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Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (RBM&E): Principles, Practices and Process

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ABSTRACT

Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (RBM&E) is a paradigm shift in performance management, which emphasizes on results and impacts rather than on inputs and activities. This paper presents a conceptual reflection and definition of RBM&E, its fundamental principles, well established practices, and its cyclic process, as an integrated system, that fulfills the identical aims of accountability and learning. The analysis vital to the inherent conflict in this framework suggesting that the technical demand for quantifiable accountability tends to suppress the participatory and reflective practice required in adaptive management and authentic organization learning. In addition, the analysis also shows and describes two major gaps in the current use of RBM&E. First, a contextual gap, where standardized frameworks often fail to align with local values and complex realities. Secondly, a gap in theoretical elaboration, where the approach does not have a strong, cohesive theoretical basis. It concludes that the key to going beyond these constraints lies in consciously rebalancing RBM&E as a compliance instrument with an integrated learning system within its methodology that is based on explicit ethical standards and solid theoretical foundations that can guarantee the delivery of both measurable and meaningful outcomes.

Keywords: Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (RBM&E), accountability, adaptive management, evaluation theory, results framework, performance measurement.

INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has fundamentally changed from a set of administrative instruments to an enterprise of values around the essential modern governance and development practice (Rossy, 2023; Stockmann, et al., 2020; Zierke et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2022). The systematic nature of its data-collection and data analysis processes is based on and reflects a set of ethical principles governing each step in terms of design through to the use of findings. Among these, the need to be accountable to donors, governments and above all to beneficiaries is paramount and requires clear displays of how funds are converted into concrete outcomes (Hoque & FCPA, 2021; Grossi et al., 2020; Kravariti et al., 2023) At the same time, organizational learning makes M&E an agent of adaptive management and continuous improvement (Schneper, 2020;

Malik & Garg, 2020; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020). This dual mandate leads to an inherent tension within the discipline where accountability requires conclusive evidence of historic performance, and in the same breath the ability to learn and adapt in the future. The duality is strongly promoted and must be done within an opened environment with insightful skepticism. (Alderman, 2022; Anand & Brix, 2022; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020; Mavrot, & Pattyn, 2022).

This is the paramount critical crystallization of this tension in the paradigm of RBM&E, which has become the leading prototype in illustrating this values-based enterprise (Uitto, 2021; Glewwe & Todd, 2022). RBM&E explicitly moves the emphasis from inputs and activities tracking to the measurement of outcomes and impacts that operationalize accountability in terms of specific chains of results, measurable indicators, and comparing baselines and objectives (Bhattarai, 2020; Alesani, 2023; Muguti et al., 2022). Its values like stakeholder involvement and evidence-based decision-making also highlight its potential as a pedagogy of training (Bamberger & Zazueta, 2024; Dugan et al., 2024; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022). Nonetheless, the mainstream discourse on RBM&E has largely progressed to develop its technical architecture, its logical structures, indicator suites, and evaluation designs, but has paid little attention to the underlying, and normally important value fundamentals. Equity, transparency, and ethical rigor, though implicitly acknowledged, are not usually conceptualized as principal and integrated idea of concepts within mainstream RBM&E praxis (Baguios, et al., 2021; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Igwe et al., 2022; Chilisa & Phatshwane, 2022). This split risks assigning more weight to the quantifiable accountability indicators in comparison to more qualitative values like social justice or even real participatory learning thereby transforming RBM&E into a less mindful of progressive action and more of compliance function.

As a result, the analysis assumes that the establishment of RBM&E theory and practice presupposes abandoning its technical description and moving on and seeking the critical discussion of its values-driven underpinnings (Bourgeois & Whynot, 2023). It posits that the perceived conflict between accountability and learning should not be considered a defect, but rather a major dynamic that needs to be actively addressed in terms of explicit ethical framing. It will be analyzed, first, by deconstruction of the key principles of RBM&E such results-orientation, stakeholder engagement, accountability, and learning in order to reveal their latent value assumptions and potential contradictions. It will then consider the common RBM&E process and practice and

clarify how much it mediates such tensions or promotes their escalation. Finally, this paper argues that the inclusion of a robust and explicit values-based framework is not peripheral, but rather critical to RBM&E to provide a genuinely real fulfilment of its two-fold promise. These refer to being a stringent accountability mechanism, and having a deft and ethical mechanism towards sustainable learning and adapting management to meaningful social impact.

