

MEASURING DEVELOPMENT

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The rural approach to measure results of the work done in 'social projects' would be significantly different than, say, an approach in the corporate sector, which is highly geared towards processes and where the 'success' parameters such as revenue, sales and profit, are well-defined and can be measured. The non-profit sector in India, specifically at the grassroots, has focused primarily around building staff for projects. The underlying support infrastructure often has difficulty attracting adequate funding and experienced staff, leading to a disconnect in measuring the effect of the work done.

In the absence of historical data, the sector also has a high dependency on a few key staff members with a disproportionate share of the knowledge base. The results that are often quoted in annual reports are at best an indication of *what* the projects are doing rather than *how*. Programme level efficiency and accountability are taken as a given.

Seva Mandir recognised the need for consolidating its work and for building a knowledge base. Given the scale of operations in 500-plus villages, technology was required as an enabling tool. At the beginning of the fourth comprehensive plan, efforts were started to build a centralised database for its work.

One of the methodologies for measuring work that has been doing the rounds in the development sector is logical framework analysis (LFA). Under this approach measurement is divided into outputs, effects and impacts. An example would be, say we consider in the education programme the enrolment of 25 children in a school as an output. The next step would be to measure the effect, i.e. the levels of learning of enrolled students. This can also be called programme level efficiency. The next level - impact - is somewhat external to the programme and looks at the needs that the programme may be fulfilling. In the current example, there may be 200 children in a village that require education. The programme which has been able to fulfil a partial 'need' for educating 25 children, may have limited impact on the education status of the village.

The LFA approach provided a structure to the thoughts that already existed in the sector. With the fourth comprehensive plan of Seva Mandir in 2003, one of the major donors stipulated the need for LFA as a reporting tool. This requirement gave another level of legitimacy for the need to build information systems. It started an institution-wide thought process on reporting and results around a uniform standard.

The starting point

Putting together data from all the programmes in a common place and adding it up to see things at the village level was a much-required need. The earlier reporting was done at the programme level by manually consolidating a diverse set of reports from more than one source. The data flow went something like - the village level workers would bring in the progress report to the zonal or block level once a month. At the block, these various inputs were consolidated to send in the information to the coordinators of blocks (geographical division) and resource units (programmatic divisions - health, natural resource management, women's development, education, etc.). The manually filled forms sent in to headquarters were mostly filed away. The reporting served a limited use and therefore was not strictly followed.

The quality of data reported varied, in most cases village level workers either viewed reporting as an unnecessary task or lacked the training or education to fill in the forms correctly. The perception of reporting as an unnecessary task may have come from the fact that there was no mechanism to share the information downwards; all data needs were seen as fulfilling the information gap for those far removed from doing the work. This seemed to hold true for different levels in the hierarchy. The block staff seemed to be fulfilling the headquarters' reporting needs. The headquarters staff seemed to be fulfilling the need of the funding agencies. There was a need for *a change in perception and data*, and the resulting information, if shared appropriately, should enable people to do their work better.

Bringing in technology...

Computers and networks were new technology for majority of the staff at Seva Mandir, mostly those doing the 'field' work. There was a relevant fear of being burdened with a sophisticated tool. It was apparent that technology had to be simple and at a slow pace for the staff to use it for their needs. To introduce technology at a slow pace, the software design was broken into four modules. Each module was independent and showed results for data collected till that time. This ensured the participation of the staff from early on.

The software to collect data had to stay close to processes that already existed. For example, a block coordinator for health project is expected to bring in information on diseases treated by village level workers. He should be able to enter the reports he receives from village level into the database. The coordinator is already used to maintaining this information manually. The technology would allow the information to be organised. More importantly, everyone in the organisation can now look at a single source of information, instead of a highly evolved 'chinese whisper' game that comes into play any time huge amount of data changes hand.

The technology had to remain simple enough to be maintained at various levels. The data had to be entered by people who were already used to reporting similar information, instead of a data entry operator sitting in a corner and interacting with technology. The targeted user-base for the database was everyone in the organisation.



The end beneficiary

...and defining technology

For everyone to have access and familiarity with the new knowledge base, it was important to provide easy access to computers. Also, it was important for all these machines to be connected together for information, sharing and maintenance.

