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Understanding
PROJECTS

COURSE

Understanding Projects

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OBJECTIVES

On completion of the module the reader will be able to:

- › Describe what a project is
- › Understand and explain the elements of a project cycle
- › Define the project objective and goal

INTRODUCTION

The mainstay of work in the development sector is in the form of projects, which are targeted at various areas like health, education, sanitation, livelihoods, child rights, climate change etc., depending on the mandate and the objective of project implementation and funding organization. In this module, the fundamental concepts related to projects are explored and a project-based approach is discussed, which is imperative for an in depth understanding of M&E.

1. DEFINING A PROJECT

As we embark upon our journey to understand how to monitor and evaluate projects, it is important to first understand the fundamentals and underlying concepts of projects and project management. At the outset of every project, it is envisaged that several activities will be performed over the course of the project's implementation. These activities constitute the work that will be done during the project and they form the mainstay of the action that will take place.

Every project has a *specific objective* and it is envisioned that through these activities the project will achieve its objective. The example of a five-year project of making its target villages open defecation free (ODF) is used to illustrate this point. To achieve this objective, the project engages in several activities like construction of household (HH) and community toilets, conducting awareness campaigns to motivate people not to defecate in the open, educating people about the technologies that should be used for toilet construction etc. The types of activities performed as part of the project vary depending on the project objective and the implementing organization's capacity. These activities form the key work that is done as part of the project implementation.

Another important aspect of every project is that it has a specific start date and a specific end date i.e., *a specific time period* within which it has to be executed. The project is expected to achieve its desired objective within this specific time period, which in the example quoted above, is a duration of five years. Last but not the least, it is very critical to understand that each project is allocated a *limited set of resources*. Resources, which may be financial, human and physical, are allocated to a project so that its activities may be implemented and its objectives achieved within a specific time period. Accordingly, the example project is also allotted a fixed budget, human resources and fixed physical resources with which its activities may be implemented and its objective achieved in a specific period of time.

Hence, a project may be defined as:

“A set of activities implemented within a specific period of time and with specific resources to achieve a specific objective.”

2. PROJECT CYCLE

Usually, social development interventions are formulated and implemented in the form of a project and follow a cycle or a sequence which is known as the *project cycle*. From its inception to its closure, every project has its unique cycle of operation though the fundamental project cycle remains the same. Therefore, it is essential to understand the project cycle in order to better conceptualize, design, plan and implement it and also to monitor and evaluate it effectively.

From the beginning till the end of the project, the project cycle comprises of various phases or stages. All the stages in the project cycle are delineated and implemented successively in a phased manner. Each of these stages are defined by their objective, information requirements, responsibilities and key outputs. The various stages of a generic project cycle are:



Project Cycle

Stage I: Situation Analysis

It is a well-known fact that a project does not exist in vacuum. It is formulated to respond to a negative situation or condition. The stage of identifying and understanding this existing negative situation which needs to be responded to through intervention is called *situation analysis*. This stage consists of understanding the prevalent situation and identifying the cause(s) of this situation. Situation analysis is useful in the later stages when the strategy and subsequently, the specific activities to target these causes are defined. A good situation analysis serves as an entry point for the project by throwing light on what needs to be done to address the negative conditions in each context. For example, in the sanitation project referred to earlier, the situation of open defecation (OD) and toilet usage in the target area are assessed, apart from identifying the key reasons why people are defecating in the open.

Stage II: Gap Analysis

A project always works towards achieving its desired objective. By the time it is completed, the project envisages reaching the intended or desired situation as opposed to the situation from where it had started. The project works towards bridging the “gap” that exists between the present and the desired situation. *Gap analysis* is thus done to identify the gap between the current situation and the desired situation. In the example, the project aims to make the target area ODF from the current situation, where it is assumed that 35 per cent of the target population defecates in the open. If in terms of actual numbers, 35 per cent works out to one lakh families, the gap is 35 per cent or one lakh families. Therefore, the intensity of project activities, the requirement of resources and the implementation plan are made keeping in mind that the target population the project must reach is one lakh families.