Contextualization of Results-Based Monitoring & Evaluation

The appearance of RBM&E as the prevailing paradigm in the field of public administration and international development is to be understood as the immediate response towards the historical and institutional demands to become more accountable and demonstrate efficiency. (Timilsina et al., 2020; Jafino et al., 2020; Uitto, 2021; Glewwe & Todd, 2022). RBM&E began to emerge prominently in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a result of a convergence of forces, such as the increasing scrutiny of the public and aid spending, donor demands to see impact, and a wider New Public Management (NPM) ethos of insisting on efficiency, outputs, and performance measurement in the public sector (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020; Christensen & Lægreid, 2022; Funck & Karlsson, 2020; Osborne, 2018). It is in these contexts, which provoked the radical reorganization of old pattern M&E systems, that had long been infested with retroactive tactics, emphasis upon financial determination and satisfaction by getting activity finished, that the shift to proactive management should be pursued with a view to explaining how inputs were being systematically converted into an impact on the society. (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022; Funck & Karlsson, 2020; Osborne, 2018). Therefore, RBM&E is not simply a technical upgrade but a reflection of the fundamental value of accountability embodied into a holistic system of operation, in an attempt to answer the essential question of whether efforts are producing significant change or merely accomplishing pre-determined plans (Hoque & FCPA, 2021; Grossi et al., 2020; Kravariti et al., 2023)

In such a framework, accountability is operationalized using a structured and almost contractual theory of change (Scott, 2023; Scott, 2024). RBM&E requires prescribed specification of explicit results chain, which is, the articulation of presumed causal relationships among inputs and activities on one side with outputs, outcomes and impacts on the other side. Such are quantified by definite and distinct indicators and targets in every level (Hoque & FCPA, 2021; Grossi et al.,

2020). This architecture imposes responsibility beyond ambivalent expectation and transforms it into a quantifiable responsibility, which forms a provable agreement among funds, the people who are carrying it out or acting to put it into effect, and the beneficiaries. (Mahmoud & Karia, 2024; Witter et al., 2019; Ouda, 2015). The evaluation of performance is no longer carried out based on expenditure reports or the narrative activity summary but rather on empirical data that reflects progress in comparison with the preset outcome targets. It is an evidentiary movement of radical reorientation, because plausible data on outcomes are converted into the medium of accountability, and a rationale to proceed with a program, an investment. (Mahmoud & Karia, 2024; Witter et al., 2019; Ouda, 2015). Nonetheless, this strength, in its turn, demonstrates a fundamental contradiction. The rigorous, and even quantifiable demands of proving that all will be counted can inadvertently narrow the direction of what is sought and quantified, relegating to the periphery less quantifiable, yet equally important qualitative outcomes like empowerment, equity, or social cohesion. (Baguios, et al., 2021; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Igwe et al., 2022; Chilisa & Phatshwane, 2022). Meanwhile, RBM&E is contextually achieved via the same and even hostile institutional value such as the necessity to learn constantly and take part in adaptive administration (Rist, 2017; Nshimyimana, 2023; Ovcina & Kalajdzic, 2024; Ba, 2021). Theoretically, the same data fulfilling accountability purposes can facilitate real-time learning, which would allow the managers to discover the bottlenecks, allow assumptions to be tested as part of their theory of change, and engage in responsive strategy adaptation (McGill et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2021; Skivington et al., 2021). This is in line with the value of enhancing effectiveness and relevance in keeping the programs dynamic in a complex environment. The stakeholder participation and transparency principles play a crucial role in this dimension of learning because they are designed to introduce diverse perspectives, local knowledge, and constructive criticism to the evaluation process (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2024; Parker & Sud, 2023; Patton, 2017). However, in reality, the contextual demands of proving achievement of accountability reports can pose a disincentive to the transparent reporting of failures or unexpected outcomes that are critical to deep learning (Mavrot & Pattyn, 2022; Altiparmakis et al., 2021; Traianou, 2025). This once again sets an internal, implicit struggle within the RBM&E framework in which the system is compelled to show both unqualified achievement to external stakeholders and diagnosis invested, and professional documentation of what the system must do internally (Röttger et al., 2024; Alderman, 2022; Anand

& Brix, 2022; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020). This is a dual role that current technical systems will most likely not meet.

Thus, the contextualization of RBM&E demands the acknowledgement that it is a discipline with this guiding duality. Its technical procedures, such as indicator creation to impact assessment, are not instruments of value-neutrality but are conditioned to continually bargain between the values of accountability and learning (Kelly, 2021; Adefila et al., 2022; Browne, 2024). The absence of conceptual insight on a formal values-based framework of RBM&E as observed in the more general literature on M&E implies that such tensions are often addressed informally or opportunistically rather than through prescribed overt design concepts. This gap highlights why it is so important to get beyond RBM&E as a technical-management toolkit. This entails its total understanding via analytic and voluntary assimilation of RBM&E as a value based enterprise on its own accord. The operationalization of the principles of results-orientation, stakeholder focus, and transparency, herein, becomes the key, that by which the difference between proving value and upgrading exertion is solved. This mechanism will be decomposed by examining how these motivating values are actually implemented in the processes of RBM&E core, and how they are also challenged to achieve these emphasized values in their core processes.

Principles of Results-Based Monitoring & Evaluation

RBM&E principles are a complex intersecting system intended to operationalize the core values of the approach.

