

# Short Cuts

A Framework for  
Addressing Ethical  
Concerns in M&E

## M&E and Ethics

September 2008

### Introduction

This *Short Cut* illustrates the inherent challenges and often conflicting responsibilities that accompany monitoring and evaluation (M&E) work. Recognizing that there are no standard, or even easy, answers to ethical challenges that arise, *M&E and Ethics* provides a framework for resolving these challenges by recognizing our responsibilities, highlighting ethical principles, and reflecting on and addressing ethical concerns with stakeholders during the planning phase. On a general level, the domain of ethics deals with moral duty and obligation, involving actions that are subject to being judged as good or bad, right or wrong (Mathison 2005: 131). Various groups of evaluators have developed standards and guidelines that provide guidance to practitioners in preventing or coping with ethical issues. The ethical principles presented here are taken from the American Evaluation Association (AEA) *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, regarded as an authoritative source in the M&E arena. By adhering to these principles, program managers further commit themselves to the communities they serve by providing them with a clearer voice, informing smarter programming, and guaranteeing that their programs “do no harm.”

#### 3 Steps: M&E and Ethics

**Step 1**  
Recognize our  
responsibilities

**Step 2**  
Review AEA's Guiding  
Principles for Evaluators

**Step 3**  
Use ethical standards

#### Step 1 Recognize Our Responsibilities

Ethical issues frequently arise in the course of M&E work. Here some examples of these situations:

- You are asked to conduct an M&E activity that is not appropriate given the project's information needs or the local cultural context.
- After your evaluation report is published, you learn that the limitations section was removed, thus implying that your findings are broadly applicable.



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Local communities are exhibiting signs of survey fatigue, especially among control groups that are not participating in the project or receiving services.

Each of these dilemmas raises ethical alarm bells. Such dilemmas arise frequently in M&E work, and thus it is important for program managers to become familiar with key ethical guiding principles.

Program staff are responsible for engaging in and addressing ethical issues to the best of their ability. Clarifying responsibilities helps to ensure that their work is undertaken systematically and competently, with integrity, honesty, and respect for people, local values, and cultural norms. The goal is to promote honesty, justice, and development to improve the quality of life of those being served. Working in a complex and interconnected environment, it is impossible to predict with certainty the outcomes and impacts of project interventions. To this end, M&E findings should provide adequate knowledge to inform programmatic decisions in changing contexts to help decision makers avoid possible harmful effects associated with an intervention.

When ethical issues arise, program staff and stakeholders need to acknowledge them and to discuss them with interested parties to reach a resolution. Program managers and M&E specialists should develop a strong working relationship with project staff to discuss M&E ethical issues openly and honestly. In some instances, it may be appropriate to involve community members in resolving ethical challenges. Local residents can often provide valuable insights into devising a culturally appropriate solution.

AEA developed a series of ethical principles to guide M&E professionals (see AEA 2004). These principles are intended to stimulate discussion among M&E professionals and can actively guide M&E design and implementation, not just support problem-solving efforts. AEA principles should not serve as constraints, since AEA recognizes that all principles may not apply equally across contexts and cultures. Nevertheless, M&E professionals should strive to meet each principle and clearly document the reasoning if any principles are not met.

AEA's five principles are summarized below—systematic inquiry, competence, integrity and honesty, respect for people, and responsibilities for general and public welfare. Many of the key concepts highlighted below are drawn from G. Jackson, "Evaluation Ethics Considerations."

**1. Systematic inquiry** maintains that M&E staff must adhere to the highest technical standards for each activity.

- Acknowledge and attempt to eliminate bias in M&E activities. Bias may result from inadequate methodologies, for example, if the data collection team only surveys men in a community or only visits communities easily accessible from the main road. M&E staff may bias results if they hold a strong opinion (either positive or negative) about an M&E activity or project. Staff must remain neutral and promote evidence-based reporting by ensuring that data are allowed to speak for themselves in an objective and unbiased way.
- Ensure that M&E activities are *systematic, accurate, and fair*, and identify the project's strengths and weaknesses. Allow critical and complementary voices to be heard in the data collected.
- Clearly communicate the methodology or approach to allow stakeholders to understand and critique M&E activities. Methodologies should include tools and questions to capture both the intended and unintended project impact, whether positive or negative. *Openly explore the*

*approach's strengths and weaknesses* with clients and stakeholders so that the results can be accurately interpreted within their context and limitations. Acknowledge any evident weaknesses in the planning stage and any additional unanticipated weaknesses in reports and documentation. Reflection events and M&E reports should include a thorough methodology section and document all limitations of the approach.

