

15. The Philippines: National Monitoring and Evaluation Systems, Social Protection and the SDGs: Experiences, Challenges and the Way Forward

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The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)⁶³ is one of the first national government agencies in the Philippines to develop and implement a department-wide policy on results-based monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to guide the various levels of the organization in designing and implementing their M&E systems. Since its institutionalization in 2014, DSWD has crafted its organization-wide results framework that logically integrates into one framework all of its development outcomes as a result of the implementation of its programmes, projects and services. The results framework is being utilized as the management tool for department-wide M&E, especially as basis for identifying priority areas for systematic evaluations.

Setting up and implementing a results-based M&E system was not without its own fair share of challenges. The initial years were met with resistance and even indifference as officials were yet to be convinced and human capacities and processes were not yet developed to implement such reforms. Results-based thinking had to be integrated not just into M&E, but more so into the DSWD management processes from planning to budgeting and performance management, to be able to sustain the reform. International development partners played an important role but political will from officials and staff was most critical. In the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), new challenges arise not just for the DSWD M&E system but for the whole of national Government.

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This paper describes a national government agency's journey in setting up and implementing a department-wide M&E system for social welfare and development. It focuses on the lessons learned from the challenges during its initial years and the perceived systemic changes with the shift to results. Moving forward, the paper looks into the expected challenges and opportunities ahead for evaluation especially with the introduction of the SDGs. With a fairly young M&E system, an abundance of challenges still remains in integrating results-based principles into existing frameworks and processes, especially in making evaluation a systematic part of programme and performance management, and in utilizing evaluations to influence political decisions. But there are a lot of opportunities to be taken advantage of, including an enabling national policy environment supportive of evaluation and the growing consensus in the international and national development arenas on the importance of evaluation in societal change.

CONTEXT OF REFORM

The DSWD is the agency mandated to provide social protection and promote the rights and welfare of poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals, families and communities. The agency aims to contribute to poverty alleviation and empowerment through the development of social welfare and development policies, programmes, projects and services implemented with or through various government and private intermediaries.

The impetus for setting up a results-based M&E system was in the context of an organization-wide reform initiative then called the DSWD Reform Agenda (2008-2012). The agenda sought to articulate the direction of DSWD as it took on the leadership role for the social protection sector in the country, after the enactment of the 1991 Local Government Code that devolved basic social welfare services to local government units. The agenda had four key reform areas: (1) leading in social protection; (2) providing faster and better service delivery of social protection programmes; (3) implementing financial reforms to sustain the reform process; and (4) improving systems for service delivery.

This agenda required the DSWD to establish structures and policies for coordinated social protection response within the organization and across all agencies. It also demanded that the DSWD expand and improve its own programmes and services, secure sustainable financing for the reform and strengthen stewardship over its financial resources. It also required strengthening internal systems, including M&E within the organization. Whatever became of the reform initiative, M&E was a crucial component in determining what will come out as a result of the reform.

Years after the crafting of the reform agenda, DSWD has rapidly expanded the scope and coverage of its programmes for the poor, vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities. From a budget of only 3.5 billion Philippine pesos in 2007, the DSWD budget increased to 128 billion Philippine pesos a decade later (2017). The increase in funding was driven by the scaling-up of the conditional cash transfer programme, community-driven development programme, sustainable livelihood programme and social pension, among others. The increasing frequency and intensity of major natural and human-induced disasters

also demanded more emergency and early recovery services from DSWD. Stewardship over the vast amount of resources allotted for social welfare and development demanded a strong M&E system to ensure efficiency, accountability and process excellence for the delivery of results.