Results-Orientation is the defining and most significant axiom of this system (Bhattarai, 2020; Alesani, 2023; Muguti et al., 2022). This principle brings about a radical epistemological transformation in a paradigm of verifying activity to an outcome of accountability. In this instance, success is not judged according to the efficiency with which things are implemented but the efficacy with which an intervention delivers quantifiable changes in desirable conditions or behaviors. (Bhattarai, 2020; Alesani, 2023). It is structurally achieved by considering the formation of results frameworks and theories of change, which formalize hypothetical or causal pathway and create a contractual foundation of the evaluation (Bhattarai, 2020; Alesani, 2023; Muguti et al., 2022). This unrelenting emphasis on predetermined goals generates an effective

mechanism of accountability and focusing on strategy. Nevertheless, it carries a very important epistemological limitation, which is how it selectively favors those indicators that can be quantified, attributed, and traceability within original project designs, therefore, creating a systematic risk of not capturing any emergent, unintended, and/or qualitatively rich outcomes (Baguios, et al., 2021; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Igwe et al., 2022; Chilisa & Phatshwane, 2022). This creates a fundamental and implicit tension between the managerial demand to have predictable and reportable evidence and the adaptive demand to detect and learn the complex, nonlinear, or value-laden change that engenders unpredictably within dynamic social systems (McGill et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2021; Skivington et al., 2021).

Stakeholder Participation and Ownership is the principle that is suggested as the counterbalance to this rigid structure in order to make it more human and tie it to the real-life experience (Timilsina et al., 2020; Jafino et al., 2020; Bamberger & Zazueta, 2024; Dugan et al., 2024; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022). The principle states that the validity and utility of M&E can only be determined by the meaningful participation of beneficiaries, implementing partners, and other rights-holders in co-defining what a valuable result is and in terms of selecting the culturally relevant indicators and the interpretation of the data gathered (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2024; Parker & Sud, 2023; Patton, 2017). The theorized presence of this engagement is believed to change M&E from an extractive audit to the collaborative sense-making process, improving the quality of data, resulting in local legitimacy, and commitment that is vital in sustainability. This participatory ideal, in operational practice, often clashes with the inflexible and top-down nature of the results-oriented planning architecture. As soon as the log-frames and key performance indicators are decided by donors or headquarters in the design phase, the room of real co-creation is usually limited to the minimization of stakeholder contributions to confirmation of previously chosen metrics as opposed to shared ownership of the evaluation agenda. It exposes such an important power dynamic, in which upward accountability imperatives of standardized, comparable data may undermine downward accountability imperatives of contextual, participatory learning and adaptive management (Kelly, 2021; Adefila et al., 2022; Browne, 2024).

The Accountability and Transparency principle offers the main political and ethical custodianship of resources and delivery of publicly declared outcomes (Mahmoud & Karia, 2024). The mechanism that establishes accountability as credible and enables external validation and trust of

the population is transparency in terms of methodologies, raw data, and open disclosure. This principle fulfils directly the fiduciary duty to funders and democratic duty to citizens. However, it is most common practice, which is aimed at demonstrating success required to guarantee the further funding, though may lead to the emergence of the very cultural environment which actively cuts the corresponding principle of learning and adaptive management.

Learning and Adaptive Management is the corresponding principle of transformative and deep learning which needs psychological safety to openly question failures, examine underlying assumptions, and provide uncomfortable data (Schneper, 2020; Malik & Garg, 2020; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020). In environments where accountability is equated with punitive audit, reporting incentives are inclined to rewarding performance and positioning adaptations as simple tactical adjustments instead of formally recording basic strategic reevaluations occasioned by failure. These differences have the capacity to create two versions of the narrative like one that is stakeholder-approved and externally transparent one, and another that compares the idea of 'what is working' and 'what is not working' more deeply uncomfortable. This positions the two claimed core objectives of the system into discord (Mavrot & Pattyn, 2022; Altiparmakis et al., 2021; Traianou, 2025; Röttger et al., 2024).

The Evidence-Based Decision-Making principle provides the methodological foundation of both accountability and learning, with the assumption that managerial and strategic decisions should be rational (Bamberger& Zazueta, 2024; Rousseau, 2020; Cairney, 2022; Slavin et al., 2021). It supports the employment of performance data, comparisons of the baseline and evaluation results to drive resource distribution, program modifications, and policy development. Although this principle is essential in justifying decisions, when applied in a technical manner, it may result in an essential restriction as empirical evidence can never be prescriptive, only descriptive (Booth et al., 2021; Lemert, 2020; Suri, 2020; Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Arithmetic data can provide insights into what is occurring and its scale and correlations, yet is silent on the normative issues of what deserves to be appreciated or what is ethically correct (Alderman, 2022; Anand & Brix, 2022; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020). This involves value judgments that moves the data of determining the quality of improved aggregate efficiency to integrate data that recompense the inequity of distribution, or whether the primary outcomes justify the negative unintended outcomes. As a result, evidence-based decision making, unless explicitly balanced with an ethical

system, might instead be a technocratic process that is methodologically proper, but morally barren, cleverly maximizing measures that do not perfectly represent the actual welfare in the society.