### Ethical Dilemmas

- Your organization is a member of a food security consortium with five other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). NGO #4 is responsible for leading the baseline survey and proposes to collect data in the least secure communities. You are concerned that they will bias the sample to demonstrate greater food insecurity. Other NGOs in the consortium seem to support this strategy and want to do everything possible to secure resources. Some have hinted that this will only increase the project impact in the end.  
*In what circumstances would you support the strategy of NGO#4? In what circumstances would you oppose this?*
- The donor for a child nutrition project requested that anthropometric data from control groups be included in the baseline survey and mid-term and final evaluations. The donor believes that control groups are the best way to demonstrate impact.  
*In what circumstances would you support including control groups? (See step 2 for more about the ethical considerations associated with control groups.)*

**2. Competence** means that M&E staff should hold the skills and cultural competencies required to conduct an M&E activity.

- ***Decline to participate*** in any M&E activity that falls outside of your skill set or competencies (or that of the M&E team collectively), if adequate technical support is not provided. Ask other technical experts in your organization or your communities of practice to support you in all aspects of the M&E activity of which you are unsure.
- Do not undertake an M&E activity if stakeholders doubt your ***credibility*** due to your past work or publicly stated views. If key stakeholders find fault with your work or position on related activities, they may discredit your approach or findings in future assignments.
- Continually seek to ***improve your skills*** and competencies through technical trainings and by reflecting on the lessons learned from each M&E activity. Seek additional experience and on-the-job learning opportunities. Keep up-to-date on new developments in your field through list serves and by reading current literature.

### Ethical Dilemmas

You have serious doubts that there is enough time to conduct a survey and analyze the data in time to present it at a donor conference the following month. After all, the evaluation is still in the planning stage. Your supervisor suggests you omit the four-day training for the data collection teams, stating that the data collection team members have all conducted surveys before and do not need training.

*In what circumstances would you agree? Are there any other typical evaluation activities could be omitted instead of the training?*

**3. Integrity and honesty** should be demonstrated in all stages of the M&E activity and to the stakeholders—beneficiaries, program staff, donors, or other groups of interested parties—and participants.

- Disclose any potential conflicts of interest to stakeholders and donors prior to finalizing the plans for an M&E activity. These include, for example, a stakeholder’s interest in presenting only project success instead of maintaining neutrality, or a stakeholder interested in demonstrating needs in one sector at the expense of needs in another (i.e., focusing on agricultural needs and not acknowledging water issues). It is also important to disclose the source of financial support to stakeholders so that they are aware of donor interests in the M&E activity.
- Honor agreements made with stakeholders (including communities and participants) regarding the timing of surveys, plans for sharing results, community participation in data collection, and any other relevant aspects of the M&E activity. If adjustments to the agreements are necessary, consult stakeholders to determine the best alternative for all parties.
- Do not undertake M&E activities for which there are insufficient resources to provide quality data and results. If there is not enough staff or money to conduct the fieldwork as planned or to analyze and report on the data collected, develop an alternative methodology for which there are sufficient human and financial resources.
- Ensure that, to the best of your knowledge and ability, the M&E data are accurate. Address any questionable M&E practices observed during data collection or analysis, whether due to negligence or mistakes by M&E team members. Correct any questionable practices even if additional data must be collected.
- Ensure that M&E results are accurately represented and attempt to prevent their misuse. It is the evaluator’s obligation to present the full and unbiased picture that the data provide and to correct misperceptions if stakeholders should try to present only the favorable results in a public forum, to use the data out of context (level of representation), or to disregard the noted limitations of the approach.

### Ethical Dilemmas

- You generally follow the good practice of sharing the funding source for all M&E activities with stakeholders. However, country A is interested in financially supporting the government of country B, among the world’s poorest, to address poverty and vulnerability in rural areas. Country A has asked your organization to conduct the survey, which is a requisite for receiving the funding. Local communities resent country A, which is not seen a positive force in the region. Field staff think local community leaders will refuse to participate if they know that country A is funding the survey.  
*What is the best way(s) to negotiate this conflict? What information should be shared with local leaders?*
- An organization that works in many of the same communities as your agency presented high success rates from their education activities. You believe their project was successful based on informal feedback from community members, but that they did not collect adequate data to support their claims. The donors seem very impressed by the results and are discussing expanding the project coverage area.  
*What questions should be raised, if any, during this discussion?*

- 4. Respect for people** begins with the premise that M&E staff have a solid understanding of contextual elements that may influence the M&E activity and respect relevant differences in stakeholders, such as gender, socio-economic status, age, religion, and ethnicity.
- Follow standards and regulations regarding ***informed consent for participants***. Consent should be documented in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (see step 2). Determine the appropriate method for collecting and documenting informed consent, whether in writing or orally, given the level of literacy in local communities. A lack of refusal is not considered informed consent. (See p. 8 for more on informed consent.)
  - Follow standards for ***confidentiality and anonymity*** of data collected from participants, as appropriate. Confidentiality guarantees that data that could link information to respondents, such as name, location of household, or identification number, are not to be shared. Anonymous data are not linked to respondent's names or any other identifiable information, and do not allow for follow up with respondents. Be sure to clarify with respondents whether the data will be anonymous or confidential.
  - M&E activities should ***maximize benefits and minimize harm***. Both the human and financial time and resources required to conduct the M&E activity should be far outweighed by the benefits of knowledge gained or results demonstrated. Also consider environmental resources in this equation. Respondents should not be put at risk physically, subject to discrimination, or disadvantaged in any way due to their participation in the M&E activity.