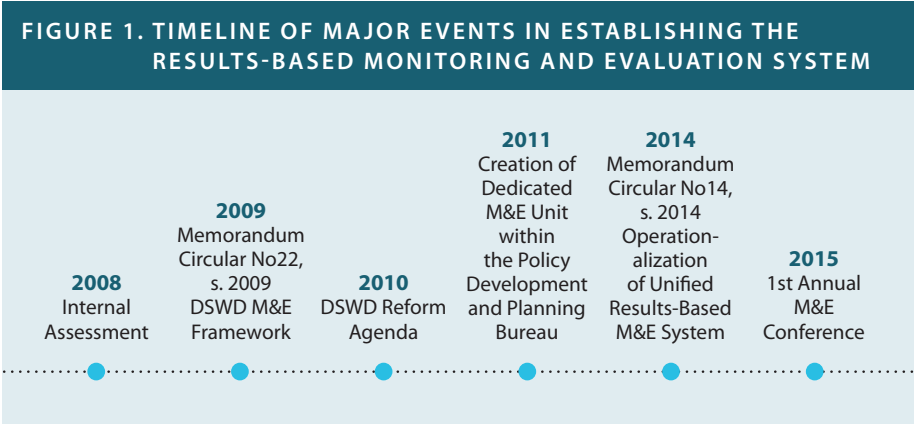
Alongside these developments within the DSWD, reforms at the national government level were also underway. The Government of the Philippines adopted results-based management within the framework of public sector management to improve transparency, accountability and efficiency. These were done through reforms in the budget preparation and execution (starting in 2007), in the financial management system (starting in 2009), in the performance management system (starting in 2011) and in national government planning (2010). These reforms included linking performance information to budgeting, streamlining planning, monitoring and budgeting processes, linking performance to employee incentives, and the introduction of sector-specific results matrices in the medium-term plan of the national Government. The more recent reforms include the National Evaluation Policy Framework crafted by the budget and planning departments.

SETTING UP THE UNIFIED RESULTS-BASED M&E SYSTEM: EARLY BEGINNINGS

Through a foreign grant, an assessment of the existing DSWD systems, processes and protocols was conducted in 2008. While a lot has already been accomplished for monitoring progress of programmes and projects, some gaps still remained. These were: (1) reports mainly enumerated outputs and were not able to generate conclusions on the effectiveness of programmes implemented; (2) the data infrastructure was incompatible with the devolved structure of the programmes; (3) delays in producing data sets and differing quality and quantity of local-level administrative data resulting in limitations for matching data; (4) the absence of a research agenda for evaluating changes, resulting in fragmented efforts to outline key questions that need to be answered; and (5) the programmatic nature of M&E resulting in the absence of basis for comparing and differentiating results and determining overall impact of the DSWD on poverty and vulnerability. For this reason, strengthening the DSWD M&E system was a key component of the reform agenda.

In response to the results of the assessment, a policy on the DSWD M&E framework was issued in 2009. The framework described the DSWD M&E system as two-pronged: organizational and programme and project-based. The policy highlighted the importance of monitoring and evaluation as two different but interrelated concepts. Objectives and performance indicators were also identified for organization-wide M&E.

To support this policy issuance and in alignment with the reform agenda, an M&E Unit within the Policy Development and Planning Bureau was created in 2011 through a programme loan from the World Bank. The M&E Unit, which subsequently became a Division in 2014, was tasked to oversee and implement the organization-wide M&E of DSWD with the establishment of the Unified Results-Based M&E System (URBMES). Various capacity-building activities and technical assistance were conducted to capacitate technical staff and officials on M&E.



To jumpstart the implementation of the URBMES, the DSWD developed its Overall Results Framework (2014-2016) that incorporates the Organizational Outcomes of DSWD. The Overall Results Framework serves as a reference to all offices within DSWD in the crafting of their own results frameworks/programme logic. Later on, the Overall M&E Plan was developed, capturing the consolidated targets on all DSWD programmes, projects and outcome indicators. The M&E Plan serves as the basis for the 1st Overall Assessment Report, a report containing statistical and narrative accomplishments and analysis of DSWD performance every semester.

Through the installation of the URBMES, the DSWD was encouraged to shift its orientation to results, focusing on the outcomes and impact of its programmes and services, as well as of the overall organization. This is a big step forward from the practice of monitoring only programme-level outputs and activities.