The principle of ***Equity and Social Justice*** acts as this required ethical framework and presents a critical interrogative to the RBM&E process itself (Baguios, et al., 2021; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Igwe et al., 2022; Chilisa & Phatshwane, 2022; Mwanza, 2024). It criticizes the facade of the neutrality of indicators and targets, posing the question of whose success, to whom are the results made, and at what cost might accrue to the marginalized populations (Adedeji & van der Lingen, 2025; Abramovich & Vasiliu, 2023; Szabó et al., 2021; Khan & Stinchcombe, 2025). The principle states that M&E has to analyze disaggregated data to demonstrate different impacts by gender, ethnicity, class, or disability, and they must also examine the relations of power in the evaluation process in order to avoid its perpetuation (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2024; Parker & Sud, 2023; Patton, 2017; Danapriatna et al., 2023; Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Kruahong et al., 2023). It pushes a conflict between a goal of aggregates that are easily to a publicly reportable and a more nuanced and politicized belief in a goal of fair results. A successful project can be considered to have realized its overall outcome target and yet increase inequality. Such outcome must be designed in a justice-oriented RBM&E system to identify and reject, thus making technical measurement consistent with ethical demands.

That holistic perspective is further justified by the concept of ***Holistic and Systems Thinking*** that warns against the myopia of solely focusing on isolated indicators (Scott, 2023; Scott, 2024; Olala & Nyonje, 2020; Watt, 2025; Chanana et al., 2024). It underscores the fact that interventions work in complex adaptive systems that are defined in feedback loops, time delays, and unpredictable interactions. A systems-conscious RBM&E approach attempts to comprehend second-order effects, unintended consequences and how some contextual factors like political, economic, and environmental, facilitate or limit outcomes (Rist, 2017; Nshimyimana, 2023; Ovcina & Kalajdzic, 2024; Ba, 2021). It goes beyond inquiring whether *'we got what we intended or not'* to pose a question of *'how did our intervention interact with the system and what new dynamics did we create?'* This principle is essential to sustainable outcome and smart adaptation, because it offers the conceptual instruments to learn about the emergent trends and adapt strategies to the behavior

of the system, contrary to trying to achieve preset goals, which may turn counterproductive in a dynamic environment.

Finally, the integration force is the principle of ***Purpose-Driven and Goal-Oriented evaluation*** which offers strategic coherence (Bourgeois & Whynot, 2023). It guarantees that all the M&E activities, including those of data collection and reporting, are not only strategically informed by, but also based on, the overall mission and strategic objectives of the organization or intervention. This principle protects M&E against being a detached, bureaucratic compliance activity. It continually shifts back to the question of utility by asking *how this data and analysis can be used to serve the core purpose*. It bridges the technical rigor of the evidence-guided practice to the strategic need of mission development in such a way that the RBM&E system serves as a unified intelligence unit that directs the organization toward meaningful change, as opposed to a partially fragmented set of reporting requirements. The combination of these principles generates a dynamic, internally robust and working matrix that organizes the ongoing and indispensable negotiation between demonstrating value to external constituencies and improving work under the desires of the public in the RBM&E paradigm.

Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation Practices

RBM&E practices become the working engine where the principles are implemented, and abstract promises of commitment to accountability and learning are transformed into those of concrete managerial activity. These practices constitute a cycle where strategic design is the starting point and the utilization of findings is the final step, with each step strengthening the ideals nn ends over means.

The critical component of the diagnostic step prior to the design and implementation of an RBME system is ***readiness assessment,*** which gauges the ability of the organizational ecosystem to adopt a results-based approach (Meyer et al., 2022; Nshimyimana, 2023). It assesses the availability of the sufficient capacity, resources, and stakeholder alignment to effectively run a results-based approach, both in terms of technical skill and cultural demand for evidence (Baguios et al., 2021; Buckley et al., 2021). This would entail an analysis of the presence of clarity in the intended outcomes, the availability of data gathering tools, the capabilities of the staff, the dedication of

leaders, and the need to implement evidence-based decision-making, thereby having the foundation in place (Ovcina et al., 2024; Zierke et al., 2023). The evaluation allows creating a robust foundation in RBM&E by detecting a shortage of skills, systems, or political will beforehand, making certain that the system is erected on good ground, not susceptible to a potential breakdown in the face of unpreparedness (Bourgeois & Whynot, 2023; Stockmann et al., 2020). It can serve as a preventative tool, ensuring that resources are spent wisely and that the organization is equipped to meet outcomes and prevent the traps of superficial compliance and performative assessment (Cairney, 2022; Mavrot & Pattyn, 2022). Thereby, an in-depth readiness exercise aligns technical design with contextual organizational aspects and power dynamics, pre-empting a sustainable and utilized M&E system (Funck & Karlsson, 2020; Indahsari & Raharja, 2020).

Outcome definition is the paradigm shift, defining the desired alterations in attitude, realities, or well-being that a project or program intends to attain by specifying outputs into outcomes (Bamberger & Zazueta, 2024; Glewwe & Todd, 2022). It goes beyond enumerating activities or outputs to define the actual change that the intervention ought to bring to the target population, thus defining the 'what' of the theory of change (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2024; Rist, 2017). The outcomes should be clearly specified, and engaging in a collaborative theory of change process is often required to make sure that all stakeholders perceive success similarly and that the evaluation is anchored in a sensible causal logic (Adefila et al., 2024; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021). This transparency is essential in the creation of the practical indicators and coming up with attainable objectives to convert the abstract objectives into specific courses of action required to integrate accountability and learning (Fox & Morris, 2021; Parker & Sud, 2023). Outcome definition helps to provide a clear sense of what change will look like, giving all future M&E the much-needed reference point to ensure the whole RBM&E process is guided by the need to achieve meaningful and measurable impact instead of merely producing outputs (Kelly, 2021; Persaud & Dagher, 2021). A strong definition of outcome therefore intervenes between strategic purpose and empirical measurement which bases the RBME system on a common, clear purpose to provide guidance to both proof of concept and adaptive learning (Nielsen & Montague, 2023; Scott, 2023).

