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The Role of Monitoring Frameworks in the Continuous Improvement of Staff Capacity Development Programs in the NGO Sector: A Case-Based Study on Friends Lanka Child Foundation in Balapitiya, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how monitoring frameworks contribute to continuous improvement in staff capacity development programs in the NGO sector, focusing on Friends Lanka Child Foundation as a case study. A well-structured monitoring system is recognized as an important driver of organizational learning and accountability. However, NGOs in resource-limited settings may face challenges when monitoring data are collected but are not systematically used for decision-making, learning and follow-up. A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Ten project staff participated in semi-structured interviews and fifteen staff members completed structured questionnaires. Findings were supported by observations of staff development sessions and review meetings and by review of organizational reports. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that Friends Lanka Child Foundation maintains several monitoring practices, particularly data collection and reporting, but gaps remain in the use of monitoring data for decision making and organizational learning, follow-up mechanisms in some projects, and monitoring knowledge among some project staff. These limitations may restrict the full use of monitoring for staff capacity development and organizational improvement. Since staff performance was not directly measured, the findings are interpreted as evidence about monitoring practices, staff perceptions and capacity development rather than proof of a direct performance effect. The study recommends strengthening follow-up mechanisms, monitoring competencies and a culture of data-driven learning.

1. Introduction

NGOs play a vital role in developing countries in supporting social development and welfare programs where government participation may not be at a satisfactory level (Shakoor et al., 2024). In response to this situation, NGOs have invested in staff capacity development programs to strengthen staff competencies, improve service delivery and program effectiveness, and ultimately improve the quality of life of the people they serve. NGOs are expected to generate program results and meet targets within intended project periods. However, the value and quality of these programs largely depend on the monitoring systems they use (FAO, 2006). These include:

- Tracking progress periodically.
- Identify challenges and make necessary adjustments and improvements.
- Continuous and regular improvements to improve results.

The UNDP monitoring handbook also shows that a correct monitoring system supports Results-Based Management (RBM), improves accountability, and helps projects perform better than weak monitoring practices. However, many NGOs still experience weaknesses in follow-up mechanisms, including insufficient use of monitoring data for organizational learning, failure to monitor organizational progress at scheduled intervals, and failure to adopt accepted and technically appropriate monitoring methods (UNDP, 2009). These weaknesses reduce opportunities to learn from experience and may contribute to difficulties in achieving organizational goals. It is therefore important to identify ways of strengthening organizational learning, accountability and long-term outcomes. Although such practices are more established in developed countries and urban settings, an empirical research gap remains in local NGO contexts in resource-limited rural areas where monitoring frameworks may still be developing. The United Nations (2014) identifies developed economies with public-sector systems that emphasize effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. The Logical Framework Matrix (LFM) is a common monitoring approach that can be adopted by both government and non-government organizations (Myrick, 2013). Myrick (2013) explains that monitoring should focus on objectives, measurable performance indicators, targets and timely reporting based on monitoring data. Earned Value Analysis (EVA) also provides benefits related to reliability, adaptability and flexibility in project management. The Malaysian context has similarly considered EVA as a project-performance monitoring approach (Abdul-Rahman, Wang and Muhammad, 2011). In any project, progress should be measured; however, Cracknell (1994) noted that well-structured monitoring systems were not consistently established across public-sector settings.

With a correct and effective monitoring system, organizations can accelerate program improvement and support better decision making (Patton, 2008). Senge (1990) also highlights that organizations are more likely to learn from their experiences and, when supported by comprehensive monitoring, can improve over time. Fowler (1997) argues that NGOs may focus mainly on donor reporting and compliance rather than using monitoring data for strategic decision-making and capacity development. Davies and Dart (2005) discuss the importance of participatory monitoring and staff analytical capacity to interpret data, which is a critical stage of monitoring. Without these skills, monitoring approaches may have limited value because data interpretation is essential for learning and improvement.

These gaps create a need for further investigation. Although monitoring is conceptually recognized as a method for learning and improvement, its practical value varies according to the level of organizational integration and commitment at the grassroots level. These scholarly findings therefore justify the need for empirical research in specific organizational contexts. By focusing on Friends Lanka Child Foundation as a case study, this research examines key monitoring components of the results chain, including activities, outputs, risks, challenges and expected outcomes. It also observes program implementation and decision-making processes. Focusing on one case organization enabled access to organizational documents, reports, field observations and interviews with program staff, contributing to richer and more reliable case-based evidence than would have been possible through a broader but less detailed multi-organization approach.

Because local organizations operate within specific social and cultural contexts, the researcher could examine how local realities influence program effectiveness. Friends Lanka Child Foundation has engaged with communities for approximately thirty years and operates several projects with nearly 50 staff members. This long-term organizational experience provided an opportunity to observe program practices and changes within the case setting. As a case study supported by empirical evidence, the research may contribute to broader discussions in development studies and social sciences.

