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EVALUATION IN FFS: A BURDEN OR A BLESSING?

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Abstract

A recent study showed how Peruvian field workers need to achieve specific goals set by their organisations. In order to evaluate whether goals are reached, a field worker fills out standard evaluation forms and/or submits a report every one to three months. Field workers normally do not conduct auto-evaluation activities, but evaluations are initiated by supervisors and external evaluation committees. In some cases a field worker's only way of knowing that he reached his goals is the fact that he still has his job. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) in Farmer Field Schools (FFS) is considered a valid strategy to assure its quality and development in the future. However, FFS Training of Trainers activities in Peru have not stressed PM&E methodologies nor is monitoring and evaluation (M&E) a significant part of FFS trainers' daily job. FFS trainers, as most field workers, consider M&E an additional task to their busy jobs, a problem worsened as they lack a working environment that allows (auto) evaluation initiatives. In general, Peruvian public and private development organisations do not provide the adequate environment to support analyses of processes and outcomes of their field workers' efforts. Though yet many development organisations share this point of view and express a need for M&E, supervisors, FFS trainers and experts lack necessary skills to monitor and evaluate FFS.

Case studies were initiated to assess the potential of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) methods and tools to strengthen the involvement of development organisations, national and local authorities, fieldworkers, and FFS participants and non-participants to achieve effective FFS development. Capacity building activities in PM&E are necessary to improve that FFS facilitators and implementing organisations efficiently plan and evaluate their FFS activities, strengthen their own capacity and actively improve their field activities. A significant element is that PM&E needs to be rapid, practical and easy applicable for it to be beneficial.

Introduction

Looking at the many training and extension programmes currently taking place in the rural areas of Peru, there is no project proposal, nor planning scheme which does not include the word "evaluation" as one of its activities. In paper, all projects and programmes consider a number of activities and resources to evaluate the activities being implemented. In practice, however, the picture is not so clear or straightforward

as it seems: Within development projects and programmes, evaluations are one of the most difficult and complex set of activities, so much, that many times they simply do not even take place at all.

A short field survey, carried out as part of the FFS process initiated with FAO IPM-FFS Project¹ in Peru, showed many of the limitations all FFS actors face around the processes of monitoring and evaluations (M&E). FFS facilitators, regional and national authorities and representatives of private and public development organizations were interviewed to generate understanding of the M&E activities in use and the perception people have on M&E.² The following five most significant limitations and difficulties could be identified:

- (a) lack of time and resources
- (b) lack of ownership
- (c) little experience and capacities
- (d) little use of results
- (e) negative perception

(a). Lack of time and resources

This limitation is the most obvious. Time is often scarce, and there are very limited resources available for a M&E process, even if these are contemplated in the plans or design of a project. FFS facilitators (as field workers, extensionists, agricultural officers, etc.) are involved in many different activities, complying with their programmes and trying to achieve the specific goals set up by their organizations. Public, as well as private organizations, face a permanent shortage of personnel: every person is involved in many activities, all of which need to be completed within a certain period of time. At the same time, jobs are scarce, so people easily accept excessive work.

Organizations do not provide the necessary time, staff and resources to conduct M&E activities. Without denying the importance of M&E, this lack of time and resources is based on a simple fact: in general, the budgets of most development organizations, whether private or public, are tight, and when priorities are set, resources are allocated to activities which show immediate (and clearly visible) results.

Another important factor which can be mentioned here is the necessary environmental support which Peruvian development organizations provide. This support is limited as a result of the widespread instability (both political and institutional) within which most organizations operate: institutional objectives change, there are continuous changes in staff and personnel, resources are needed for different activities, etc. Long term planning, and thus monitoring and evaluation activities, is difficult when staff and resources cannot be taken for granted. In a country where the political and institutional situation is unstable and face daily struggles for their existence, strategic planning and evaluation is not considered first priority.

¹ FAO Integrated Pest Management- Farmer Field School Project in main food crops in Peru

² Studies were conducted in the FAO IPM-FFS project's field area: The regions of Cajamarca, Piura, Cusco, Huancayo and Cañete

(b). Lack of ownership

M&E are mostly seen as “a must” which needs to take place (only a few interviewees answered that M&E activities never occur). Is M&E necessary? Most actors think so, as M&E helps determining if objectives are achieved or not. But is there a felt need at field levels? Answers are vague and imprecise. To some field workers, M&E is easily justified; to others, evaluations are “*a pre requisite, a necessary condition set by the financiers, required in exchange for their support...*”

The survey showed that most evaluations do not “belong” to field workers, even in the cases when they are involved. Most thorough evaluations are planned from the outside, only involving those in the field as subjects for data gathering. As illustrated in Table 1, those in charge of an M&E process are not those in the field, but rather “outsiders”.