### Ethical Dilemmas

- Your organization recently expanded programming into the eastern part of the country. Local leaders expressed frustration at repeated time-consuming surveys in the past that did not result in any changes for their community. You had planned to conduct a survey in the next month prior to the beginning of the rainy season; however, this is planting season and households are very busy.  
*Would providing an incentive for participation be appropriate in this circumstance? Would it be appropriate in any other circumstances? If so, what type of incentive would be recommended?*
- Reliable national-level nutritional data exist; however, the data may not be representative of the communities where you work. The government collected the national-level data through school feeding programs, and the data cannot be disaggregated to represent the coverage area. The data represent children participating in school feeding, and you seek district baseline figures.  
*Is it worthwhile to collect primary nutritional data in this case? Are there tradeoffs between methodology and resources in the project's M&E system?*

**General and public welfare responsibilities** include not just immediate outcomes of the evaluation process and results, but long-term implications and effects as well.

- Stakeholders (including project staff) should review and comment on the M&E results and reports; however, M&E staff are ultimately responsible for ***deciding on the report contents*** and ensuring that the report (and any presentations) provides a full and balanced picture of the results, including the methodology, a limitation section, and any less favorable findings. A limitation section explains the extent to which the study findings can be generalized to a larger population and any shortcomings in the data quality.

- Follow a ***non-disclosure policy*** and share and use results only as initially agreed with stakeholders. If confidentiality has been protected and the findings are derived from the data, it is appropriate to share findings widely. Only if the donor places limitations, should research findings be withheld. It is advisable to agree upon a dissemination plan prior to conducting each activity to avoid confusion or conflict at a later date.
- Present M&E findings in a way that is ***highly accessible to all stakeholders*** yet still maintains participant confidentiality. Determine the appropriate means for disseminating results to each stakeholder. For example, consider a community's literacy level when planning the community dissemination meeting. M&E staff should be careful to maintain confidentiality when results are presented to communities. Community members are often acutely aware of the conditions of local households and may be able to tease out the responses of various community members with very little information provided.

### Ethical Dilemmas

- Focus groups with orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and with children who are not orphans or not vulnerable are planned in an area where stigma towards HIV/AIDS exists but is declining. You are concerned that OVC would be stigmatized if they participate in an OVC focus group.  
*What are creative ways to collect OVC information without risking stigmatization?*
- You are preparing to present survey results to participating communities and are aware that there is a spectrum of literacy skills in each community. You are eager to engage community members in interpretation and reflection of results but are not sure that all community members will be able to participate in this process, given that the methods you have chosen require literacy skills for a minor component.  
*How can these two aspects of community involvement be balanced?*

## Step 2 Review AEA's Guiding Principles for Evaluators

**Discussions with stakeholders** should cover the relevant ethical principles and the outcome of the reflection process. Solicit input from stakeholders prior to presenting ideas to gain fresh perspectives. With stakeholders, jointly develop a framework for solving ethical issues. Identify each stakeholder's role and appropriate means of communication to address the issues. Involving stakeholders in issues during the planning phase will increase their awareness of the ethical principles guiding the work and instill a sense of ownership in the quality of the results.

**Control groups** were long considered the gold standard for demonstrating programmatic impact. Including control groups in M&E involves collecting data from households and communities that received no services and comparing the data with that from project participants. However, using control groups requires significantly more data collection resources and raises ethical considerations, as follows:

1. In what circumstances should data be collected from individuals who receive no benefit from the current project and are unlikely to benefit from future projects (based on the M&E results)?

2. If the project intervention initially appears to be effective and successful in reaching its goals, should project services continue to be withheld from the control group and data collected to further prove project effectiveness? Would the answer differ if the project provides life-saving interventions?

**Environmental stewardship** is an emerging priority and a public welfare responsibility. Given the increased strain on natural resources, M&E activities should seek to increase the efficient use of resources and eliminate unneeded travel by car and by plane, and the unnecessary printing of paper, whenever possible. If these and other conservations methods are not commonplace in the office, start a dialogue with co-workers. Be a leader in this arena!

