PR03 / Learning from Evidence: Rethinking Monitoring and Evaluation through Qualitative and Ethnographic Insights

Topic : Practice

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) has become central to India's development governance architecture, shaping decisions on program design, performance management, and accountability across sectors. Yet an increasing dependence on quantitative indicators, digital dashboards, and standardised metrics often constrains the ability to understand how policies actually unfold in diverse implementation contexts. This panel approaches M&E not solely as a technical apparatus but as an institutional and social process shaped by frontline discretion, community engagement, everyday administrative routines, and local political economy.

Aligning with the 2026 IPPN conference theme on public policy praxis in the Global South, the panel argues for evidence systems that capture contextual complexity and lived experience, elements essential for coherence, adaptability, and resilience in rapidly changing policy environments. Recent research from health, nutrition, education, water governance, and women's empowerment illustrates how frontline actors interpret, negotiate, and sometimes reconfigure monitoring expectations in response to local constraints. These micro-practices influence outcomes as substantively as formal indicators, yet they are seldom recognised within existing M&E frameworks.

By foregrounding qualitative and ethnographic insights, the panel asks how evaluation systems can better incorporate experiential knowledge, gendered perspectives, and informal practices that shape implementation. It aims to shift attention from compliance-driven measurement toward learning-oriented evaluation that supports inclusive and adaptive public policy.

Research Questions
How do qualitative and ethnographic approaches reshape the understanding of how M&E systems influence development outcomes and institutional learning in India?
What forms of local and experiential knowledge are overlooked by current monitoring frameworks, and how might they be integrated into adaptive policymaking?
How can participatory and ethnographic evaluations bridge the gap between measurement, accountability, and reflexive learning in development practice?

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites contributions that demonstrate how qualitative, interpretive, and ethnographic approaches can reshape Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems to better support institutional learning and adaptive governance. As scholars of development have long argued, numerical indicators often obscure the social, relational, and political processes through which policies are implemented on the ground (Eyben, 2015; Mosse, 2005). In India's complex administrative landscape, frontline discretion, community interactions, and everyday bureaucratic practices shape outcomes as profoundly as formal program designs, making qualitative inquiry essential for understanding how policies actually work in practice (Gupta, 2012; Puri, 2021).

To this end, the panel seeks empirical case studies that illuminate the lived realities of implementation, whether in health, education, nutrition, water governance, or social protection. Submissions may explore how frontline workers navigate monitoring expectations, reinterpret performance metrics, or negotiate accountability demands in resource-constrained settings (Chambers, 2017). Participatory, embedded, or collaborative evaluations that centre community voices and experiential knowledge are also welcome, especially those that highlight gendered or intersectional dimensions of program delivery.

We additionally encourage methodological contributions comparing qualitative, mixed-methods, and ethnographic evaluation approaches, or reflecting on the challenges of integrating qualitative insights into state evidence systems that remain primarily quantitative and compliance-driven. Analyses that examine how governments, civil society organisations, or donors incorporate, or fail to incorporate, contextual knowledge, tacit expertise, or informal practices into decision-making are particularly relevant.

These are the potential panellists:

Dr. Aarti Madhusudhan, Founder, Governance Counts
Maya Menon, Founder, The Teacher Foundation
Dr. Prashanth N. Srinivas, Institute of Public Health (IPH)
Together, these contributions aim to advance a more reflective, context-sensitive, and learning-oriented vision of M&E in India

References:

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Eyben, R. (2015). International aid and the making of a better world: Reflexive practice. Routledge.

Gupta, A. (2012). Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394709

Mosse, D. (2005). Cultivating development: An ethnography of aid policy and practice. Pluto Press.

Puri, J. (2021). Integrating qualitative methods in impact evaluations: Tackling complexity in development programmes. Journal of Development Effectiveness, 13(3), 265–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/19439342.2021.1947802