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PANEL 6

Demystifying M&E: What Worked and What Not?

Moderator



Nabila Hussein

Panellists



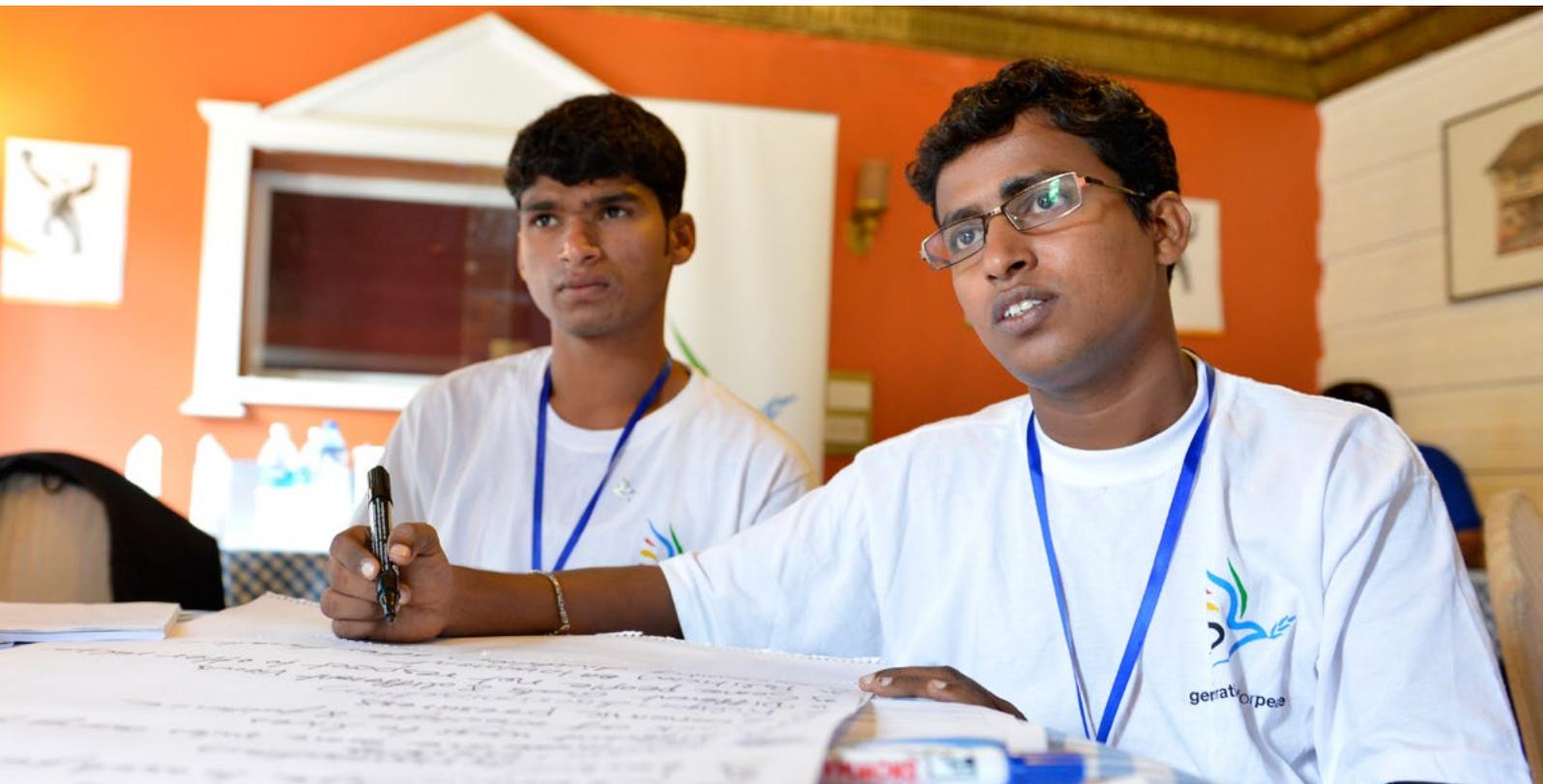
*Sanja
Angelovska*



Tamar Nasidze



Sairah Yusuf



This panel dealt with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the peace-building sector by zooming in on the model of M&E used by Generations For Peace (GFP). Participants discussed the importance of M&E procedures, the specificity of GFP's approach to M&E, and some of the successes and challenges of this approach. The panel concluded with some recommendations for implementing and improving a participatory approach to M&E within the peace-building field.

This discussion, following a series of panels on GFP's programme implementation, focused on a practical conversation around measurement of programme results. Tracking change to understand what happened within a project or programme, and why, is crucial in assessing the outcomes and impacts of any type of social or developmental intervention. This is particularly important in the peace-building field, which is plagued with two major challenges: demonstrating strong evidence of change at any level, and showing that localised peace-building efforts have an impact on "peace" beyond the communities that these efforts deal with directly. Rigidity in M&E processes and an unwillingness to adapt measures and standards of success to complex environments on the ground have compounded these problems. The discussion acknowledged these challenges by focusing particularly on mechanisms to overcome some of the challenges of traditional M&E procedures.