It had to be a balanced approach between costs versus effective use of technology. To optimise the use of computers, two common lab areas were planned. But the lab areas had a disadvantage, it attracted users who were already comfortable with

the use of computers. To break the learning barrier, each department was assigned a computer in their room. The computer assigned to the departments also came in handy when email addresses were assigned to the departments. Seva Mandir now has its own web address www.sevamandir.org and email addresses like health@sevamandir.org, at department levels. In 2001, the whole campus of Seva Mandir headquarters, was connected with a network and a centralised 'server'. This implies users can log in from any computer and have access to their files which are stored on the central machine. This allows for use of machines irrespective of their location.

It is easy to be carried away with technology investments. Introduction of an email server in the institution makes for an interesting story. For many years, Seva Mandir used a single email account to receive all its correspondence. The emails were then printed and distributed to the various departments. Responses via emails were sent very grudgingly since it involved a long wait and around 30 active users lined up for their chance at a single machine with

email connectivity. Then, Seva Mandir signed up for its domain and hosted a website. With this came the chance to have multiple email addresses. That emails allow access to the outside world was a concept that was now familiar to the organisation. But, when the idea that the same network would allow email exchange among the staff was presented, there were not many who were convinced. Who needs technology when you can talk!

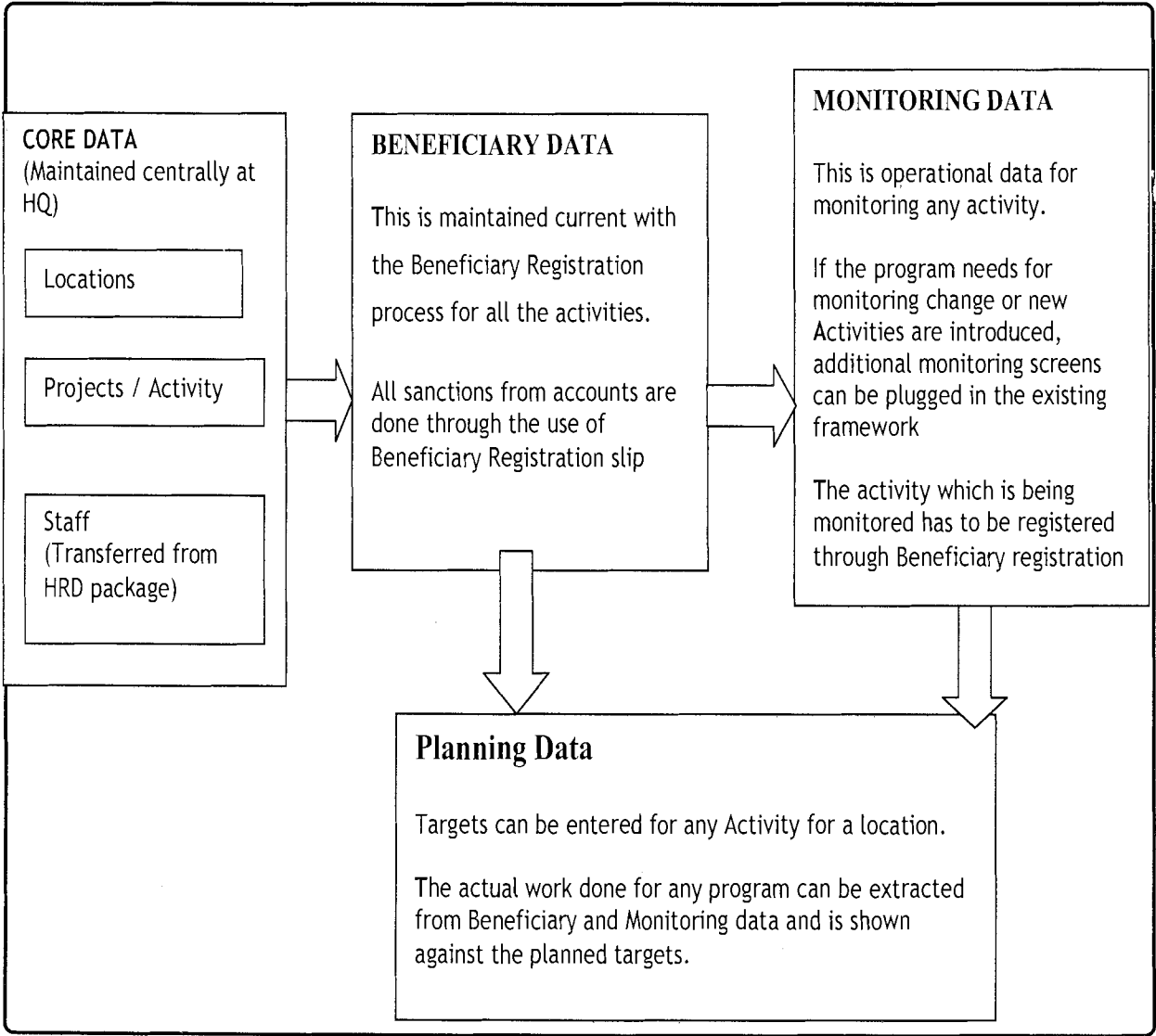
The rate at which technology should be introduced is another area to watch out for. An institution which has been in operation for over 30 years has its own processes in place for information exchange. What usually gets ignored is the fact that most processes can be made to work in a small operation. The test for a process is its scalability. For example, if a self-help group programme is working in three villages, could you add another 100 and still maintain