INITIAL CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Setting up and implementing URBMES was not without its own fair share of challenges. As in any organization, the initial years were met with some resistance as human capacities were not yet developed and the staff complement was not yet established. A conscious effort was required to oversee or supervise activities on M&E. The adoption of new technologies or tools took time and capacity-building activities had to be consistent and sustained. The level of knowledge, skills and attitudes on M&E was unequal within the organization, with foreign-funded projects having more advanced M&E and other parts of the organization lagging behind. The fast turnover of staff also hampered continuity of learning in the organization.

In addition, the lack or absence of credible data and integrated information systems was also a challenge. Additional challenges include the inability to come up with realistic targets, errors in manual encoding of reports, timeliness of reporting and overlapping systems/frameworks that cause confusion and duplication of efforts.

The DSWD initiated strategies to overcome such challenges and these form part of the lessons learned from the installation of the M&E system, namely:

Importance of ownership. Conducting consultations with the concerned offices and stakeholders is necessary to impart to them their significant role in the process. The more that key personnel and management are involved, the more they take accountability for their actions and the better they perform to produce the outputs the Department is trying to deliver.

Major role of technical assistance and capacity-building. For organizations that would want to install a new system or update/enhance their existing systems, provision of relevant technical assistance and the conduct of useful capacity-building activities are a prerequisite. Through these efforts, the stakeholders will feel the support they need in terms of skills and knowledge enhancement/development which in turn will be helpful in performing the tasks assigned to them. The conduct of capacity-building activities is an investment in the key personnel which tries to address not only the low level of skills/competencies but also the level of dedication and motivation of staff to the M&E work as they come to appreciate the new functions designated to them.

Value of partnerships and knowledge transfer. The DSWD actively pursues partnerships with various organizations in order to broaden its network towards becoming an environment that supports a culture of evidence-based public service. Through these partnerships, M&E activities such as trainings/workshops, evaluation studies and knowledge-sharing forums are conducted. Local and international partners provide resources and technical assistance for various M&E activities such as in the conduct of evaluations. In pursuit of constant learning, hired consultants work with DSWD personnel for knowledge transfer.

Good documentation is also necessary for knowledge transfer among peers and continuous learning. (DSWD-PDPB, 2016). Through these lessons, the Department has been able to continue moving forward to where it is today on M&E.

CHALLENGES MOVING FORWARD FOR RESULTS-BASED M&E

With a fairly young M&E system, abundant challenges still remain in integrating results-based principles into existing frameworks and processes, especially in making evaluation a systematic part of programme management and in utilizing evaluations to influence policy decisions. The following are the challenges moving forward for results-based M&E:

Integrating results-based principles in management processes. While much has been done in promoting and implementing results-based M&E, principles of results-based management have to permeate other management processes such as planning, budgeting, implementation and performance management in order to achieve intended outcomes and impact. At present, while M&E systems are already in place, there is a growing awareness that they are not linked to processes for strategic and operations planning, budgeting and performance management. Oftentimes, results frameworks are used just as a basis for reporting progress but are not utilized as a key tool for analysis.

In past years, indicators for performance management were not the same as those in the DSWD results framework. This disconnect lowers the accountability of management and staff to their commitments in the DSWD medium-term targets as indicated in the results framework.

For the first time, the DSWD medium-term strategic plan has a results framework and it will be accompanied by a results matrix providing the organization's outcome and output indicators and targets for the medium term. The results matrix will be the basis for the annual planning and budgeting of each office. The targets and indicators in the results matrix will also form part of the performance contracts of each office, cascaded down into the individual officials and staff for accountability and incentives.

Existing platforms gathering management officials on a regular basis will also be influenced to become the venue to discuss M&E findings so that they can immediately respond.