The foundational practice is ***Developing the Results Framework and Theory of Change*** (Scott, 2023; Scott, 2024; Timilsina et al., 2020; Jafino et al., 2020) which is a strategic planning undertaking that goes beyond mere work plans into an attempt to model the postulated causal logic

of an intervention. This is achieved by strictly mapping the results chain by the articulation of how the particular inputs and activities are likely to deliver outputs, which will consequently trigger short and medium-term outcomes and ultimately will bring about a long-term impact. The principle of results-orientation is directly institutionalized by this practice by pressuring a level of clarity about the purpose of activities. Nevertheless, the development process itself is a highly value-laden process of choosing which results should be given priority; what causal relationships should be represented is a subjective choice; where the initial assumptions are made to the guide all future measurements; and the system's ability to accept other stories of change as truth are part of the either objective or subjective considerations (Stone, 2024; Alkin et al., 2024).

In order to challenge this logic and drive enquiry, it is imperative to undertake the practice of ***Formulating Results-Oriented M&E Questions***. In contrast to the classical M&E questions that might require asking something like, *"Were activities fulfilled?"* RBM&E questions are directly aimed at investigating the result chain such as *"To what extent did the intended outcomes happen?"* and *"What proves that our operations have been causes of such changes?"* (Bourgeois & Whynot, 2023). This practice redirects the epistemic angle framed on implementation fidelity to outcome achievement and causal contribution. It can be used both to achieve accountability, whereby the questions are designed *to ensure conclusive evidence shows whether a given target has been achieved or not*; and to learn more, *where inquiry initiated the mechanisms of change and circumstances*. The balance between such goals is difficult since the questions used to determine unequivocal accountability (such as*, 'Did we reach the 70% target?'*) is not the same as the one used to determine complex learning (like *'How did the political environment interact with our intervention to generate unexpected results?'*).

Performance measurement is the process that involves tracking the progress towards the pre-defined results on a systematic and regular basis (Ouda, 2015; Bhattarai, 2020). It does not just record activities and inputs but evaluates the process of whether tangible outcomes and effects are being realized, thus operationalizing the fundamental principle of the results-based management (Alesani, 2023; Nshimyimana, 2023). It is based on transparent, SMART indicators identified at the planning stage, which enables managers to measure actual data against baselines and goals, forming an accountability contract that is verifiable (Chau et al., 2021; Grossi et al., 2020). Performance measurement also facilitates evidence-based, timely corrective interventions by

allowing informed decision-making based on real-time evidence of what has been achieved and what has not based on performance metrics (Alkin et al., 2024; Mertens et al., 2025). It is the working centerpiece of the results-based system, as it makes the system accountable to the stakeholders and aligns day-to-day activities with the strategic goals, thus closing the gap between implementation and impact (Glewwe & Todd, 2022; Ovcina & Kalajdzic, 2024). The absence of effective performance measurement means that an organization cannot be certain whether it is producing meaningful change or is simply performing activities, which can result in the continuation of inefficient interventions (Ba, 2021; Marc et al., 2022).

The integrative process transforming gathered information into positive action and institutional knowledge is referred to as ***reporting and learning*** (Anand & Brix, 2022; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020). It is a systematic analysis of M&E results to make conclusions about the reasons why outcomes were or were not attained thereby going beyond descriptive to interpretive sense-making (Bourgeois & Whynot, 2023; Patton, 2017). Efficient reporting helps to adapt communications to various stakeholders like donors, management, and beneficiaries, and engenders transparency and develops trust, which are the basis of credible accountability (Kuchenmuller et al., 2022; Mahmoud Saleh & Karia, 2024). In addition to disclosure, the process is more focused on learning which is critical on success or failure. Ultimately, it builds a culture of using evaluation as a means of improvement instead of an obligatory reaction (Alderman, 2022; Chaytor, 2023). It provides feedback loops that enable adaptive management, enables strategies to be changed based on evidence, which is essential in coping with complexity (Buckley et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2020). Finally, reporting and learning make sure that knowledge is recorded, disseminated, and implemented to promote continuous improvement and make sure that future errors are not repeated, hence the institutionalization of evaluative thinking (Parker & Sud, 2023; Stockmann et al., 2020).

These questions are translated into measurable terms by the fundamental method of ***Developing SMART Indicators and Establishing Baselines and Targets*** (Scott, 2023; Scott, 2024; Timilsina et al., 2020; Jafino et al., 2020). The indicators are the vital signs of the RBM&E system, which gives quantifiable or qualitative evidence of change at every level of the results framework. The SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) criterion makes sure that the indicators are operationally viable to track (Kuchenmüller et al., 2022; Persaud & Dagher, 2021).