a level of programme efficiency?

The big change that the staff has to adapt to with a central data source, is gearing to move towards ‘institutional memory’ as opposed to ‘individual memory’. In other terms, the need to chase people for every piece of information has a very high institutional cost once an organisation scales up, and worse still, may lead to very poor planning and follow-up of the programmes.

The software

The database was designed to be implemented in four phases. The software for the first two phases was installed at the headquarters. The software was allowed to stabilise and collect data for a year. In simple terms, the first two modules (‘Core’, and ‘The Beneficiary’) served two basic purposes. One was to collect and store all possible historic data



on the activities Seva Mandir has done in the past, specific to each village. And the other much bigger purpose was to have users get used to new standards and keep this information current.

For keeping the information current, a process of 'beneficiary registration' was introduced. The data was collected by piggybacking on everyone's need for money for their work! The programme/project sanction papers to be submitted in the accounts section, had to be accompanied by the beneficiary registration slip. This was to ensure that any activity in a location would exist in the projects database. To keep the process simple, a common screen has been designed for all the resource units. The software can be run by any unit by logging on, through a network, to the centralised machine with the database. It takes less than a minute to enter sanction related data for a single beneficiary and print the registration slip.

The next phase of monitoring module is designed to collect monthly reports from the blocks. The same software is installed at all locations into which block teams are assigned to enter the reporting data. This data is collected from the block offices electronically through email where available, or on CD, on a monthly basis.

The monitoring data is then loaded to the central database in the headquarters. The data from the headquarters for any new beneficiary's registration for the month is sent back to blocks and loaded on the database at the blocks. This implies, the information at the headquarters and the block offices (which are scattered geographically, the farthest being 80 kms away) have the same information, which is synchronised once a month.

So what happens, if a new programme is introduced and has its unique data collection and reporting needs? The software has been designed so that any new data collection need, once it has been defined

well by the programme staff, can be plugged in the existing frame of the software. The turnaround time for plugging in the additional screen by the Seva Mandir computer staff, could be one or two weeks, depending on the level of complexity.

The planning module ties all the earlier modules. The targets for the activities at any level of location can be stored in the planning module. The planning information is designed to be entered only at the headquarters. The actual work done at any location can be seen in the database, against these planned targets. This information is readily available because activities and their monthly progress reports for any location are all in the same database.

In conclusion

The process of software development, furthermore, was an exercise in revisiting the data collection formats and processes for all the existing departments and projects. That is the crucial step; software is just the methodology. The important thing is to keep 'appropriate technology' as a goal. It is only too easy to get carried away by the latest-and-the-greatest tool available out there, technology for technologies' sake, in other words.

The database has now been operational for more than two years in the headquarters and about a year in the block offices. The goal is to have it be the singular source of accurate information, and enable the organisation in informed decision-making, planning, monitoring and evaluation of programmes.

Anita Bhatia is a software engineer based in California. She also has had an association of over ten years with Seva Mandir. Over the past three years, she has spent about half of it in Udaipur, establishing a centralised database and associated software for the organisation.