Embedding evaluation in social welfare programmes. Evaluation is still not embedded in a majority of social protection and social welfare programmes. Programmes with embedded evaluations are mostly those with funding support from development partners. A lot of long-standing programmes have yet to articulate their theories of change, let alone set up an effective M&E system. And because some social welfare programmes have no project "end" like foreign-funded projects, the motivation for such programmes to show "results" are low (especially if they are not a priority of the current administration).

While an internal policy document is already in place, emphasis on results-based M&E can be further pushed by planning and budgeting oversight authorities through policies and processes that will require all government programmes to have a theory of change, results frameworks and M&E systems.

Low demand for evaluations and communicating evaluations. Demand for evaluations from the public is still low. Results of evaluations or the lack of evaluations to provide evidence of results is not commonly discussed in budget deliberations where parochial concerns still dominate the discussion. But in some instances when impact evaluation results are actually available, the credibility of the statistics are sometimes questioned. This is a challenge when communicating evaluation results, especially in light of the abundance of opinions in social media, alternative facts and fake news that evaluation results have to compete with in public discourse.

Moving forward, the DSWD has to learn how to be strategic with the conduct of evaluations to support decision-making, especially in using results as leverage against decisions driven by mere political propaganda. While there exists a National Evaluation Policy Framework, the criteria as to which programmes should be prioritized for evaluation are not yet available.

Capacity for evaluation. Individual and institutional capacities for evaluations still need to be strengthened. The DSWD is fortunate to have received support from various development partners for capability-building opportunities for officials and staff on M&E and social protection. However, there is no systematic strategy for capability-building for the whole of government for M&E. Sustaining and expanding the role of M&E in development requires having to hire and train additional human resources for M&E. Graduate courses on evaluation are only starting to be developed in a few universities in the country.

CHALLENGES MOVING FORWARD IN EVALUATION OF THE SDGs

The DSWD works with the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA), the planning ministry, to ensure that policies and programmes on social welfare are aligned with the SDGs. NEDA coordinates the political process of SDG implementation in the Philippines. In cooperation with the statistical authorities, it is developing the localized version of the SDG indicators that will be relevant to national priorities while considering availability of data sources.

A strong feature of SDG implementation is the clear identification of the national government vision and strategy aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. The long-term vision is called *Ambisyon Natin 2040* (Our Ambition 2040) that was a result of a series of national and local consultations and surveys. The long-term vision has three pillars—“*Matatag, Maginhawa at Panatag na Buhay*”— meaning “strongly-rooted, comfortable and secure life.”

The Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022 is the first medium-term plan anchored on this long-term vision. It seeks to lay a stronger foundation for more inclusive growth, a high-trust and resilient society and a globally competitive knowledge economy. The Plan has an accompanying results matrix with performance indicators and targets to measure progress.

In line with the Philippine Development Plan, the DSWD as an implementing agency of the national Government developed its own medium-term strategic plan. The role of DSWD in the Philippine Development Plan is in reducing vulnerability of individuals and families and ensuring their inclusion in efforts to accelerate human capital development.

The Philippine Statistical Authority Board has enjoined all government bodies to provide the necessary data support to monitor the country’s performance vis-à-vis the SDGs based on the indicator framework that was determined by NEDA, Philippines Statistical Authority and other government agencies.

After a series of workshops and meetings led by NEDA and the statistical authorities, the Philippines was able to identify 155 indicators for 97 targets of the 17 SDGs. Of these, 73 out of 155 indicators are in the Philippines Development Plan Results Matrix, 14 out of 155 indicators are tagged under gender and 7 out of 155 indicators are tagged under social protection.

While much has been achieved, some challenges still remain for national government agencies such as DSWD in ensuring the achievement the SDGs.

Fragmented national development planning and programming. Unlike other countries, in the Philippines, the 2030 Agenda was not coordinated by a strong political power such as the President. The job of ensuring political commitment and implementation of the SDG agenda became the responsibility of NEDA, which was mostly concerned about how to measure the SDGs.

