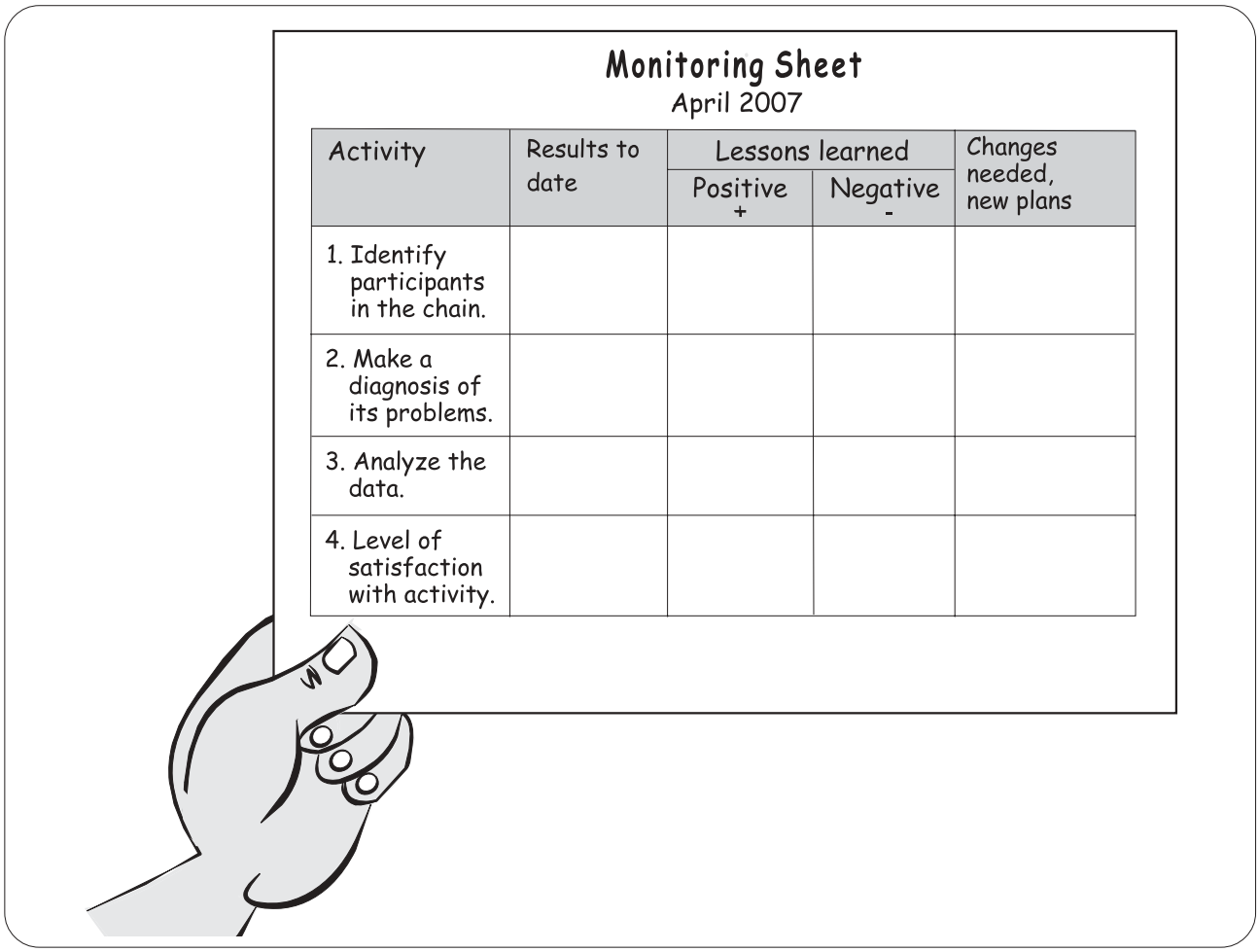
SECTION 5

Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning



Monitoring Sheet
April 2007

Activity	Results to date	Lessons learned		Changes needed, new plans
		Positive +	Negative -	
1. Identify participants in the chain.				
2. Make a diagnosis of its problems.				
3. Analyze the data.				
4. Level of satisfaction with activity.				

