Excerpt from:

Reflections on 50+ Years Assisting Smallholder Farming Communities

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Monitoring & Evaluation (~~Learning~~): Failure & Liability?[3]

How the smallholder poverty alleviation effort by the development community failed to quickly identify and address the operational limitations of smallholder farmers, as well as persisting for over three decades in relying on producer organizations the beneficiaries shy away from can be attributed to the failure of the Monitoring & Evaluation process. While the M&E process can measure a project's progress in meeting the project's strategic objectives, it most important task is to guide future projects to better serve the needs of the beneficiaries. In the process the M&E also serves as the primary voice of the beneficiaries[4]. Recall the beneficiaries had little input into the design and implementation of the project, leaving their only voice the degree to which they rely on or avoid the projects' activities. This must clearly be identified in the M&E analysis for it to be meaningful and provide valid guidance for future programs.

The problem comes when the M&E analysis become a propaganda tool promoting the perceived accomplishments rather than critical analysis of success or failure that can guide future programs. The effectiveness of the M&E depends on the criteria being monitored as well as how they are analyzed. If you don't observe and document the eight plus week spread in crop establishment with accompanying decline in potential yields, it will be difficult to identify the operational limitations smallholders face and need to facilitate access to contract mechanization to expedite crop establishment so farmers can more easily comply with recommendations. Similarly, if you don't evaluate the calories available to smallholder farmers you won't appreciate their limited ability to undertake manual agronomic field work, prolonging the time to complete different task and limited quality of crop husbandry, most noticeable initial crop establishment. Thus, the problem continues to be overlooked and unaddressed.

Likewise, if you simply aggregate values of M&E categories, particularly if you do it across projects and countries, you can generate some very impressive number, measuring 100,000s of beneficiaries. However, since there is no reference point as to the total potential beneficiaries, the

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[1] Presentation at the Colorado State University 2023 International Symposium. February 27 to March 1, 2023, Lory Student Union. The ideas and opinions in this article are strictly the authors and do not reflect endorsements by Colorado State University, USAID, World Bank, or any other organization that supported or financed the author's work.

[2] As an excerpt from the end of a 30 page presentation, some of the content refers to early sections on the article and thus may appear out of context. However, when contained within the whole presentation would make more complete sense.

[3] https://agsci.colostate.edu/smallholderagriculture/mel-impressive-numbers-but-of-what-purpose-deceiving-the-tax-paying-public/

[4] https://agsci.colostate.edu/smallholderagriculture/monitoring-evaluation-the-voice-of-the-beneficiaries/

aggregate number could be totally meaningless in guiding future programs. If aggregated across several countries the 100,000 beneficiaries could still be only 10% of potential participants leaving 900,000 avoid the project, perhaps wisely so. Thus, aggregation is more a propaganda tool than analytical tool. It only shows how massive the project is and if ineffective the extend of wasted funds. A better analytical analysis is percent. Also, there is a need to establish clear percent definition of what percent would separate success from failure.

Using the business parameters mentioned earlier and surveys of what my students suggested as minimum acceptable values for each business parameter as the target, and best value I was able to synthesis from what sources were available in over a decade of quiet searching, without the advantage of information being included in periodically published project reports, how do the producer organizations fair[5].

- Percent of potential beneficiaries actively participating in the organization's services. Expectation a minimum of 50% with preference for 70%. Actual closer to 10% no more than 15%.,
- Percent marketed produce members consign to a producer organization as mandated by organization by-laws. Expectation is 85 – 90%, Actual is closer to 10 – 15%
- Percent of produce consigned to producer organization allocated to loan repayments. Expectation: 25% or less, but actual most likely 90% or more. Note the cavate that according to by-laws all loans must be repaid before "dividends" are paid. This allows the organization to confiscate consigned produce of productive members to pay off loans of defaulting members, strongly discourages members consigning more than the estimate needed for loan repayment.
- Total percent market shares the producer organization has in the total community being served. Expectation: Not available, but with 50% minimum desired individual participation and 85% minimum marketed produce would be 42%. Actual: >5%
- Overhead costs incurred by the producer organizations, Expectation: 10%. Actual: 30% Administrative overhead is always greatly underestimated.
- Extent members are side-buying inputs or side-selling produce contrary to organization by-laws. Expected: 10 – 15% Actual: 70 – 90%
- Additional income members obtain by relying on the producer organizations for the service offered, vs side selling to private service providers. Expected: 10 – 20% Actual: Minus 10 – 20%. Relying on the cooperative would be a financial disadvantage as mentioned previously.
- Percent of organizations surviving for two years, representing two complete agricultural cycles, after all external facilitation end. Expectation: 50% Actual: 0% Although getting this data would be difficult as rarely are funds available to revisit a program site after financing ends and all accounts closed.

Can anyone provide alternative values for these business parameters? I think the suggested expected values are realistic and make for good performance targets reflecting what interested

[5] https://agsci.colostate.edu/smallholderagriculture/request-for-information-basic-business-parameters/

underwriting taxpayers are expecting from their poverty alleviation tax investments. The one exception being the highly underestimated administrative overhead cost. That just reflecting typical underestimation of administrative costs by the public. If the failure to meet these targets was public know, there would be some substantial public concern for miss use of taxes. The magnitude of the differenced note above would constitute a major concern, possible a legislature investigation. The magnitude of the difference also leads one to consider this is a major deliberate cover-up to deceive the underwriting taxpayer being USA or other donor countries. The ease at which a well-designed M&E analysis could, with a few simple computation, no-rocket science, have identified the failure of producer organizations and guide future programs to consider other mechanism for assisting smallholder producers is appalling. Likewise, it difficult to see how those promoting them were not aware that they were a misfit to smallholder communities yet continued to insist on their imposition. How many millions, if not billions, of development funds, dollars, Euros, or other currency, have been squandered for this oversight over the past three plus decades. Again, it supports my earlier contention that there is not a sincere interest in assisting smallholder farmers out of poverty, but a determination to impose on them, at all costs, a socially desired but totally inappropriate highly flawed business model that if rely upon would force them deeper into poverty. Fortunately, they are not gullible enough to fall for this and wisely divert their business to more reliable business enterprises.

Please note that the word “Learning” was crossed out in the sections title. This reflects my concern with the term as the only learning in the current M&E procedures and analysis I see is how to deceive the underwriting taxpayers and cover up what by any business standard would be total failure.