There was no strong vision on social protection as a means to achieve the SDGs, especially in “leaving no one behind”. This resulted in fragmented planning among implementing agencies concerning social protection and poverty reduction. The absence of clear strategic direction for social protection poses a challenge not only in ensuring that “no one is

left behind” but also for evaluating the contribution of social protection policies and programmes in achieving the SDGs. The integrated nature of the SDGs and the complexity of problems requires a whole of government approach. Some Philippine SDG indicators are programmatic and do not capture the real essence of the Goals.

Absence of a national M&E framework as basis for systematic and institutionalized conduct of evaluations. Another symptom of fragmented planning is the absence of a coherent national M&E framework. While there have been public financial reforms in terms of linking budgets to performance information in agencies, there is no clear guidance for implementing agencies as to how M&E systems should be developed, implemented and aligned with that of the whole national Government.

The M&E framework should also be a basis for a national evaluation policy detailing the evaluation priorities of the national Government. Evaluation results should be available in time for planning and budgeting. The Government should evaluate whether it is doing the right things, not just if it is doing things right in its own programmes and services. As an implementing agency, we want to know if we are delivering the right combination of outputs, and whether we have the right mix of policies and services that will contribute to national development.

Linking budgets to results. Because social protection is a cross-cutting concern that spans several SDG goals and targets, evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of social protection policies and programmes poses a challenge. One of the questions that can be raised is, does the Philippines have enough resources to achieve its 2030 goals?

Improving capacity to meet the SDG challenge. Evaluating the SDGs relies heavily on the ability of all levels of government to effectively plan, implement, monitor and evaluate within their own organizations. This challenge needs to be addressed as we aspire to meet the demands of the SDGs. Unless the capacities of national government agencies for results-based management improve, the same challenges will continue to permeate in the bureaucracy.

OPPORTUNITIES AND WAYS FORWARD FOR M&E AND THE SDGs

As we progress towards evaluating the SDGs, especially the role of social protection, the following is an opportunity to strengthen evaluation: the upcoming review of the social protection operational framework and the development of a medium-term social protection plan. An M&E plan should be in place for the social protection plan to ensure that social protection efforts can be evaluated against the SDGs.

Ongoing support from development partners for M&E. There are existing networks and partnerships that provide opportunities for knowledge transfer and capability-building between development partners and the agency. These can be maximized by agencies to continuously improve their capacities, although we should also be strategic in our partnerships with them.

Increasing awareness of the importance of evaluation in development among national government agencies and civil society organizations (CSOs). More national government agencies and CSOs are taking notice and demanding evidence of outcomes

and impacts of government policies, programmes and projects. Hopefully this will translate into more resources for evaluation and more evaluations will be used for policymaking.

The SDGs as a strategy to make political leadership prioritize evaluations to measure results and show accountability. The SDGs can be the starting point for influencing elected officials and government executives to become more accountable to their constituents. The private sector can play a critical role in demanding evidence of impact.

Moving forward, we have learned that beyond M&E we also have to institute reforms in organizational processes in order to implement effective results-based management. These are in the areas of performance management, budgeting, and of course the way we do monitoring and evaluation, and feedback. Policies and processes have to be streamlined and enhanced to be inclusive and gender-responsive.

Given the complexity and interrelatedness of the SDGs, the DSWD will have to strengthen its multi-stakeholder partnerships as part of the needed systemic reforms. Some partnerships are already in place, however most of them have to be reinvigorated to focus on SDGs. People's organizations will have to be empowered to demand more evaluations for accountability in government. What will success look like for our various stakeholders?

And lastly, there is the need to engage elected officials for their role in implementing the 2030 Agenda but also encouraging them to support evaluation as a tool for development and good governance. The international community will have to be engaged as well for continuous technical assistance for building institutional capacity for evaluation. We have to admit that the role evaluations play in national development relies heavily on how we interact and make use of the powers at play within our scope of work. How do we bring our Government closer to the standards of evaluation of the international community while making it relevant to our nation's people?

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