

## INTERNALIZING MONITORING IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PROCESSES

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**Monitoring of projects has typically been planned, implemented and considered as a form of ‘policing’, instead of as an opportunity to learn, innovate and strategize to maximize outputs and outcomes per unit of input. There is however a paradigm shift taking place in the way monitoring and impact assessment approaches are now being designed. Lessons from the implementation of development projects indicate that although external mid-term and end of project reviews have their benefits and help to justify investments, internalizing monitoring systems within project designs and implementation have far greater, long term and meaningful benefits.**

In order to demonstrate and generate evidence of research in use and to be able to effectively influence policy processes and improve implementation, it is critical for development projects to have a robust and efficient monitoring, impact assessment and learning (MIL) system.

An appropriately designed and implemented MIL system has the potential to generate learning through the life of a project rather than only at its culmination. This learning can feed into the project cycle and improve implementation and therefore the outputs and outcomes. Recognizing this potential, a MIL system has been developed under the CoDI project, which beyond the project itself, provides lessons on conducting ‘transitional research’ and translating concepts and theories into practice.

This MIL system has been developed collaboratively by project partners through an inclusive, interactive and flexible approach, which is a combined effort rather than driven by a single partner. This concerted approach has been adopted to foster a common understanding among all partners and to ensure that field level limitations are defined and addressed so that the MIL system has greater applicability and relevance.

### CHALLENGES

Effectively internalizing MIL processes into project implementation poses a number of challenges for the project team as well. While some are somewhat conceptual in nature, others have to do more with practical applicability and relevance. Some of the significant challenges that the CoDI team had to deal with are:

- Aligning divergent points of view within the team
- Establishing MIL as a continuous process rather than a one-time activity
- Overcoming preconceived notions
- MIL often viewed by implementing partners as an additional task
- Harmonizing MIL expectations and field limitations
- Internalizing MIL into specific project activities

The most effective way of addressing these challenges is through extensive and iterative interaction and dialoguing within the project team (e.g. during the inception workshop, team meetings, field visits, and other means of communication) and with the resource

### KEY MESSAGES

- Discussions on MIL critical at proposal development stage
- Take ground realities into account
- Establish MIL as an opportunity to improve implementation
- Tools should be a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques
- Tools should be effective yet not complex
- Develop tools and indicators with implementing partners
- Orientation of team members critical to bring about shift in perspective – from just deliverables to monitoring processes and impacts
- Build on existing data collection systems

### The Coalition to Diversify Income through Underused Crops (CoDI)

CoDI is a group of five organizations in India and Vietnam led by the International Centre for Underutilised Crops. Funded by DFID’s Research Into Use (RIU) Program 2008-2011, the coalition will provide community services for production, post-harvest and marketing, to help disadvantaged people in India and Vietnam have better market access to generate sustainable income, and have more options for better land husbandry.

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persons who provide support services to the project. Through this process all challenges may not be wholly overcome, but mutually acceptable and workable solutions can be arrived at.

## WHAT WE LEARNT

Internalizing MIL processes into project implementation should begin at the conceptualization stage and follow through to its operationalization. At various stages in between, the following approaches were found to facilitate this process:

**Proposal development:** At this stage it is important to identify the key questions that will help determine whether the project goals have been met, and to recognize MIL as a project activity that would help answer these questions. While allocating this responsibility within the team, a clear understanding should be established that though one of the team members will be responsible for MIL from the project management perspective, only if the team as a whole contributes towards the identification of MIL components and its application will it be effective in project implementation.

**Orientation workshop:** An orientation workshop organized by the donor agency prior to project initiation is an extremely useful and interactive platform for aligning aims, developing a common understanding of the expected objectives from MIL, and for the donor to assess potential support services that it could offer to its implementing partners. This early investment towards alignment of priorities, expectations and approaches pays rich dividends in project implementation, outputs and outcomes.

**Draft operational MIL mechanisms & inception workshop:** Based on inputs from the project team during the proposal development stage and at the orientation workshop, draft sampling and data management protocol templates can be developed for sharing at the project inception workshop. The latter is an opportunity for knowledge sharing, mutual agreement on the purpose of the MIL, to contextualize the MIL strategy and tools to field situations, and to allocate responsibilities for data collection and management across the project team.

**Team meetings / field visits:** This takes the cumulative learning from the inception workshop a step ahead towards finalizing the MIL strategy and tools. It is imperative for the team member allocated with the responsibility of developing the MIL system to have as good an understanding of the field situation as possible, i.e., in terms of the data collection systems that are already in place, the various institutions involved – government and community-based, and the existing dynamics, opportunities and constraints. These interactions also lead to defining: (i) who is to be monitored (direct and indirect beneficiaries); (ii) where should the monitoring take place (area of intervention & area of influence of the project); (iii) what is to be monitored (realistic

parameters or indicators); and (iv) how should the monitoring be done (which tools are appropriate and easy-to-use given the situation within which the monitoring is to be undertaken). In addition, the project team should identify potential weaknesses in the MIL system e.g., reliability of secondary data, literacy and numeracy of participating community members, as well as strategies to overcome these weaknesses. This exercise will help refine the tools developed under the MIL system.

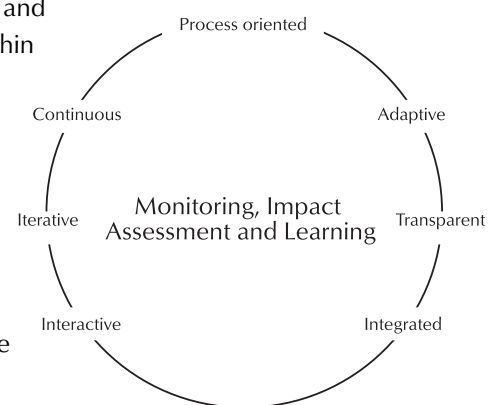
**Designing data management systems:** The following step is to finalize the data management systems i.e., collection of data (quantitative and qualitative) and data entry. At this stage incorporating inputs from the donor's support services (in terms of defining the sampling strategy, finalizing the tools for data collection, systems for data entry, analysis and archiving) facilitates finalizing the data management systems. The knowledge gained through this interaction should then be transferred across the team during pre and pilot testing stages of the tools developed.

**Operationalizing the MIL system:** Having developed and tested the data management systems; these systems now need to be incorporated within the relevant project activities. Operationalizing the MIL system is itself a learning process and could lead to the need to change certain approaches in order to make it more applicable and relevant. Therefore, the MIL system should be iterative and adaptive in nature and follow up and feedback mechanisms need to be established to facilitate this process.

## KEY FEATURES OF THE MIL PROCESS

There is no one standardized method to internalize MIL processes, just indicative guidelines that can help drive the exercise. Each project situation will have distinct characteristics and limitations and it is within this 'universe' that the project team would need to design and implement its MIL systems. However, there are certain features, which if adhered to could make it robust and effective.

These are depicted in the adjoining figure. It is important to recognize that implementing MIL systems is a continuous learning process that would result in improved project implementation, outputs and outcomes.



### For further information, please contact:

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