Importantly, this practice cannot be complete without the setting of a baseline of an empirical measure of the status of the indicator prior to an intervention and a performance target. The target-baseline pair forms the basic measurement of the progress which is the efforts to convert abstract goals into a concrete direction. This is vital in implementing the technical core of accountability that offers the definite, numerical evidence needed to show results. However, there exists a crucial risk to it *where what is actually quantifiable* (e.g., the number of training sessions delivered) is often a proxy variable that measures *what is meaningful but difficult to quantify* (e.g., the intensity of the knowledge application or sense of empowerment). Such is termed the 'quantification bias' and may lead to prioritizing the programs more on metrics than on overall impact (Alderman, 2022; Anand & Brix, 2022; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020).

The cross-cutting practice in monitoring as well as evaluation is the ***Systematic Data Collection, Management and Analysis***. RBM&E requires both relevant and reliable, valid, and timely data. This is done to underpin the guidelines of collecting both quantitative data (surveys, administrative records) and qualitative data (interviews, focus groups), as well as to cover ethical issues and integrity of the data. It also includes advanced analysis that goes beyond just the descriptive statistics to more analytical tools that determine the relationship between variables, assumption tests, and interpreting qualitative trends. It is a practice that captures the concept of evidence-based decision-making by converting raw data into action operation intelligence (Hoque, & FCPA, 2021). One of the most significant institutional issues is the construction and sustenance of the technical capacity and technological systems (databases, analysis programs) necessary to effectively implement such a practice, particularly in resource-limited contexts (Buckley et al., 2021; Tobin et al., 2022).

Continuous tracking functionality of RBM&E is performed by ***Implementing Results-Focused Monitoring***. This consists of the systematic, periodic gathering of data on output and outcome indicators to make a comparison between actual and planned progress. It goes beyond observing logistical compliance to observing the occurrence of results. The practice facilitates real-time management delivering a flow of performance data to answer the question of whether the project is on course to deliver the intended results as intended. This is the primary instrument of adaptive management as it helps managers to notice delays or gaps in intermediate outcomes and explore reasons to engender a change of activities or plans (Rist, 2017; Nshimyimana, 2023; Ovcina &

Kalajdzic, 2024; Ba, 2021). Its appropriateness, however, entirely depends on the quality of the indicators and the data collection system. A poor indicators monitoring delivery provides false signals, whereas overly infrequent monitoring compromises the capability of responding proactively.

As the progress is monitored, the ***Conducting Periodic and Strategic Evaluation*** practice yields the profound and thorough evaluations that would allow comprehending effectiveness, efficiency, and impact (Bamberger & Zazueta, 2024; Dugan et al., 2024; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022; Booth et al., 2021). In an RBM&E system, evaluations are specifically expected to measure the upper levels of the results chain, outcomes and impacts intended results and to investigate the theory of change itself (Lemert, 2020; Suri, 2020; Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). They utilize stronger methodologies, including quasi-experimental designs, or in-depth comparative case-studies, to deal with the problems of causality and attribution beyond those provided by routine monitoring. The practice is essential in both strategic level learning and accountability (Bamberger & Zazueta, 2024; Dugan et al., 2024; Byrne & Callaghan, 2022). It responds to the question of *whether the whole intervention model is sound*, and *what the overall contribution to change has been*, to give evidence about significant decisions about scaling, redesign or termination. The conflict, in this case, is between a resource-intensive, time-dependent nature of rigorous impact assessment and the stakeholder pressure to deliver fast, conclusive evidence of success (Fox & Morris, 2021; Marc et al., 2022).

Reporting and Communicating Findings is the medium of transfers of the evidence into stakeholder accountability and learning (Hoque, & FCPA, 2021; Parker & Sud, 2023; Patton, 2017). To effectively report using RBM&E, the content to be reported is customized to suit the various audiences such as detailed, technical reports to donors and evaluators; brief, dashboard-like reports to senior management; and accessible and visual summaries to beneficiaries and the general public (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2024; Parker & Sud, 2023; Patton, 2017). This practice helps in the operationalization of the principles of transparency and accountability, as it brings performance and results into the view. It demands integrity in reporting both the achievements and the failures. The strategic issue is how to design reporting systems that meet external accountability requirements of simplified success-focused stories and also encourage internal learning by

maintaining honest and subtle debates about difficulties and failures without necessarily creating two different versions of the truth.

