All effective projects require effective data for action – data that is accurate, indicators that are relevant, and analysis that leads to action. This is particularly true of livelihoods projects, which are very complex making it difficult to obtain accurate information for project decision-making on a regular and actionable basis.

Principles

1. Real Time learning from MONITORING

2. Long term learning from periodic quantitative and qualitative IMPACT EVALUATIONS

3. QUALITATIVE TRACKING AND SPECIAL STUDIES to understand key issues for project implementation and design.

The Social Observatory is an integrated learning system – incorporating various monitoring and evaluation tools – to measure change, assess the effectiveness of the project, and pinpoint design and implementation challenges. This comprehensive learning system will be driven by the following principles:

(i) Real time learning from monitoring
(ii) Long term learning from periodic quantitative and qualitative evaluations and
(iii) Special studies to understand key issues for project implementation and design

The core organizing hypotheses of the Social Observatory are built around the impact of the project on:
(a) reducing poverty
(b) reducing indebtedness
(c) expanding the livelihoods portfolio and
(d) empowering women.

In addition, the principle of randomized pilots will be followed for all related “vertical” sub-interventions such as food security, nutrition, skills development, and livelihoods interventions.

The National Social Observatory will be housed in the National Project Implementation Unit of the National Rural Livelihood Mission, which is implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development of the Government of India. The State Social Observatories will be similarly housed in the state level project implementation units.
Monitoring

Careful attention needs to be placed on monitoring systems (Indicators + MIS + analytical dashboards + process monitoring + community based monitoring) because they facilitate internal feedback and learning-by-doing.

Data for Action and MIS

**Objective:** To collect useful indicators on a real-time basis, make the data accessible and useful to project staff at all levels (VO, Cluster, Block, District, and State) for everyday decision-making.

**Key Elements:**
- Clear conceptualization of data to be collected and entered
- Using best practice methods to minimize time between data collection and data entry
- Putting a system of data validation in place, to minimize errors in collection and entry
- Developing user friendly and effective dashboards at every level of the project

Process Monitoring

**Objective:** To examine the effectiveness of NRLM implementation, implementation challenges and roadblocks; and changes in livelihoods and wellbeing

**Key Elements:**
- Qualitative data collection from a rotating random sample of GPs
- User-friendly quarterly reports based on this data
- 2 page executive summaries of these reports prepared for project staff at the block, district, and state level.
- A feedback system at the block and district level.

Community Based Monitoring

**Objective:** To use community organizations to monitor the quality of their inputs, assess outcomes, audit funds, and validate data.

Special Studies

**Objective:** To understand key issues for project implementation and design

**Key Elements:**
- Case Studies of specific issues conducted on a needs based basis
- Qualitative studies to understand processes of change in depth
- Participatory Studies for rapid assessment
- Artefactual Labs using behavioral experiments to measure outcomes such as agency and empowerment that are difficult to measure in surveys.

Qualitative Tracking and Special Studies

Impact analysis and monitoring need to be supplemented by qualitative tracking and special studies to understand the mechanisms underlying the impact, and to gain insights into challenges of implementation.
Impact Evaluations

Objective: To understand the impact of a specific intervention with a long-enough time lag to allow outcomes to be observable. Impact evaluations can be used to assess both the impact of the core SHG intervention, and the impact of interventions beyond the core SHG intervention, e.g.: Intensive cultivation (SRI and MKSP), Resource Blocks, Financial Literacy, Nutrition, VO-Headed PDS Shops in Bihar etc.

Key Elements:

a) Design to allow comparable “treatment” samples where the intervention will be administered and “control” samples, which are as similar to treatment samples but where the intervention is not administered. The most effective way to generate comparable treatment and control samples is randomized assignment, where the sample where the intervention is administered is randomly selected from a list of villages, and with another randomly selected set of villages assigned as control areas.

b) Measurement to measure relevant outcomes that the intervention is expected to produce. This requires the development of questionnaires that generate useful data on key indicators of interest, and collecting accurate data on these indicators from households and communities.

c) Analysis Analyzing the data generated by the surveys to measure the impact of the intervention, and interpreting the results in a manner that is useful for project learning.

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