Stage III: Project Planning

Project planning follows the gap that needs to be bridged through the project that has been identified. During the *project planning* stage, objectives are defined, strategies by which to achieve this objective are formulated, activities are identified, timeline based targets are set and resources are allocated to the project. A detailed implementation plan with the activity schedule and milestone timelines is also prepared as part of the project planning. During this phase, a project monitoring plan (PMP) is also devised to assess its achievement.

Discussing the project planning phase in reference to the example, the first step is to define the project objective, which should be specific and realistic. For this project, the objective is to make the project area ODF in the next five years. The second step is to identify the activities that are undertaken as part of the project to achieve its intended objective. The project can undertake activities like building HH and community toilets, creating awareness in the community about the ill effects of OD, tracking people who defecate in the open and counselling them, and providing information and technical support for building the right type of toilet etc.

After identifying the activities, targets are set, i.e., the number of HH and community toilets that could be built within each year, and the number of communication campaigns that need to be undertaken to motivate people to not defecate in the open. This is followed by deployment of resources for the project, primarily in the form of finances available for implementation of the project. The money is utilised to recruit human resources (project staff) based on the defined roles and responsibilities. Physical and infrastructure resources like office, equipment etc., required for the project are also purchased. Timeline targets are set for communication campaigns and constructing toilets in a phased manner.

Stage IV: Implementation and Monitoring

The next stage is project *implementation* during which the formulated plan is executed. *Monitoring* of project activities is done concurrent to their implementation to ensure that the project is on track and as per the formulated plan. Monitoring helps to identify deviations, if any, from the project plan and also to introduce mid-course corrections. While executing a project, its quality, time, cost and risk management needs to be considered to ensure that it is successfully implemented within its predefined resources and timeline.

To take the case of the ODF project, the various activities that were identified in the planning stage are executed during this stage. The project staff is recruited and deployed, awareness campaigns are conducted about the ill effects of OD, and subsidy is provided for toilet construction etc. These activities are also simultaneously monitored to assess whether the toilets are being constructed as planned, both in terms of quantity and quality and whether the communication campaigns are being conducted as planned etc.

Stage V: Evaluation

After project activities are completed, many stake holders like project implementers, policy makers, the government, and the external audience, among others, want to know whether there is any change in the 'situation'. The stake holders also want to know whether this change is due to the project intervention or other external factors. An *evaluation*, helps to systematically assess the impact, effectiveness and the contribution of the project. Mid-term evaluations are helpful because they provide timely learning which helps in course correction. Post project evaluations help in getting insights that are helpful in formulation of other similar projects. Various techniques or designs are thus adopted for different projects in different situations. These evaluation designs are explained in detail in the following modules.

Taking the current example of the ODF project, an evaluation should be conducted to know if the rate of OD has reduced in the project area. Also, in case it has reduced, would it be right to say that it has reduced due to the activities undertaken by the project?

To consider another example of a project which aims to increase the rate of institutional delivery, and examining its project cycle through the M&E lens, the first question at the start of the project would be to inquire about the proportion of women who had opted for institutional delivery. At the end of the project, the same question is asked once again regarding the proportion of women that had institutional deliveries. Also, whether it could be confidently asserted that the institutional delivery rate had increased only because of the project activities and not because of any other external factor. The change from the initial status (e.g., 65%) is measured and whether the desired situation (say 80%) has been reached or by what margin the gap has reduced.

After the various stages of the project cycle are examined, the practitioner needs to assess the stage at which M&E needs to be conducted and the specific M&E activities that should be performed at each stage of the project cycle.