Lastly is the practice that establishes the final value of the whole system, and it is the ***Utilization of Findings to Decision-Making and Adaptive Management*** (Bourgeois & Whynot, 2017; Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2024; Parker & Sud, 2023; Patton, 2017). This is a strategic and planned process to use the data given by monitoring and assessment to inform conclusions which support decisions about program modification and future plan. This is where the cycle completes and the process of learning is realized. This may involve both tactical adjustments (re-training staff in response to performance gaps identified by monitoring) to pivotal shifts at the strategic level (total restructuring of a program model in response to a finding of ineffectiveness in an evaluation). This is a practice that institutionalizes the factor of learning and adaptation (Parker & Sud, 2023; Patton, 2017). Organizational culture will be vital to its success. In case where the aforementioned practices of accountability leds to the establishment of a blame-oriented climate, the results might not be described candidly but instead, very likely be ignored (Schneper, 2020; Malik & Garg, 2020; Antunes & Pinheiro, 2020). Consequently, the utmost display of RBM&E maturity is an organization that gathers evidence methodically and possesses the psychological safety and administration procedures to respond to it in a fearless manner and, thus, guarantee a continuous alignment of its work to the achievement of valuable fair outcomes.

Results-Based Monitoring & Evaluation Process

RBM&E cycle is an extensive, iterative management cycle that converts strategic intent into viable change using a process which is disciplined and follows a systematic order of steps with every step building accountability and facilitating adaptive learning. The process does not start with planning but with a crucial diagnosis stage.

The Readiness and System Design Assessment (Kelly, 2021; Adefila et al., 2022; Browne, 2024; Timilsina et al., 2020; Jafino et al., 2020) phase entails a systematic analysis of the organizational ecosystem to identify its ability to accommodate a results-based approach. It involves auditing current data systems; financial resources, and human capital regarding M&E skills; measuring both the less tangible but key-demand side; the commitment of leadership to use evidence in

making decisions; and how an organization tolerates the risks of critical feedback (Kelly, 2021; Adefila et al., 2022; Browne, 2024). Formal stakeholder analysis is part of this, which maps the power dynamics, interests, and possible resistance to make the future RBM&E system politically viable and in line with major influencers' expectations (Natsios, 2017; Direito & Almeida, 2024; Williams, 2024; Coyne et al., 2024). The danger of ignoring this foundational step is adopting an advanced RBM&E framework in a setting where it will be disregarded or heaved, a situation which will lead to performative compliance where data is gathered but never actually used leading to the squandering of resources and reinforcement of skepticism of evaluation itself (Fox & Morris, 2021; Marc et al., 2022; Huber & Helm, 2020; Alkin et al., 2024; Mertens et al., 2025).

When the readiness of the organization is confirmed, the process is further developed into the core architectural stage of ***Definition of Results and Development of the Strategic Framework*** (Scott, 2023; Scott, 2024). It is a conceptual and joint action that transcends ambiguous aspirations to develop a more specific logic model or a theory of change. It demands the stakeholders to firstly reach a conclusion about the final, far reaching effect, and then rigorously backward-map the required order of intermediate results, as well as short-term outputs (Direito & Almeida, 2024; Williams, 2024; Coyne et al., 2024). This activity makes the explicit statement of the *if-then* hypotheses, form the causal logic of the program (Stone, 2024; Alkin et al., 2024). This derived strategic design is the grand blueprint that makes the major assumptions of the project testable and gives the framework of further measures and assessment processes all, so that every element under monitoring is intentionally associated with the overall purpose.

Simultaneously and based on the strategic framework, the technical operation of ***Indicator Selection, Baseline Establishment and Target Setting*** translates the plan into reality in a quantifiable manner. Each related outcome should have specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) indicators (Bhattarai, 2020; Alesani, 2023; Muguti et al., 2022; Kuchenmüller et al., 2022; Persaud & Dagher, 2021). The problem here is to strike a balance between validity (whether the indicator actually representing the intended result*?),* and feasibility (can we actually collect these data reliably and at a reasonable cost?). After indicator selection, a baseline study carefully records the initial value of every indicator prior to the start of the intervention. It is essential that the essential baseline is a counterfactual baseline. Otherwise, all subsequent claims of change or implication are deemed anecdotal. Lastly, each indicator is

established with realistic but ambitious targets that will define the performance trend with which performance will be closely monitored. This three-pointed approach of indicator, baseline, target, is the technical foundation of the whole RBM&E accountability system.

Having established the architecture and metrics, the process is switched to execution with the ***Ongoing Monitoring of Results***. This is an ongoing, systematic operation that gathers data on indicators in specific intervals, comparing the actual outcomes with the planned ones. It marks a radical transition towards the monitoring of traditional activities, with the emphasis being put on the generation of outputs and the indicators of future results. It is a real-time data stream that is used as the central nervous system of the project and it gives managers a pulse of performance at all times. It allows maintaining a flexible management approach as the bottlenecks, delays, or deviations can be detected in time and processed accordingly (Hoque & FCPA, 2021; Grossi et al., 2020; Kravariti et al., 2023). Its efficacy however depends on ensuring the establishment of a culture whereby data that uncovers problems or deficits are understood as vital learning intelligence but not as some form of failure that needs to be hidden, which epitomizes a culture challenge is explaining why most organizations can hardly succeed (McGill et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2021; Skivington et al., 2021).