The precise conceptual problem addressed in this study is the gap between collecting monitoring information and using that information for decision making, organizational learning and staff capacity development. In this study, monitoring is therefore considered not only as a reporting process but also as a possible learning process when information is interpreted, discussed and followed by action.

1.1 Literature Review

The literature used in this study shows three connected areas: monitoring frameworks, organizational learning and staff capacity development. Monitoring frameworks are not limited to collecting information; they also require clear objectives, indicators, targets, periodic reporting and the use of findings for management decisions (UNDP, 2009; Myrick, 2013). Patton (2008) further emphasizes the value of using evaluation

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information for practical decision-making rather than treating monitoring as only a reporting requirement.

Organizational learning is also important for understanding the value of monitoring. Senge (1990) explains that organizations improve when they are able to learn from experience, while Fowler (1997) notes that NGOs may focus strongly on donor reporting and compliance without fully using evidence for internal learning. Davies and Dart (2005) similarly emphasize participatory monitoring and the capacity of staff to interpret information. Therefore, the usefulness of a monitoring framework depends not only on collecting data but also on whether staff can discuss, interpret and use those data.

The above literature identifies a practical gap relevant to this study. Existing work explains the general value of monitoring, learning and accountability, but there is limited empirical evidence on how these processes operate within a small, resource-limited rural NGO in Sri Lanka. This study therefore focuses on the relationship between monitoring practices, the use of monitoring data for organizational learning, follow-up mechanisms and staff capacity development within Friends Lanka Child Foundation. The study does not assume a causal relationship between monitoring and staff performance; instead, it examines how monitoring is practiced and perceived within the case organization.

Taken together, the literature suggests a connected process: monitoring produces information; staff analytical capacity affects whether that information can be interpreted; discussion and feedback can turn the information into organizational learning; and systematic follow-up can support staff capacity development. This relationship provides the conceptual basis for examining Friends Lanka Child Foundation. The study therefore focuses on how monitoring data move from collection to interpretation, learning and follow-up rather than assuming that data collection alone improves staff performance.

2. Research Problem

Although monitoring frameworks are important for organizational performance, there is limited updated empirical evidence on how these frameworks contribute to staff capacity development in NGOs operating in resource-limited rural contexts. The study therefore tries to bridge this gap by exploring how monitoring frameworks support staff capacity development, decision making and organizational learning, using Friends Lanka Child Foundation in Sri Lanka as a case-based study.

2.1 Research Question

How do monitoring frameworks contribute to staff capacity development programs in NGOs, with a focus on Friends Lanka Child Foundation?

2.2 Research Objectives

- To identify the ongoing monitoring practices used by Friends Lanka Child Foundation in relation to staff capacity development.
- To identify how organizational monitoring data are used for decision-making and organizational learning.
- To identify gaps in existing monitoring practices that may affect staff development.
- To provide practical recommendations for strengthening monitoring frameworks and staff capacity development in NGO operations.

2.3 Research Design and Methods

This study adopted an exploratory mixed-methods case-study approach by combining quantitative and qualitative data. The design allowed data triangulation and a deeper understanding of the research problem because numerical patterns alone could not explain staff experiences and organizational practices. The research was conducted within Friends Lanka Child Foundation, a local NGO functioning in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. The study population included administrative and project staff working in Early Childhood, Disabilities, Scholarships and Women Empowering Income Generating Programs who were involved in planning, implementation and monitoring. A total of 25 staff members participated in the study: 15 completed structured questionnaires and 10 participated in semi-structured interviews. The interview format allowed additional questions, changes in question order and detailed open-ended responses when new ideas emerged during the conversations.

The questionnaire component was used to describe patterns in staff perceptions, while the interview, observation and document data were used to provide deeper explanation of those patterns. Because the questionnaire sample was small, quantitative analysis was treated as descriptive and was not intended for statistical generalization or causal testing.

The mixed-method findings were integrated during interpretation. Questionnaire patterns were compared with interview themes, observations and organizational documents to identify convergence, differences and complementary explanations across data sources. This integration strengthened the case-based interpretation while avoiding claims of causal effects that were not directly measured.

2.4 Sampling

Purposive sampling was mainly adopted for participants with relevant experience in organizational planning, monitoring and staff development, including Project Coordinators, Administrative Staff, Executives and Management. Convenience sampling, a non-probability method, was also used to include staff members who were available and willing to participate

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during the study period so that a broader staff perspective could be obtained.

The sampling approach is therefore appropriate for an exploratory case study of one organization, but the small questionnaire group limits the extent to which the quantitative results can be generalized beyond the case organization.