3. PROJECT GOAL AND OBJECTIVE

One of the most critical and fundamental steps in designing a project is to define its objective and goal. Many people often get confused and use these terms interchangeably without realizing that they are two different though interrelated concepts. Poorly defined goals and objectives cause ambiguity in project planning and implementation. Therefore, it is essential for any project to lucidly define its *goal* and *objective* and make sure that the entire project planning and implementation is aligned towards achieving them.

Objective

The *objective* of a project is the specific condition that the project targets to achieve and that too by itself. An objective is derived from a goal, has the same intention as a goal, but it is more specific, quantifiable and verifiable than the goal (SMART, Characteristics of Good Objectives, 2016). Usually, the project tries to address the inverted image of the core problem. For example, if the core problem in a specific village is the 'high rate of OD', then its corresponding objective would be to 'reduce the rate of OD from 35 per cent to zero per cent in a period of five years'.

The SMART criteria is widely used to judge project objectives. A project objective is said to be SMART if it fulfils the following criteria:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Realistic
- Time-bound

Using the SMART criteria to examine the objective to 'reduce the rate of OD from 35 per cent to zero per cent in a period of five years':

Specific: The objective is said to be specific as it specifically targets the issue of OD.

Measurable: It can be safely stated that this objective is measurable using the indicator 'rate of OD'. The data for this indicator can be collected using the HH survey data collection tool.

Attainable: To assess if the target of reducing the OD rate from the current 35 per cent to zero per cent, for one lakh families is attainable or not the availability of resources, time in hand and other relevant factors are considered.

Realistic: While setting an objective, the project team and other experts analyze whether the project would realistically be able to achieve its objective, keeping in mind the resources available for the project and the external factors related to the project.

Time bound: It needs to be ensured that the project has defined timelines. In the case of the current example, the project is expected to achieve its objective in a time frame of five years.

If the project objective fulfils all the five criteria as part of the SMART framework, it is said to be a good objective. Another question which may be considered is whether a project should have a single objective or multiple objectives? By its definition, an objective is supposed to be precise, specific and definite. A project should thus simply have a single objective. In common parlance, the term 'project objectives' is often used.

However, this term is incorrect and this usage is against the spirit of a 'project-based approach'. A project is essentially about the breaking down of a large problem into its smaller constituent parts, such that each problem is addressed one at a time in a single project. It is not about tackling all problems at once by trying to find a general solution for the various aspects of the problem. A project which has more than one objective is likely to lose focus, while it renders the objective open to ambiguity and subjectivity.

Therefore, a well-designed project should ideally have one objective which is clearly articulated.

Goal

By now the practitioner knows that the planned activities have to lead to fulfilment of the project objective. The objective also has a higher purpose which extends beyond the precincts of the project. This higher purpose is the *goal*/which the project aims to contribute towards. Each project, by achieving its objective contributes towards a larger goal. Thus, it can be rightly said that while a project 'achieves'

its objective, it 'contributes' towards the goal. In other words, the goal is the macro-level change that the project contributes to at the micro-level.

Thus, the objective of our example project, 'reducing the rate of OD from 35 per cent to zero per cent in a period of five years', at the same time contributes to the higher goal of 'improving the sanitation conditions in rural India'. Another current example would be of a project which aims to contribute towards the goal of improving the standard of living of the rural poor. Increasing the HH income of the rural poor, improving their access to social schemes, improving the sanitation conditions, improving their health, providing safe drinking water, increasing the HH assets etc., could be a few of the project objectives which would contribute towards the above mentioned larger goal. Thus, a goal is the intended change we seek; it is expansive in its scope and all-encompassing in its vision. In this way, many projects may refer to and contribute towards a single goal while achieving their respective objectives.

Hence, it is of paramount importance to define the objective and goal lucidly to ensure clarity in project planning and implementation.

ASSIGNMENT

What is your understanding of projects?

REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

SMART, Characteristics of Good Objectives. (2016, 01 04). Retrieved from Community Empowerment Collective: <http://cec.vcn.bc.ca/cmp/modules/pd-smar.htm>