The purpose of this section is to provide some general ideas about the utility of a simple monitoring, evaluation, and learning system for the working group. Two simple methods will be put forward document advances place. The final decision on which to use will be in the hands of the group.

Designing and Building an Appropriate Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning System for the Working Group

The principal objective of a monitoring, evaluation, and learning system is to assist the working group and clients to become more effective over time. To build an appropriate system, the working group and client groups should review their information needs and design a system that focuses on those demands. Some key principals to keep in mind in this sense are:

1. Design the system around what the working group members and, for example, the farmer groups want to control, evaluate or learn.
2. Keep the system as simple and straightforward as possible.
3. Base the system, where possible, on existing information that can be analyzed in new ways (poverty or income data, for example).
4. Link the system into existing data gathering exercises (i.e., baseline studies, surveys, others) in the area and build on the data collected in the diagnosis of the working group.

5. Resist the temptation to gather "interesting" information on a wide range of activities.
6. Be systematic in data collection and analysis and make use of locally relevant tools for both (use visual methods rather than surveys for low literacy areas, for example).
7. Assess the utility of information generated for decision making in the working group.

If the working group adapts these principles, the resulting system should fit well with their capacities and information demands.

Utility of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for the Working Group

This section presents monitoring tools to assess and control activities, and learning tools to highlight important learning experiences for specific members of the working group. While these tools are best used together, it is common to find working groups focused principally on the monitoring and evaluation function. However, without a useful and simple learning process, the working group runs the risk of being stuck in 'single loop learning' as shown in Figure 13.

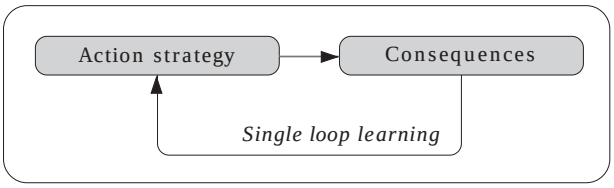


Figure 13. Single loop learning cycle.

In a single loop learning cycle, people and organizations plan, act, and evaluate the results of their actions. Based on the effects of their actions, they then complete the cycle by returning to the planning phase. This process is useful if the relation between the problem and its solution is straightforward, lineal, and causal. In addition, a single loop system assumes that the basic assumptions on which the system rests are valid and static. However, many problems encountered in rural development, do not respond to this simple model, which requires a more complex analysis. In reality, what is needed is to review basic assumptions about what needs to done, when and why[5].

5. For more discussion on this point, see Fairbanks and Lindsay (1997).

Monitoring and evaluation on its own tends to reinforce a single loop learning system. A monitoring and evaluation system linked to a learning process, on the other hand, moves us towards a more complex learning system. This system, known as 'double loop learning' by Argyris[6], generates a process through which the basic assumptions underlying planning, implementation, and evaluation are questioned and improved upon. A 'double loop learning' model is shown in Figure 14.

A double loop learning system helps to move beyond the simplistic plan-act cycle and begins to question the way that organizations promote rural agroenterprise in the area. This more thorough analysis should lead to a more effective process.

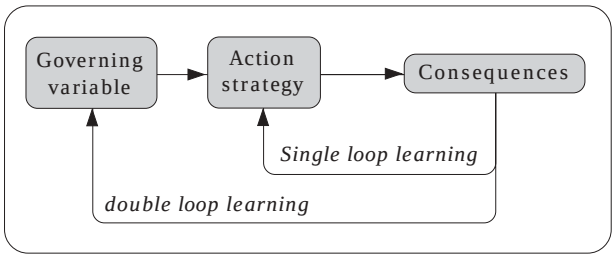


Figure 14. Double loop learning cycle.

Tools for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

The two tools included in this section are simple. As the focus of this guide is on basic principles and techniques that can be adapted to diverse needs at the field level, the first tool for monitoring and evaluation draws on the action plan developed in the previous section and focuses on documenting, controlling, and monitoring the implementation of the working group's action plan. The second, known as 'most significant change', seeks to document lessons learned by diverse members of the working group and facilitate discussions on the underlying assumptions of the group to reframe approaches based on experience.