## Guiding the Discussion on Ethical Issues

Strong working relationships with colleagues and involvement in communities of practices foster discussion about ethical issues and offer support during ethical challenges. If a strong work community does not yet exist, seek and invest in these relationships. Be ready to support colleagues, and you'll learn along the way!

Below are questions to guide the reflection process (Morris 2008). While these questions are geared toward the planning phase, there should be ongoing reflection of ethical issues. Consolidate and record your thoughts throughout the life of the project or M&E activity to identify lessons learned. Consult colleagues to discuss any concerns or issues arising after reflection and review. Consider the following:

1. How can I set an appropriate tone for this M&E event? To what degree are the stakeholders familiar with the AEA guiding principles? What are the potential problems I might encounter given the context, project, and stakeholders?
2. Are there any AEA guiding principles that are particularly relevant for this work? Are there case studies in the broader M&E literature that provide any insight into ethical challenges for this particular work?
3. If any ethical conflict arises, how will I ensure that necessary conversations occur within or between different groups of stakeholders? Can ethical conflicts be differentiated from conflicts related to value or culture?
4. Are there colleagues whom I can consult regarding any ethical concerns? Specifically, can I consult any colleagues that may hold opinions different from my own and not just colleagues who are likely to affirm my conclusions without challenge?
5. How will my values and personal ethical standards influence my work? How can I ensure that stakeholders feel comfortable to share with me any ethical concerns they may have?
6. Am I comfortable working through conflict situations? Will this work pose any potential situations that I feel I am not equipped to handle? If so, should I proceed with my current level of involvement in the work?

## Informed Consent

Informed consent is the voluntary consent to participate in research and is required by each participant in any M&E activity (Williams and Senefeld 2007). Information, understanding, agreement to volunteer, and decision-making capacity are the four main elements of informed consent (Pedroni and Pimple 2001), as follows:

- *Information:* M&E staff should share information about possible risks and benefits of participation, use of results, confidentiality procedures, contact information for voicing concerns, and any other information relevant to the decision to participate with all potential respondents prior to requesting consent.
- *Understanding:* M&E staff must ensure that potential participants fully understand the information provided prior to requesting consent.
- *Agreement to volunteer:* Potential participants should, in no way, be coerced, persuaded or pressured to participate.
- *Decision-making capacity:* Informed consent requires that each participant has full decision-making capabilities and is able to weigh the risks and benefits of participation. Special consideration is required when seeking informed consent from vulnerable groups who may not have full decision-making capacity, including children, persons with mental disabilities, very poor individuals, and persons with limited access to services and resources. Consideration from an ethical review committee is required to determine whether and how informed consent can be obtained from these vulnerable groups.

The World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki 1964/2004 declares: "The right of research subjects to safeguard their integrity must always be respected. Every precaution should be taken to respect the privacy of the subject, the confidentiality of the patient's information and to minimize the impact of the study on the subject's physical and mental integrity and on the personality of the subject."

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### Step 3 Use Ethical Standards

- **In the planning phase**, it is important to identify potential ethical challenges and to develop a framework for resolving any conflicts. Although planning ahead will not ensure that ethical conflicts do not arise, it is likely to decrease the severity of any conflicts and expedite their solutions. To identify challenges and paths towards solutions, begin with individual reflection and critical thought about the ethical components of the upcoming work. Next, hold discussions with key stakeholders to engage them in the ethical elements identified, as well as any they see as relevant.
  - **Individual reflection** requires that M&E staff set aside adequate time to consider the broader project context, including any potentially conflicting stakeholder interests and cultural norms.
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**The Program Evaluation Standards** (The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation 1994) place evaluation standards according to: utility, feasibility, accuracy, and propriety categories.

The propriety standards related to an evaluation's ethical elements are summarized below:

- **Service orientation:** Evaluations should be designed to assist in addressing and serving the range of targeted participants.
- **Formal agreements:** Obligations of an evaluation (what is to be done, how, by whom, when) should be agreed to in writing, so that the parties are obligated to adhere to all conditions of the agreement or formally renegotiate.
- **Rights of human subjects:** Evaluations should be designed and conducted to respect rights and welfare of human subjects.
- **Human interactions:** Evaluators should respect human dignity and worth in their interactions with other persons associated with an evaluation, so that participants are not threatened or harmed.
- **Complete and fair assessment:** Evaluations should examine and address their weaknesses and build on strengths.
- **Disclosure of findings:** Ensure that the findings and limitations are accessible to the persons affected by the evaluation.
- **Conflict of interest:** Conflict of interest should be dealt with openly, so that it does not compromise the evaluation.
- **Fiscal responsibility:** The evaluator's allocations and expenditures should reflect sound accountability procedures and otherwise be prudent and ethically responsible, so that expenditures are accounted for and appropriate.

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The M&E series is available on these Web sites:

- [www.crs.org/publications](http://www.crs.org/publications)
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