Table 1.

| Who's in charge of M&E? | % |
|--|----|
| <i>Head of area, immediate boss</i> | 38 |
| <i>Head of the institution, director</i> | 15 |
| <i>Special evaluation unit</i> | 24 |
| <i>Facilitators, extensionists</i> | 16 |
| <i>Farmers, participants in a FFS</i> | 4 |
| <i>Financiers</i> | 3 |

It is not difficult to observe that it is mainly heads of areas or projects, or the immediate bosses, are the ones who initiate and manage M&E initiatives. Facilitators and farmers are part of these initiatives, but have very little control and influence on the activities and the outcomes: they are merely providers of information.

(c) little experience and capacities

The survey demonstrated that extension workers show little knowledge as to who should start or implement an evaluation process, how to start it, or even why and with whom to do so. When asked about M&E procedures and techniques, facilitators showed no clear difference between methods and means, and –in particular- about the use of indicators.

Because of the reasons mentioned above, it is clear that FFS facilitators have little experience, and this experience is limited to the use of quantitative indicators (so many participants, so many sessions, so much money spent, etc.). An M&E process is considered something external and at the same time difficult, which requires capacities which field actors recognize they do not possess. In order to fulfill the requisites, when required, M&E strategies are mainly based on quantitative indicators, as a viable measurement of the achievement of goals.

(d). Little use of results

Once implemented, a fourth set of limitations is easy to see: evaluation results are often not published, there is little diffusion of what has been found, and final reports are frequently not shown to those in the field (Table 2). Analysis of the data and information gathered takes place in central offices, with a very limited feedback to the providers of information, and to those who –in the field- are to benefit from the whole process. (In addition, lack of feedback and communications leads to a different set of problems: nobody knows what other people are doing, even if working in the same area.)

Table 2.

| Who uses the results of M&E? | % |
|--|----|
| <i>Head of area / project, immediate boss</i> | 35 |
| <i>Head of the institution, director in Lima</i> | 23 |
| <i>Special evaluation unit</i> | 25 |
| <i>Facilitators, extensionists</i> | 16 |
| <i>Farmers, participants in a FFS</i> | - |
| <i>Financiers</i> | 2 |

According to the same survey, 40% of the interviewees consider that results of an M&E process are analysed only by those in charge or responsible for a project: the bosses. M&E based on data gathered by field workers and analysed by ‘outsiders’ implies that M&E is a vertical, bureaucratic and time-consuming process. Furthermore, evaluation results are often not reliable for the large amount of steps and actors involved, all having their own interpretations of situations and information provided. In addition, field workers do not always provide complete data due to lack of documentation skills but moreover information is often biased or incorrect. Sensitive and ‘undesired’ information is frequently left out. Demonstrations of failure is embarrassing, not desired by their supervisors and could very easily inflict ‘unnecessary’ problems. For example, several FFS facilitators modified results of the IPM field and the traditional field in favor of the IPM field – being convinced that they did the right thing: IPM practices are, and have to be, better than farmers’ traditional practices. Hence, an M&E system delivering biased information provided by field workers, further analysed by ‘outsiders’, is not likely a reliable tool for adequate decision making.

(e) A limited and negative perception

The picture which results from the factors described above is even more uninviting if we take into account the general perception most actors have towards a M&E process. An evaluation is usually considered a tool to measure whether the goals, set by the project or institution, are reached or not. When taking part in an evaluation, field workers are frequently asked to fill out standard forms and submit them, sometimes every month, in many cases every three months. These forms aim to gather information on what has been done, what is being done, and how close they are to achieving initial aims and goals. Having filled out such a form is generally seen as successfully

completing the evaluation, not requiring any further requiring additional involvement. Auto-evaluation and feedback activities are not widespread. Evaluations for learning purposes are not part of one's terms of references.

People are hired to achieve set goals. Herein, a distinction can be made between evaluations that aim to measure personal goals or institutional goals. Evaluations are extensively applied to measure field workers' performances, however evaluations of project or organizations' performances is less common. Evaluations of institutional performances are more complex and less tangible and are often left for the end – and then attempted in a moment when time and resources are finished, and many times even when key actors are not present anymore.

Hence, field workers have negative perceptions of evaluations for they perceive evaluation as a 'control-tool' applied by those in charge. It scares them, for deficiencies and failures, however minimum, can be highlighted. In the current competitive environment observed in most development organizations, evaluations determine certain employees losing their jobs. Therefore they dislike unexpected visits, try to avoid and even escape of evaluations meetings or sessions.