Monitoring and Evaluation Advances in the Working Group's Action Plan

The most straightforward way to establish a monitoring and evaluation system for the

6. For more discussion on this, see: www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm#_Single-loop_and_double-loop

working group is to base it on the action plan developed in Section 3 of this *guide*. In the action plan, the working group defined key activities, steps, responsibilities, dates and, perhaps, budgets. A monitoring and evaluation system can revisit each activity in the action plan periodically[7] to assess how successfully this activity has been carried out and what the results are. In operational terms, this process can occur in the course of normal meetings of the working group or, if implemented in conjunction with the 'most significant change' learning tool, to special sessions of the working group focused on monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

To document changes, positive and negative, in the evolution of the action plan, the working group can make use of a monitoring tool such as that found in Table 21.

The working group assesses each activity in four areas:

1. Results achieved.
2. Lessons learned what worked well and what worked less well.
3. Changes that need to be made to the work plan based on results to date.
4. Level of satisfaction with the activity.

7. The meaning of "periodically" can vary based on the needs of the working group. In those groups with a strong tradition of collaboration, monitoring and evaluation might occur every 3 to 6 months while in newer groups monthly revisions might be more appropriate.

It is important to note that the monitoring and evaluation should take place at the level of the activity—which includes several steps—and not at the level of each step. This distinction is made to save time for the working group and avoid getting trapped in details when what we want to assess is the overall effectiveness of the activity as such. Has this activity—with all of its steps—led to the changes that the working group expected? Why or Why not?

In operational terms, the revision of the action plan takes place in a workshop with the working group members. Each person or group of people who appear as 'people responsible' for the activity present a short summary of work in this area focusing on results achieved, lessons learned (both positive and negative), and changes that need to be made based on results up to now (points 1 through 3 above). A summary of this information is discussed with the rest of the working group. The final step is to assess the level of satisfaction of the working group with each activity. This information is written on a flip chart prior to advancing to the next activity.

Once all of the activities have been reviewed and the level of satisfaction assessed, the working group decides on what changes need to be made to the existing action plan in terms of activities, steps, dates, budgets, responsibilities or any other aspects. These changes are then noted and incorporated into the action plan for implementation. At the end of the workshop, the working group should have several flip charts showing their results to date, the

Table 21. Building a monitoring and evaluation tool for the working group.

Activity	Steps	Results to date	Lessons learned		Changes needed, new plans
			Positive ☺	Negative ☹	
Analyze the chains of the prioritized products	1. Identify participants in the chain.				
	2. Make a diagnosis of its problems.				
	3. Analyze the data.				
	4. Level of satisfaction with activity.				

assessment of each activity and the changes required in the action plan. These can be typed up and shared within the working group as well as with other interested stakeholders to show the advances made by the group as well as serving as a record of the working group as such.

The process of planning, acting, monitoring, and evaluating should lead the group through an iterative process that allows the action plan to evolve and develop or hone skills. In dynamic working groups, this process becomes second nature and continuous while in weaker groups it often falters. To avoid this pitfall, the working group requires tools and spaces to reflect on their assumptions and deepen their understanding of processes of rural agroenterprise development. The 'most significant change' method is one way of doing this.

'Most significant change' as a learning tool[8]

If the working group decides to make use of the 'most significant change' (MSC) method to document learning, this process can evolve directly out of the monitoring and evaluation work described previously. The MSC method comes from experiences in Bangladesh (Davies, 1996) and Australia (Dart, 1999a) that sought to document processes of organizational learning in development activities.

According to Dart, MSC can be understood as process through which program stakeholders interpret their experiences with the program and select instances of significant change and record each as a story. They are also required to record why this change is significant to them. Then when the reviewers read and evaluate the story, they engage with it and construct further new meaning. When this is done in a group, this construction may be shared. In the MSC approach the criteria that are used to interpret the story are documented, made transparent and attached to the story itself. It is this transparency that makes the whole process even more open to new and more sophisticated constructions of meaning (Dart, 1999b).

8. This section draws on Dart (2000).

'Most significant change' processes and logic

To make use of this method, the working group needs to undertake three main activities: (a) establish the kinds of change the group expects to see; (b) organize a system to collect, process and review stories of change, and; (c) find time—and perhaps assistance—to conduct a secondary analysis of the stories selected. Each process is described briefly in the following section.