To begin with, all panellists stressed the importance of having procedures in place to assess the results of programmes. Sanja Angelovska, from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, described the importance of M&E in the following terms: "M&E is very important to us as it helps us

see how far we have come. ...I know it takes time and is not an easy task at all, but it is very important to show us, and others, that we are on the right track." She also stressed the dual nature of M&E: "In the end, M&E is not only an evaluation of the programmes, but of our work as well." The idea that M&E was an evaluation of implementers' own work – in this case, the work of volunteers – was one that Tamar Nasidze, from Georgia, built on further. She stated, "We were able to register every change that had happened so far. It was a very emotional moment when we realised that the work we had done had actually changed the lives of some people." This brought home the fact that M&E was not only important in understanding the results of a programme, but could also be an incredibly rewarding process for the implementers themselves.

Whether implementers found the process of M&E rewarding depended strongly on the type of M&E that was used. Traditionally, M&E has focused on ensuring that a project has worked, using external and pre-decided indicators of measurement, involving external evaluators who addressed achievement of results desired by donors, usually presented in the form of complicated reports made available well after the completion of the project in question. As outlined by Sairah Yusuf, Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at the GFP Institute, GFP used a participatory approach to M&E in the programmes discussed by the panellists. This meant that all of GFP's M&E processes were volunteer-led and volunteer-based; GFP volunteers decided on how best to bring about change by developing their own theories of change, creating their own standards/measurements of success, and evaluating the programme themselves by collecting everyone involved in the programme to comment on what worked well, what did not, and why.

Experiences with this model of participatory monitoring and evaluation demonstrated both major successes and challenges. In terms of successes, Tamar stressed the fact that the participatory method allowed the programme participants, the wider beneficiary community, any key stakeholders, and the programme implementers to come together and comment on the successes and shortcomings of the programme in question. Sanja felt that the creation and measurement of simple indicators of change was a major success; these indicators allowed a clear comparison between the situation at the start of the programme and at the end of the programme. Sairah stated that noticeable successes from a Headquarters (HQ) level perspective were as follows: volunteers understood and realised the importance of M&E in measuring the changes caused by their programmes; volunteers had taken ownership of the process, making it truly community-based and community-led; volunteers now had greater capacity in M&E processes; and, finally – reiterating Tamar’s point – the greatest success had been in ensuring wider community involvement in M&E processes. This was evidenced by the fact that, at the time of this writing, GFP had successfully carried out community-based Participatory Evaluations for 22 programmes across 11 countries over the course of a single year.

While the successes of this approach were considerable, participatory M&E also presented many practical challenges. Esther Mebrahtu, writing in 2002, discussed M&E procedures in international NGOs, demonstrating that M&E presented a separate set of challenges at different levels of an organisation. This panel demonstrated that this insight was still relevant today. Speaking of challenges faced in the field, Tamar pointed out that involving community members required a great deal of logistical planning and – most importantly – the availability of human resources. Participatory methods required the presence of more volunteers than were always available. In addition, reaching out and engaging with community members who were not direct participants in the programme (stakeholders, for example) was difficult, and required a sustained process of community engagement. Building on this comment, Sanja raised an interesting point about having to overcome resistance to M&E at the field level, both amongst those who had to implement M&E procedures and those who were at the receiving end of them (local respondents, for example).



Sairah mentioned some of the challenges observed at the HQ level. One major challenge was standardising the information received; because all indicators were created and measured by volunteers – with support from HQ – information was always context-dependent. While this was an advantage for individual programmes, it made it difficult to compare and contrast across countries. From an HQ perspective, it was also difficult to support fully the creation and measurement of strong indicators, as volunteers faced resource constraints, lack of time, and difficulties accessing target populations. Another major challenge was the tension between collecting as much information as possible or collecting limited but focused information. This raised some interesting questions, at the end of the panel, of prioritising data quality over the actual quantity of data collected about programmes, balancing the demands of donors, HQ, and people on the ground.

As a whole, this panel demonstrated a few important trends in what made GFP participatory M&E processes work well. Key factors included the importance of community ownership, both in terms of moving away from traditional, externally-driven M&E procedures towards a more participatory approach, and overcoming resistance to M&E by convincing community members of the importance of the activity; using procedures that were simple for community members to design and implement, so that lengthy processes of data analysis could be bypassed; and, finally, prioritising the collection of lesser, good quality data over large amounts of data that was not always useful. Keeping these elements in mind was considered crucial in making sure that M&E was done across local programmes, generating information that was simple, relevant, and useful to encourage learning and reflection during a programme and improving programme design in the future.





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