Trying out Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation (PM&E)

Results of the survey undertaken rapidly describe the current situation and the general perceptions actors have of monitoring and evaluation activities in Peru. As described above, it is characterised by: a very negative perception in field workers; time scarcity; few resources being available for extensive and qualitative M&E; its external character with little or no direct involvement of local actors; results which are not consistent and effectively used; experiences that are limited; and widespread confusion between what is understood by means, methods, techniques, indicators, etc. Yet, most actors involved (FFS facilitators, agencies of the Ministry of Agriculture, and various non governmental development organization) expressed little doubt of the potential benefits of M&E, if applied correctly. Besides, most actors expressed the necessity to strengthen their organization's existing M&E activities.

Within this context FAO IPM-FFS in Peru tried to identify whether and how monitoring and evaluation could become beneficial to FFS trainers and their organizations. To do so, it assessed whether Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation (PM&E) is a valid alternative to change the perspectives of those in the field towards M&E – thus moving from a burden, to a tool from which specific benefits can be attained. As Guijt (1998) stated, the main purpose of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation is one of encouraging internal learning to further the objectives of empowerment and locally appropriate development that are central to participatory development.

PM&E – A multifunctional tool

Monitoring and evaluation methodologies were not stressed in the various FFS Training of Trainers (TOT) sessions in Peru, nor, as outlined, has it been a significant part of the

FFS facilitator's daily job. Similarly, Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) methods and tools are unknown, although, it must be mentioned, FFS facilitators who have been working with NGOs have a fair knowledge of and experiences in PRA³ methods.

PM&E is not used as a structured set of steps and activities but rather as a multifunctional toolbox containing guidelines, methods and tools to facilitate participative assessment and interactions and understanding between actors involved. In order to assess the potential of PM&E, FAO IPM FFS Project in Peru implemented several case studies, involving actors of various institutional levels, in various areas in the country. These studies can be distinguished for containing different objectives and strategies and accordingly different applications of the PM&E methods and techniques. Three main case studies, aiming to experiment the potential of the PM&E toolbox in FFS were applied:

- I. PM&E to strengthen (institutional) involvement:
- II. PM&E to learn and improve; and
- III. PM&E to link the different actors.

I. PM&E to strengthen(institutional) involvement

The challenge of this case study was to seek entries in the organisational structure of the public and private development organisations with whom the Project works in Peru, in order to define strategies that provide specific benefits to these organisations. The FAO IPM FFS project offered the FFS methodology for potato and cotton crops as an effective alternative to improve their agricultural extension and training activities. However, even after a complete TOT process, occupying a full cropping season⁴, followed by a season long FFS implementation phase, many participating decision makers (both of public and private development organizations) were still not convinced of the FFS methodology. Even though their field workers, trained by the Project, were. In some cases, this was clearly due to the fact that decision makers did not consider the FFS methodology compatible with their organizations mandate. However, in most cases, many decision makers had very little notion of their field workers' new activity and in some cases only therefore rejected the methodology. The advances FFS facilitators had in their FFS were rarely discussed in staff meetings, nor included in evaluation forms and reports. Only a few decision makers undertook fieldtrips to FFS sessions to get to know the activities undertaken. Consequently, facilitators implementing FFS in such a context, received very little assistance and respect for their effort in FFS.

In order to strengthen the involvement of decision makers in FFS activities and change their perceptions on the methodology (being implemented within their own organisation), the Project's Board of Directors⁵ (national decision makers of the FAO IPM-FFS Project's main counterparts, so the main public and private development

³ PRA = Participatory Rural Appraisal

⁴ 6 months in potato , and 8 months in cotton

⁵ Defined in Spanish as "*La Dirección Mancomunada*"

organisations trained in the FFS methodology) were asked to evaluate the FFS methodology and to give their opinion on the Project's achievements at that certain stage. In a meeting with all representatives, an evaluation plan was jointly designed, requiring their direct involvement in the process. The actors identified indicators (of their choosing) in order to effectively evaluate what they consider a 'good' project needs to contain. In groups of four they elaborated evaluation plans based on the five main indicators identified. In a full day visit to the field, observing *in situ* the work of farmers and facilitators of several FFS, the Board of Directors implemented their plans divided in groups of five persons each. Returning from the field, these groups sat together to analyse their results and additionally to present their results to the other Board members in order to reach collective conclusions. The next day, the Board of Director presented their visions, opinions and conclusions to a group of FFS facilitators. It was aimed to facilitate exchange of perceptions and experiences of FFS by the various actors present; to jointly reflect upon the strengths and limitations of the methodology; and to enhance understanding between the national decision makers and their FFS facilitators.