Defining the types of change the group wants to see: In this step, the working group members should identify no more than three kinds of changes that they would like to document as a result of their activities. Examples could include 'more diversified livelihoods' or 'increasing value added activities'. This list serves as a guide for members of the working group to identify and report changes they see at the field level.

Collecting, reviewing, and processing the stories of change: Stories that show the kind of changes that the working group would like to document are recorded by those most directly involved in project implementation (i.e., field workers and farmers or entrepreneurs). People at each level of the project hierarchy are then involved in reviewing a series of stories and selecting those that they think represent the most significant accounts of change (Figures 15 and 16). The selection of the stories takes the form of an iterative voting process, until consensus is achieved. At the various review fora, participants are required to document which stories they selected and what criteria they used. This information is then fed back to the storytellers and the project stakeholders. It is intended that the monitoring system should take the form of a slow but extensive dialogue among working group members, their organizations, and farmers during each reporting period (Dart, 2000). This process can be repeated with important external stakeholders (i.e., donors or government officials) to establish a dialogue with them about what constitutes significant change in terms of agroenterprise development in the area.

Secondary analysis of the stories: The stories reported by the organizations involved in

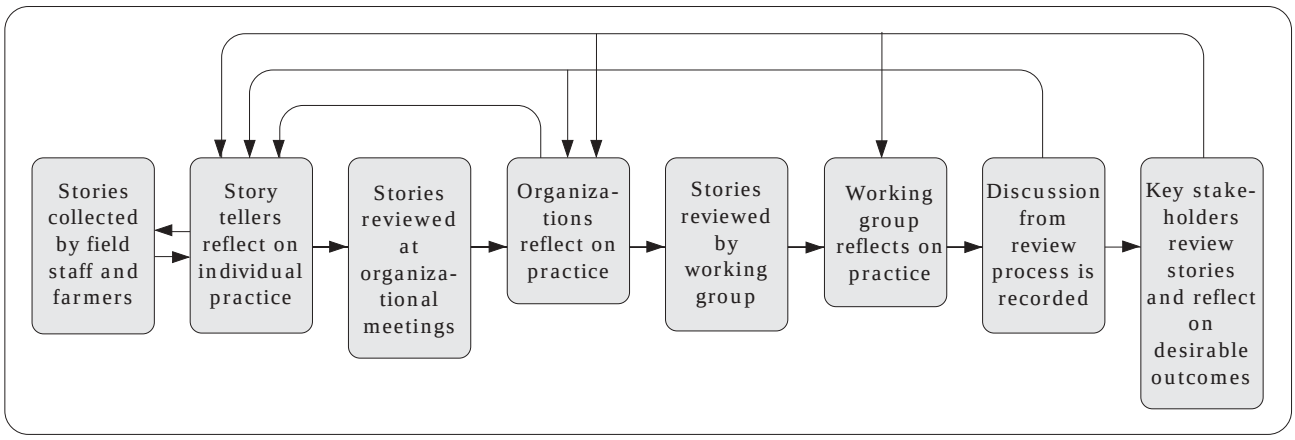


Figure 15. Steps and feedback loops in the MSC system.

SOURCE: Adapted from Dart (2000).