Periodic Strategic Evaluation of key milestones is needed to supplement the continuous monitoring. Evaluations are also qualitative intensive studies that use rigorous methodologies (e.g., quasi-experimental designs, comparative case studies), to provide answers to higher-order questions of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, sustainability, and impact (Bamberger, & Zazueta, 2024; Booth et al., 2021; Lemert, 2020; Suri, 2020; Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Monitoring questions include: *Are we on the right track?* Evaluation questions include: *Did we get where we needed to be, and was our theory of change right?* Evaluations are aimed at attributing the observed outcomes to the intervention by isolating the external influences, offering the high-definition of evidence needed when it comes to high-stakes accountability to external stakeholders. An evaluation design may frequently be a negotiation between summative uses (to offer a conclusive judgment to hold oneself accountable) and formative uses (to create knowledge that would make learning viable). Such negotiations depict tension which is necessary to consciously inform the main use of an evaluation (Bourgeois & Whynot, 2023).

The ***Systematic Reporting, Utilization, and Institutionalization of Findings*** (Mahmoud Saleh & Karia, 2024; Witter et al., 2019; Ouda, 2015; Chau et al., 2021) is the result and ultimate justification of this process. Reporting puts complex data and evaluation evidence into simple narratives to fit various audiences, such as technical donors down to beneficiaries in the community. This practice implements the principle of transparency. Reporting is, however, just the means to an end, and the end is utilization (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020; Mohamed Esa et al., 2025; Kimaro, Fourie, & Tshiyoyo, 2018). This can be defined as the process of evidence being fed back intentionally, and frequently formalized, into the decision-making processes. Their effective use requires certain mechanisms, including management response matrices that trace the actions performed in response to the recommendations, and dedicated learning forums, upon which teams discuss findings without blame (Buckley et al., 2021; Tobin et al., 2022).

The last and long-term outcome is the ***Sustained Institutionalization of the RBM&E System,*** entrenching the capacity, process, and, most crucially, the culture of results-oriented thinking into the organizational DNA. This makes RBM&E more than a project-oriented imposition as it is an inherent organizational activity to developing a sustainable engine of strategic learning, responsible stewardship, and never-ending improvement in pursuit of a meaningful impact (Huber & Helm, 2020; Alkin et al., 2024; Mertens et al., 2025)

Conclusion and Recommendations

This conceptual discussion has illuminated RBM&E as a paradigm of dominance but internally contradictive being essentially designed based on the main values of accountability and learning. The above discussion shows that RBM&E is a strong systematic framework that enables managers and evaluators to shift the managerial and evaluative focus towards outcome and impact rather than inputs and activities and is formulated in terms of a well-defined set of principles, practices and a repeated process. Nevertheless, the discussion shows that the technocratic administration of RBM&E usually facilitates the accountability imperative in disproportionate measure occasioned by the requirement of being able to provide measurable evidence in reports to the donors and supervision agencies. This is often done at the cost of its learning and adaptive capacity, which creates a huge disparity in performance with one side of the performance profile strong in

following set measures but weak in the capability to engage in honest reflection and open conversation that bring a healthy adaptation and innovation in performance.

The outlined tensions indicate two significant contextual and theoretical settings gaps in the current RBM&E application. First, there is the significant contextual discontinuity in which standardized RBM&E frameworks, most often formulated in international development paradigms, might fail to accommodate local relevance, equity and ethically complex results. The intense focus on SMART indicators habitually push aside more intangible yet important values like empowerment, dignity, or social cohesion especially among marginalized communities thus the notions of success are quite unlikely to correspond to externally imposed indicators. Second, and, essentially, there is a significant gap in theoretical elaboration. Although procedurally robust, RBM&E does not have a clear, comprehensive theoretical foundation that combines with ethical philosophy, complexity science, and institutional theory. This deficiency deny practitioners of the structured lens and thus gravitate to the subjective judgments inherent into choice of outcomes, data interpretation and competing stakeholder values. In turn, it reduces RBM&E to a compliance process instead of a strategic learning system.

To close these gaps and achieve complete integrated potential of RBM&E, a concerted change both of the practice and research is in need. To practitioners and organizational leaders, there is need to strategically design or combine the two paths of the M&E systems; one streamlined to be able to report externally on accountability; and another, safeguard with security, to support internal learning and adaptation, in which the data on the shortcomings can be analyzed without attribution to make real time management decisions. Moreover, there should be a shift to the creation of context-sensitive approaches, with a shift away from exportation of blueprints to models developed in collaboration with the locals, using complexity-sensitive monitoring mechanisms which are more appropriate to changing contexts.

To the scholarly community, the major suggestion is to take the enterprise of reinforcing the theoretical basis of RBM&E using interdisciplinary research. Further studies will have to make a clear linkage of RBM&E practice to existing theoretical frameworks, such as philosophies of justice to ground equity evaluations, institutional theory to comprehend cultural entrenchment, and complexity theory to be able to model the interventions of non-linear systems. Developing this

stronger theoretical foundation is not merely intellectual abstractionism. It is practical to develop the more qualified and richly reasonable understanding needed to implement RBM&E as an adaptive learning system rooted in values. Finally, the merging of RBM&E with a compliance tool to generate an integrated learning system depends on the deliberate combination of ethical rigor, relevance in context and richness in theory, so that its methodology remains committed to substantial and equitable human development.

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