

M&E and the Project/Program Cycle

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In this lecture, we'll walk through three major phases in a typical project and program cycle:

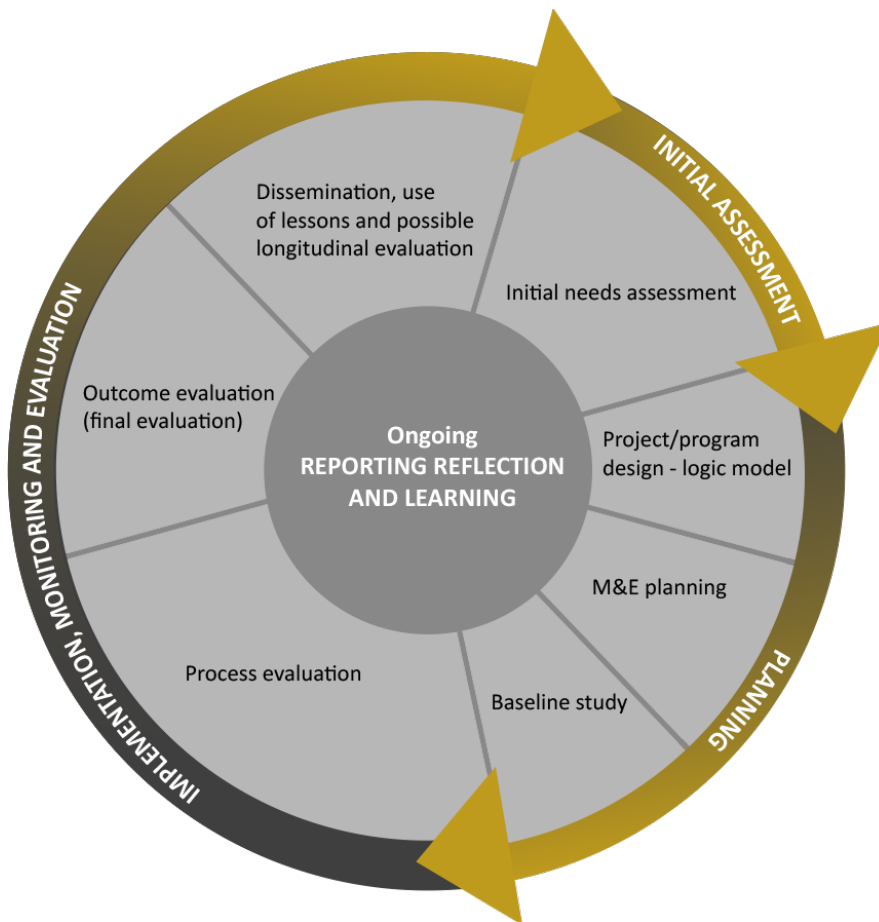
These are: 1) initial assessment, 2) planning, and 3) implementation.

Within each phase, we will discuss some key M&E activities or processes that are commonly conducted and how they serve to improve the project or program, including: needs assessments, logic models, and M&E plans. We've already touched on some of these activities, and others will be covered in greater detail in other lectures; however, this lecture is an opportunity to see how all of these activities work together within the larger sequential framework of a project or program.

A common thread across all the phases is the importance of engaging project or program stakeholders. Who are stakeholders? Stakeholders are individuals or groups that have an interest in or are affected by the project or program. Stakeholders of public health programs can include the program's priority population, government stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health, or the donor funding the project or program.

For the remainder of this lecture, I will primarily refer to "projects" rather than programs, though the cycle is applicable to both. With projects, the scope tends to be smaller and there is often a more definitive "endpoint," whereas with a program, there may be multiple projects occurring simultaneously. For this reason, it can be easier to look at the project approach and imagine how this might be replicated within a program setting.

Let's begin by looking at the diagram "M&E and the Project/Program Cycle." This provides an overview of the typical stages and key activities in project planning, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting.



Initial Assessment

As you can see in the diagram, there are two major phases in a project's life cycle that occur prior to implementation: initial assessment and planning.

The first, initial assessment, is conducted to determine whether a project is needed, and, if so, to inform the project's planning efforts. The main process used in this phase is called a "needs assessment."

A **needs assessment** is a systematic process used to identify needs (or "gaps") in the target population, examine the causes of those gaps, and prioritize strategies to address them. Needs are defined by focusing on the difference between "what is" and "what should be."

Imagine for a moment a community with no place nearby to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. The community members want to eat healthier, including eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, but they often choose not to because they have to travel so far to get it. A needs assessment of this community might identify a lack of a fruit and vegetable market to be a "gap" in this community.

It is most useful to carry out a needs assessment in the following situations:

- When your project is just starting out
- When there is uncertainty as to what the most important needs are
- When you need to convince funders or external groups that you are tackling the most important issues
- When you want to involve the community more in determining the scope or specific components of your intervention
- When you are unsure of baseline knowledge, attitudes, and practices, but cannot afford a baseline assessment.