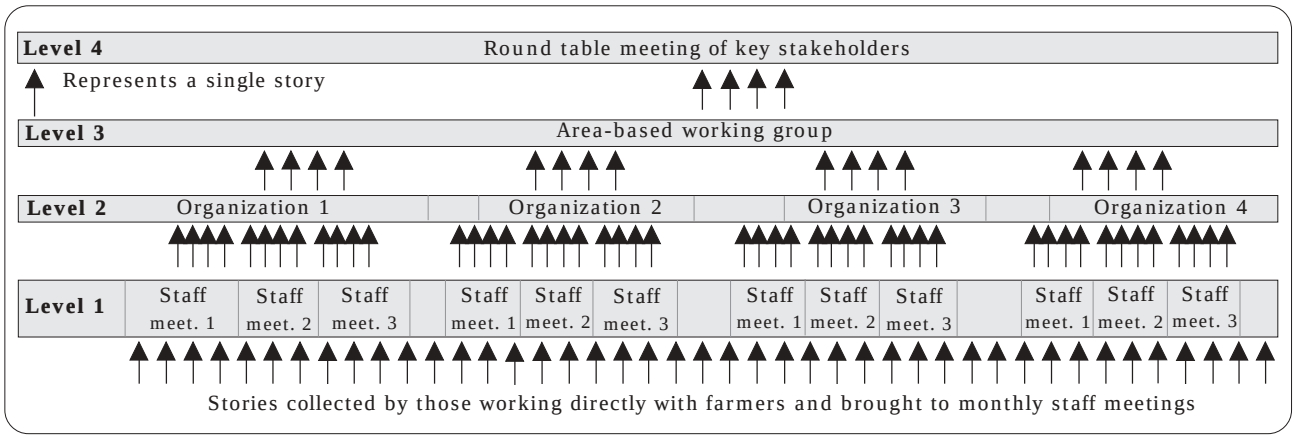


Figure 16. Idealized flow diagram for stories collected during a reporting period. (Adapted from Dart, 2000)

the working group can be grouped for additional analysis. These stories are of particular use in understanding the outcomes and limitations of agroenterprise development in terms of 'big questions' such as rural poverty, social and gender equality, and changes in natural resource management. The inclusion of social science researchers from local universities may be useful for this kind of analysis.

'Most significant change' tools

For each of the above mentioned steps, the following tools can be adapted for use by the working group.

Defining the types of change the group wants to see: The definition of the types of change that the working groups hopes to see, can be based on the 'preferred future' (or vision) that they developed in Section 3. From this work, the group selects no more than three specific types of change to document and lists them. This list of expected changes is then communicated to the field workers—staff who work directly with farmers or agroenterprises—who then identify stories of change that correspond to these categories.

Collecting, reviewing, and processing the stories of change: The collection of the stories of significant change at the field level can take various forms depending on the region, local culture, and relative levels of literacy. In all cases, the stories of change should be short and focused on answering the basic journalistic questions of:

- *What* was the change that occurred and *why* is it significant to the people involved?
- *Where* did this story of change take place?
- *When* did this change occur?
- *Who* was involved in the significant change?
- *How* did this change occur?

In areas with low levels of literacy, it may be more effective to document stories of significant change using drawings, photographs or

interviews (audio or video). There is ample space here for field staff and farmers to use their creativity and design reporting mechanisms that are adapted to their conditions.

Once each field worker has identified and documented with farmers or agroentrepreneurs their best story of significant change in the period of analysis—including the reasons why it is significant—these are fed into organizational meetings (shown as level 2 in Figure 16). The stories are reviewed internally and up to four stories are selected to share with the working group. At this stage it is important that the organization explain why these stories of change are significant in relations to the type of change the working group hopes to see. The working group, in turn, reviews the stories from each partner organization and selects the most significant to share with key stakeholders (shown as level 3 in Figure 16).

The final step of the process is sharing and discussing stories of change and their significance with the key stakeholders of the working group. Stakeholders might include upper level managers from the partner agencies, project investors, private sector actors, and relevant government officials. In this space the stories selected by the working group are reviewed and their significance debated with the key stakeholders. The goal of this space is not so much the selection of the most significant story of change but rather the discussion about what constitutes significant change for rural agroenterprise development in the area. This discussion is useful because it helps to:

- Inform the key stakeholders of the outcomes of the activities of the working group in a tangible way and build support for agroenterprise development process in the area. What does the working group mean for rural agroenterprise development in the area? How successful are its activities?
- Align the goals of the working group with those of the key stakeholders who can facilitate structural changes that are beyond the capacity of the working group as such (i.e., government, donor or private sector policies).
- Provide feedback to all levels of the working group as to what is seen as significant change and should therefore be pursued actively.

The results of this discussion are communicated with all levels of the working group (levels 1 through 4 in Figure 16) and decisions made incorporated into future action plans. In this way the MSC approach completes the second loop of the double loop learning cycle.

Secondary analysis of the stories: The sum of the MSC stories provides a rich picture of how the working group is contributing to agroenterprise development at the field level. This data contrasts and complements more traditional indicator-based impact assessment and can be reviewed to provide important social data about why changes—either positive or negative—are occurring. As mentioned previously, this task is best undertaken in collaboration with social science researchers from local universities who can assist in the interpretation of the stories at other levels.