This case study demonstrates that evaluation can be an effective tool to provoke interest and involvement even in those cases where knowledge and interest are modest. Even if brief, this experience showed that the actors involved felt appreciated when their help was requested, and moreover, it provided valuable information on the evaluator's perceptions, interest and values. After having evaluated the FFS methodology, the participating members of the Board showed much more appreciation and willingness towards the methodology and, at the same time, the FAO IPM FFS Project got a much better notion of the Board's viewpoint. By facilitating that public and private organizations themselves validate merits of the activities undertaken either by themselves or somebody else, their involvement in dealing with the strengths and the limitations can be strengthened and can thus offer a more solid base for their efforts.

II. PM&E to learn and improve

In a short training session of FFS facilitators in participatory methods for M&E, taking place in three of the regions where the Project operates (Cajamarca, Huancayo and Cusco), facilitators designed PM&E plans for each of their schools. The PM&E plan consisted of indicators (as key questions and sub-questions) reflecting the main issues to be discussed and analysed with the participants. Each plan also included practical methods and tools that could be easily applied in farmer communities, such as role plays (also with glove puppets), songs, poems, letters and drawings; and a time schedule indicating when and where to implement the activities. The PM&E plans were implemented at the end of several FFS sessions, and especially in the final session of the FFS season in each school. Farmers were asked questions of interest to the facilitator, related to his/her performance, the topics discussed, the whole learning process, the interest participants sowed, etc. Instead of answering orally, they wrote songs or poems or letters to friends, sketched in paper; acted or used any other form of reply. In this way, both farmers and trainers expressed to be satisfied, being able to exchange opinions and discuss items of importance in such a relaxed and entertaining matter. The methods enhanced not only interactions between facilitators and farmers but

also reinforced interfaces between farmers themselves. Facilitators emphasized that PM&E increased their relationship with farmers and facilitated a process wherein facilitators receive valuable feedback and farmers feel appreciated. Having received farmers' feedback, trainers felt a lot more secure about their performances, and felt motivated to improve their FFS.

In a system where people lack ownership; capacity and experience, where time and resources are limited, and where results and outcomes are biased and inaccurate, M&E initiatives constitute an ineffective burden. M&E as a control method interferes with peoples' self-esteem, confidence and motivation, and creates numb, ineffective and static workers. In contrast, PM&E provides FFS facilitators and farmers control, self-esteem and tools to improve their efforts. It implies continuous monitoring of daily FFS activities, where farmers and trainers critically reflect upon the process, their own performances, strengths and limitations with the aim of continuously improving FFS. As stated by J. Abbot & I. Guijt, (1998), Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation shifts the emphasis away from externally-defined and driven programmes and stresses the importance of locally-relevant process for gathering, analyzing and using the information. In this manner, people are active decision makers of their own actions and capacity building. PM&E provides actors (FFS facilitators, farmers but also decision makers) a tool to improve their abilities and activities. Hence, PM&E is a strong tool in the FFS learning process. Approached in this manner, monitoring and evaluation is not considered an extra task, but it is more a necessity and value tool for good performance.

III. PM&E to link actors

In a third case study, PM&E tools and methods were used to create platforms of discussion between the different actors involved, in order to stimulate interactions between people reflecting on the FFS process and to validate the methodology. Various workshops were organized with the participation of representatives of the different institutions (private and public), FFS facilitators, FFS farmer participants and FAO PM FFS Project's team members. These workshops enabled actors to discuss their expectations, aims and perspectives as to the whole FFS training process. Furthermore, with all Project's team members, a M&E plan was designed and critically reflected upon throughout the implementation process. In regular team meetings, the advance of FFS activities, institutions' and trainers' performances were discussed with the aim of setting out strategies to (re)shape activities seeking for quality FFS implementation, and seeking to provide a clear picture of the Project's effectiveness and the fulfillment of its aims and objectives set at the beginning.

In each case, members (of each group) were invited to define aspects they considered most important to be evaluated, as a step prior to the evaluation itself. This showed clearly that each actor or group of actors defines different aspects as indicators for an evaluation. It was clear that with indicators of their own choosing, each actor or group found it easier to analyse the results achieved and the process "lived" during the previous months. It illustrated that different actors are not necessarily interested in the same kind of information. In addition, the activities demonstrated to all actors that evaluating is more complex than initially recognised for it needs to take into account

many perceptions different people have on the situation. The actors appreciated that approaching monitoring and evaluation in this manner, provided an opportunity for each and every actor involved to express his/her opinion, and gave a clear picture of the current situation: what has been achieved, what have been the greatest limitations, what are the activities which need to continue, etc. But most important, not only different views as to what has been achieved (and needs to be highlighted), but also different interpretations of the objectives and what was expected to be achieved, came under actors' attention. It made actors aware of the different perspective each group of actors has on the situation. Evaluation went much further than the common quantitative look by focusing on qualitative aspects. It went beyond merely extracting information, but focused on analysis of information at hand between all participants involved.