Do you think there are any situations in which it might NOT be useful to conduct a needs assessment?

A needs assessment is not always necessary, particularly:

- When the needs are known, either because an assessment has already been done or because all stakeholders are certain about the most important needs;
- When there is no buy-in from community members to conduct a needs assessment, maybe because they see it as redundant or wasteful;
- When it is urgent to act immediately, for example, following a natural disaster.

While it is beyond the scope of this course to get into the details of *how* to conduct a needs assessment, there are additional resources listed at the end of the module for your reference.

Planning

The second phase that occurs prior to implementation is project planning, which is directly informed by the findings from the needs assessment. This phase often includes the development of a logic model and M&E plan and conducting a baseline study.

A **logic model** is a visual representation to systematically map the relationship between a project's resources, activities, and the results of those activities. It illustrates a project's assumptions of how it intends to contribute to improvements in the target population. Logic models will be covered in much greater detail elsewhere.



In the **M&E planning** stage, the most widely used tool is an M&E plan. An M&E plan is a table or document that describes all the monitoring and evaluation activities for a particular project.

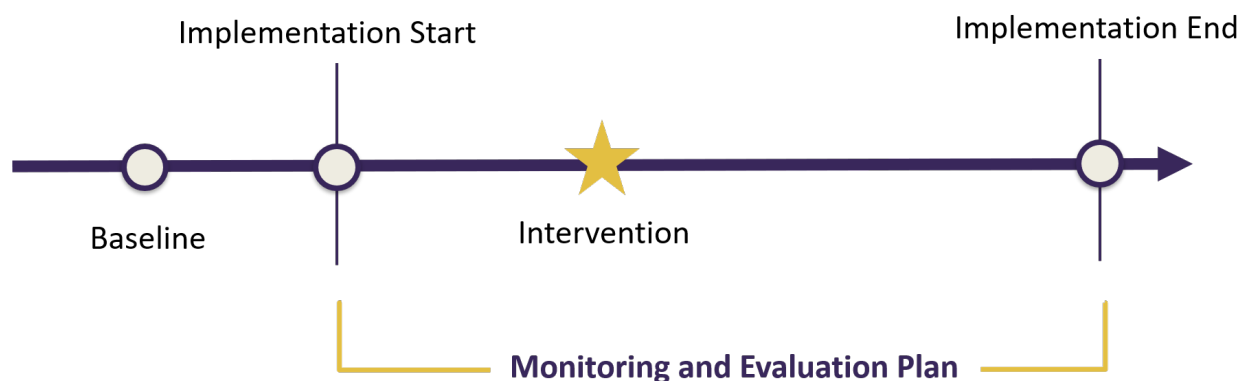
GOAL					
Objective 1:					
Outputs	Indicator	Target	Data Source (method/tool)	Frequency of data collection	Responsible Person(s)
Outcomes	Indicator	Target	Data Source (method/tool)	Frequency of data collection	Responsible Person(s)

The purpose of this tool is to track progress toward project objectives and determine whether you have achieved your desired results. M&E plans will also be discussed in-depth elsewhere.

A **baseline study**, sometimes just called a “baseline,” is a study to capture the conditions *before* the start of a project. Findings from the study provides a starting reference to track any changes in the future.

Baselines are usually followed by another similar study much later in the project called an **endline study**.

An endline study assesses the degree of change from baseline to endline during the project period. Baselines and endlines are important aspects of project evaluations. If a project lacks baseline data, it becomes impossible to measure the level of change that occurred due to the project.



Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Phase

The implementation, monitoring, and evaluation phase includes monitoring, and process, outcome, and impact evaluations as well as dissemination activities.

As soon as project implementation begins, its monitoring should too, as dictated by the M&E plan.

During project implementation, **process evaluations** may be conducted to determine whether project activities have been implemented as intended. Process evaluations often include a detailed description of a project's strengths and weaknesses and provide evidence-based recommendations for project improvement.

Outcome evaluations, sometimes called final evaluations, are commonly conducted at the end of a project to assess how well it achieved its planned objectives and to understand the difference it made. Data collected from baseline and endlines may be used for the outcome evaluation.

Impact evaluations are conducted to assess if any observed changes can be attributed to, or caused by, your project. These are less commonly done because they can be resource intensive, demand a lot of time, require high quality data, and need highly skilled evaluators.

Key findings from your M&E activities should be regularly reviewed internally as a team and also disseminated to stakeholders to inform future programming.

It is important to note that **reporting, reflection and learning should be ongoing occurrences throughout the *entire* cycle**, which is why they are positioned in the center of the diagram.

In this lecture, we reviewed the diagram, "M&E and the Project/Program Cycle" to explore how various M&E activities fit into a typical project cycle and to describe the important roles they play in overall project improvement. We talked about the benefits of needs assessments, logic models, M&E plans, baseline and endline studies, process, outcome and impact evaluations and the dissemination of findings.