2.5 Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 key project staff to explore their experiences, perceptions and challenges related to monitoring practices. Observation was also used during staff development sessions and review meetings. Document review included organizational data-collection sheets, bi-annual and annual reports, meeting minutes, donor reports and internal databases as supplementary evidence.

3. Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns in staff engagement with monitoring activities. Because the survey sample consisted of 15 respondents, inferential statistical tests were not used and the quantitative results were interpreted descriptively within the case-study context. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.

- The descriptive analysis considered staff role and level of engagement in monitoring activities.

Qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, observations and document reviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. The first stage involved familiarization through repeated reading. Meaningful patterns were then coded in relation to monitoring practices, staff development and organizational learning. Related codes were grouped into broader themes, including challenges in monitoring practice, use of data for decision-making, and organizational learning.

Themes were triangulated across interviews, observation notes and organizational documents to strengthen the credibility of the findings. NVivo 14 was used to support coding and the organization of themes and patterns.

During mixed-method integration, qualitative themes were compared with the descriptive questionnaire results to identify where staff perceptions, interview explanations, observations and documentary evidence converged or differed. This procedure was used to strengthen interpretation rather than to test cause-and-effect relationships.

3.1 Data Collection Tools

The semi-structured interview guide focused on the following areas:

- How is the organization collecting and using data?
- Practical challenges when implementing monitoring practices in the organization
- Monitoring data contribution for organization and learning

The questionnaires included close-ended and Likert-scale questions related to the frequency and perceived effectiveness of monitoring approaches.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

All interviews were conducted in person at the Friends Lanka Child Foundation project premises and lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Responses were recorded with participant consent and transcribed during the data-analysis stage. Questionnaires were distributed and collected during the same study period, and observations were made during staff monitoring and development sessions referred to as 'Team Meetings'.

4. Ethical Consideration

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and research data were stored securely.

5. Findings

The empirical data from Friends Lanka Child Foundation revealed both strengths and gaps in the organization's ongoing monitoring system. Quantitative findings indicated that monitoring practices were present across projects, while qualitative evidence provided explanations about how these practices were understood and used by staff.

Based on Table 1, staff perceived monitoring data collection and reporting as more established than the use of monitoring data for decision-making and follow-up. Given the small questionnaire sample (n=15), Table 1 presents the descriptive response pattern rather than overstating numerical precision. This pattern suggests that the organization has a functioning basis for monitoring, but the strategic use of monitoring information is less developed. Qualitative interviews and observations similarly indicated that monitoring was perceived to support accountability and staff development by identifying areas for professional improvement. However, staff also reported that data were not always analyzed systematically or applied to program adjustment, and some participants demonstrated limited confidence in formal monitoring methods.

Staff performance was not directly measured through an objective performance scale or pre-post assessment. Therefore, the findings describe perceived contributions of monitoring to staff development, accountability and organizational learning and

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should not be interpreted as evidence of a direct causal performance effect.

Table 1: **Staff Perception of Monitoring Practices (n=15)**

Monitoring Activity	Descriptive response pattern	Interpretation
Monitoring Data Collection	Frequently applied was the dominant response	Most established monitoring practice
Data use for decision making	Responses were divided mainly between frequently and moderately applied	Less consistent use of monitoring information for decisions
Follow-up for staff development	Responses were concentrated between frequently and moderately applied	Follow-up is present but not consistently systematic
Reporting and Feedback	Frequently applied was the dominant response	Relatively established monitoring practice

Table 2: Key themes of qualitative data

Themes	Quotes/Observations
Inadequate data use	"Normally, we record data in every unit on a day-to-day basis, but we rarely use them for overall project improvements."
Limited follow-up	Observation: Some projects have periodic review meetings, but these meetings are not consistently used to monitor staff-development programs.
Insufficient monitoring knowledge	"I am not confident enough to interpret monitoring reports. I have heard about monitoring methods such as results-based frameworks, but I do not know how to apply them."

Based on the above results, Friends Lanka Child Foundation maintains monitoring practices related to data collection and reporting, but gaps remain in the use of data for organizational improvement. The organization therefore has an opportunity to strengthen a learning-oriented culture by connecting monitoring more directly with decision-making, feedback and staff-development follow-up.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings show a consistent pattern: data collection and reporting are more established than the use of data for decision-making, systematic follow-up and staff learning. The convergence of questionnaire patterns, interview evidence and observations strengthens the interpretation that the central issue is not only whether monitoring occurs, but how monitoring information is used after it is collected.

6. Limitations

Although this study provides useful insight into monitoring mechanisms and staff capacity development at Friends Lanka Child Foundation, several limitations should be recognized. The study involved a small sample of 25 participants from a single local organization, which limits generalizability to NGOs with different structures, operational settings and international standards. In addition, much of the evidence was based on interviews and questionnaires and therefore depended on participant self-reporting.