Limitations of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

Although Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation methods and tools have a lot of potential as an alternative to M&E, as currently applied in Peru, various constraints and limitation could be identified during the case studies presented. First of all, PM&E is unknown. In order to generate interest for this tool, awareness of the constraints in the existing planning and evaluation system need to be raised. To achieve this, an attitude change from externally-defined and driven planning and evaluation to horizontal decision making processes is required. As known, attitudes do not change over night, it is a slow and complex process. There are many factors and a large variation of people to consider with their own specific interest and needs. To manage such a process, tremendous facilitation skills are demanded. In addition, patience and continuous encouragement is necessary. Well thought and scheduled follow-up activities are needed. Furthermore one has to be cautious not to get tangled up in too much information for this could hamper processes, collective analysis and effective usage of the results obtained. Consequently, key points converted into concrete action plans instead of in-depth analyses promote that PM&E is not an extra task but a well-received necessity for quality management and development.

Secondly, even though more and more development organisations and fieldworkers share this point of view and express a need for PM&E, few of them have the necessary skills. Intensive training in rapid and practical methods and tools applicable for multiple M&E purposes is recommended. Additionally, development organisations and FFS trainers should receive assistance in strategic planning and evaluation of their future FFS in order to develop location- and actors-specific PM&E mechanisms. Training in simple, time and cost-effective methods is needed to reduce time and lack of motivation to participate because people are occupied and desire rapid solutions in order to be able to act rapidly. If PM&E meets these requirements it could be a potential tool to speed up and improve processes and people capacity.

Conclusions

In Peru, the general opinion of public and private development organizations and fieldworkers towards monitoring and evaluation is: M&E is a necessary element of their

programmes, however, many factors hamper an adequate use of M&E, causing it to be frequently left out, applied incorrectly, containing a negative image and providing little benefit. The FAO IPM FFS Project assessed the Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation methodology, providing development organizations a valuable tool that allows them to generate rapid and practical information on their advances, strengths and limitations. The case studies presented on PM&E showed that the methodology can be applied for many other additional purposes beneficial to FFS development processes such as strengthening involvement, enhancing learning progresses and linking actors.

PM&E enhances involvement by inviting key actors to evaluate activities implemented, for it encourages dialogue and motivates actors to closely look at the situation and develop an opinion. Instead of providing people evaluation reports for them to form an opinion, auto-evaluation activities strengthens participation, raises awareness on the current situation, and enhances further involvement (willingness to continue participation) and dialogue. Furthermore, initiated participatory monitoring and evaluation efforts help seeking the involvement of development organisations, national and local authorities, trainers and FFS participants and non-participants to jointly reflect upon the strengths and limitations of, in this case, the FFS methodology. It creates platforms for dialogue and accordingly actively involves all main actors and stimulates interactions between these actors. It facilitates people to understand different perceptions and expectations of, and actions taken by other people. It illustrates that objective, value-free and quantifiable evaluations are complex however not required when different visions and perspectives are taken into account and decision making on activities for implementation are made by all actors involved. It induces locally defined and relevant processes for gathering information, analysis and usage of information and diminishes externally-defined and driven programmes.

In addition, PM&E encourages learning because for it generates feedback and self-reflection. It motivates FFS facilitators to improve their activities and skills because they themselves identified what results were achieved and became aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. It makes people more aware of their own actions and the outcomes of these actions. Hence, it enhances peoples' self-esteem, confidence and motivation to improve their activities undertaken. Therefore, monitoring and evaluation activities are much more sustainable applied as a tool for learning instead as a method to control actions and judge performances.

Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation is a multi-functional toolbox containing various methods and tools applicable in many different situations, involving a large variety of actors and achieving distinctive goals. PM&E should not be applied as a blue print or static element in development projects but rather used as an integrated and continuous activity to achieve well defined objectives. This approach is absolutely a valuable tool in FFS, since it is flexible, easy to use and coincides with the horizontal approach of the FFS methodology. In order for PM&E to be beneficial for FFS development in Peru, organizations and FFS facilitators need capacity building in order to develop PM&E mechanisms that are not a burden but dynamic, easy applicable, flexible and rapid encouraging sustainable development both at personal as well institutional levels.

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