Participant responses may have been influenced by social desirability or personal bias. Because descriptive statistics were used with a small quantitative sample and no inferential tests were conducted, cause-and-effect relationships between monitoring practices and staff development could not be tested. The resource-limited rural context may also influence the findings, and the results may not fully apply to urban or resource-rich settings. Finally, the study was conducted within a limited time period and therefore could not capture the long-term effects of monitoring practices.

In addition, staff performance was not measured directly through objective performance indicators. The study therefore provides context-specific evidence about monitoring practices, perceived staff development and organizational learning rather than causal evidence of performance improvement. These limitations also identify directions for stronger future research.

7. Future Research

Future research should include broader studies across different NGO settings, including international NGOs and government-supported NGOs, to examine how monitoring relates to organizational quality in different contexts. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the same organizations over longer periods and identify changes in monitoring practices and staff-

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development outcomes over time. Where ethically and practically possible, comparative or quasi-experimental designs could examine staff groups exposed to different monitoring approaches and compare resulting learning or development outcomes.

8. Discussion

The findings reveal both strengths and limitations in the way monitoring supports staff capacity development at Friends Lanka Child Foundation. Data collection and reporting are relatively established practices, but the use of monitoring information for organizational learning and decision making is less consistent. This finding is consistent with Fowler (1997), who argues that NGOs may focus on donor reporting and compliance without fully using monitoring evidence for internal learning.

The findings also suggest that monitoring can contribute to organizational learning when staff activities and information are reviewed through organizational meetings and feedback processes. This interpretation is consistent with Senge (1990), who emphasizes learning from experience, and Patton (2008), who highlights the importance of using monitoring and evaluation information for practical decision making. At the same time, limited follow-up mechanisms and insufficient monitoring knowledge among some staff restrict the effective use of monitoring information. These findings also relate to Davies and Dart (2005), who emphasize participatory monitoring and the ability of staff to interpret and use evidence.

A central finding is therefore the gap between collecting monitoring information and using that information for action. Questionnaire results indicate stronger application of data collection than decision-making use and follow-up, while qualitative findings explain this pattern through limited monitoring knowledge and weak systematic follow-up. This supports the view that monitoring creates greater organizational value when data are interpreted, discussed and connected to decisions rather than collected mainly for reporting purposes (Patton, 2008; Myrick, 2013).

The study adds contextual value by showing how this issue operates within a resource-limited rural Sri Lankan NGO. Regular collection and reporting provide a foundation for learning, but the weaker use of data for follow-up and staff development limits the full value of the monitoring framework. Strengthening staff capacity to interpret monitoring information, providing regular feedback and linking findings to follow-up actions may therefore help convert routine monitoring into a stronger organizational-learning mechanism.

Practically, the findings indicate three priorities for Friends Lanka Child Foundation: strengthening staff knowledge of systematic monitoring methods, using monitoring results more consistently in internal decision making, and creating documented follow-up actions after review meetings. These recommendations arise directly from the identified gaps in data use, follow-up and monitoring knowledge and can be implemented without replacing the organization's existing monitoring practices.

However, these findings should be interpreted within the design of the study. Staff performance was not directly measured, the questionnaire sample was small, and the study focused on a single organization. The contribution is therefore contextual and explanatory: it shows how monitoring is currently practiced, where staff perceive value, and where organizational gaps remain. This interpretation is consistent with the evidence generated by the case study and avoids claiming a causal performance impact that was not directly tested.

9. Conclusion

This study explored the role of monitoring frameworks in the continuous improvement of staff capacity development programs at Friends Lanka Child Foundation. The findings show that the organization has established monitoring practices, particularly regular data collection and reporting, which contribute to internal accountability and provide information that can support staff learning.

At the same time, the study identified important limitations in the use of monitoring information. Monitoring data are not consistently used for strategic decision making and systematic follow-up, and some staff members showed limited understanding of formal monitoring processes. These findings

indicate that the value of the monitoring framework depends not only on collecting data but also on interpreting and using them for organizational learning and staff development.

The study therefore emphasizes the importance of strengthening monitoring practices in a systematic way, especially in under-resourced rural contexts. Building staff monitoring knowledge, improving feedback and follow-up mechanisms, and promoting data-driven learning may help the organization use its existing monitoring system more effectively.

Overall, the mixed evidence suggests that Friends Lanka Child Foundation has a functioning basis for monitoring, but the system has greater potential when collected information is converted into decision making, follow-up and organizational learning. Because the study is based on one organization, a small descriptive questionnaire sample and no direct measurement of staff performance, the findings should be treated as case-specific evidence rather than as a general or causal claim.

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