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Sound, participatory monitoring and reporting for effective implementation of the results-based management approach

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The results-based management (RBM) approach has been widely adopted across the globe in efforts, by governments and development organisations, to improve livelihoods through the achievement of sustainable development results. The Government of Zimbabwe adopted the approach in 2005 and subsequently formulated brilliant economic development policy documents and programmes. Progress towards attainment of the related goals appeared to be rather limited as was the case in most nations although, according to the literature, success with the approach has been recorded in several nations. Such success is mostly attributed to the design and execution of effective monitoring and reporting processes. This study sought to identify trends, strengths and shortcomings in performance measurement processes relating to the implementation of projects and programmes in Zimbabwe and other nations that had recorded success stories with the approach. In addition, it sought to contribute to the body of knowledge on RBM and performance management through the identification of strategies for improving performance and ultimately impact of the related initiatives. The findings showed the essence of a sound, participatory results-based monitoring and reporting function, found to be lacking in Zimbabwe, in enhancing the achievement of development results. It, therefore, concluded that the function, if effectively implemented, can significantly enhance the delivery of development results and consequently the impact of related programmes. Recommendations for improvement as well as further research to help address limitations of this study were provided.

Introduction

Economic, social and political environmental factors, emanating from globalisation and the related competition, have stimulated increased demands for improved responsiveness in the provision of public services (Mayne 2008). Consequently, there is continued pressure on governments and organisations for enhanced delivery of tangible results through quality service, good governance, accountability, transparency and greater development effectiveness (Kusek & Rist 2001). In response, discussion on how to obtain maximum value from the limited resources to promote such effectiveness has taken centre stage within the global economy (Tam 2013). In the same context, there is also growing appreciation of the need for existence of a result or performance orientation in governments and other institutions as a way of improving performance and subsequently the quality of service delivery (Mackay 2006). Adoption of the results-based management (RBM) approach has emerged as one of the most popular options.

Results-based management is a comprehensive, team-based, participatory management and reporting approach through which all participants ensure that all processes, products and services contribute towards making a desired difference in the lives of the targeted population. In the process, the approach helps to demonstrate the provision of value for money, good governance, accountability and transparency. The basic notions of RBM are change and causality, where change involves a visible transformation and causality demonstrates the cause and effect relationship between an action and the arising effect. Such change, referred to as a result, is defined as a concrete, visible and measurable positive or negative change in state (expressed in 'change language') in the target entity deriving from a course of action. Regarding development, a result is ordinarily an authentic improvement in people's lives, caused by undertaking an activity or project and is, therefore, precisely quantified and expressed in human terms. That is, the most important element of RBM entails ensuring that interventions lead to effective development and a positive change in people's lives. A typical example that demonstrates the basic principle of primary client focus and setting-specific criteria for success

would be 'female enrolment rate in 900 primary schools increased from 40% to 80% by the year 2025'. RBM, therefore, reflects a significant departure from the traditional 'action language' that would state the goal as 'constructing 20 primary schools', thus focusing on the completion of activities and also from the perspective of the providing organisation. Such departure facilitates sound monitoring and reporting on progress towards achievement of development targets and subsequently effective service delivery.

In Zimbabwe, the adoption of RBM was aimed at the achievement of sustainable development results for the citizens through the enhancement of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability (OPC – Modernization Department 2012). Unfortunately, progress towards attainment of the goal appeared to be rather limited despite the subsequent formulation of brilliant economic policy documents and programmes, a situation that pointed to inadequacy in the implementation process.

Literature shows that the RBM concept, if implemented properly, can positively affect the quality of life through the improvement of public service delivery as adoption of the approach creates close linkages between national policy and strategy with plans as well as monitoring and reporting tools (Saldanha 2002; Thomas 2006). From observation, literature and informal discussions with key stakeholders in the Zimbabwe Public Service delivery system, it was apparent that performance measurement practices were less than optimal which could help to explain the limited impact of the approach.

Purpose of the study

The study sought to identify trends, strengths and shortcomings in performance measurement processes relating to the implementation of projects and programmes in the context of utilising the RBM approach in Zimbabwe and other nations that had recorded success stories with the approach. In addition, it sought to contribute to the body of knowledge on RBM through the identification of strategies for improving performance and ultimately impact of the related initiatives. That is, the findings help to improve the execution of development programmes by combining or adapting experiences from other countries and organisations that had registered success with the RBM approach. To achieve these objectives, the study addressed the following questions:

1. How is the function of development programme monitoring and reporting executed in the Zimbabwe Public Service?
2. How different are the related processes from those within organisations that have recorded success in the implementation of RBM?
3. What lessons can be learnt to improve execution and subsequently enhance the delivery of development results?

Theoretical framework and previous research

Results-based management

The RBM strategy involves three phases: planning, performance measurement and learning in programme management (Adaptation Fund Board [AFB] 2009; United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] 2008). The planning phase conveys the results that the programme aims to achieve including the target group and programme endusers (or beneficiaries) as well as the necessary processes and resources required. The performance measurement phase, during implementation of the programme, demonstrates the results which are the outcomes (changes) caused by the outputs (goods and services produced) and reports on them. At the centre of performance measurement is the results-based monitoring and reporting function which involves assessing, over time, whether the intended results (outcomes) are achieved and the reasons why (or why not) (UNDP 2009). This is achieved through the active application of production of information on results, as they emerge, towards continuous improvement (AFB 2009).

Monitoring and reporting

Literature identifies several critical factors that impact the success of projector programme implementation that include planning, budget performance, and monitoring and reporting, with monitoring and reporting often being cited as an extremely critical success factor (Tam 2013). Similarly, Ika et al. (2010) and Thomas (2006) contend that effective monitoring and reporting is more critical than planning for achieving programme success. They argue that sustained impact of projects depends to a large extent on the feeding back of the resulting accurate, timely information to improve current and future design. Such success is measured by product quality, timeliness, budget compliance and degree of stakeholder satisfaction, among other factors. In the same context, UNDP (2009) adds that sound results-based planning, monitoring and reporting can enhance the chances of programme success through the establishment of clear links between past, present and future initiatives and development results.

Monitoring and reporting involve the regular collection of data on timeliness and quality of implementation and results, review and analysis, reporting as well as use of resulting information for improved decision-making (UNDP 2002). Such decision-making relates to programmatic fine-tuning, reorientation and future planning (UNDP 2002). The allied system provides a framework for accountability as well as information for decision-making, on current or future processes, as it checks whether the allocated resources are making the intended difference (Col et al. 2006; Kusek & Rist 2001). It then feeds back the information, which ordinarily comprises findings, conclusions, best practices and lessons learned for timely corrective action. Within the external

environment, the monitoring and reporting can help to demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of the organisation within the community as well as facilitate the extraction of relevant information from past and ongoing activities (UNJIU 2004). In addition, findings from monitoring activities often trigger in-depth examination on the existing performance problems and facilitate the effecting of corrections as necessary (UNDP 2002). That is, results-based monitoring and reporting systems have often proved to be effective 'management toolkits' that promote sound decision-making and enhance development effectiveness through the delivery of results.

The monitoring and reporting process can be either participatory or non-participatory, with the participatory mode focusing on the active engagement of all primary stakeholders (UNDP2009). Learning, an integral and closely related part of reporting, is a continuous process of feedback into decision-making, project design and strategy development (OECD 2010; UNDP 2002). Participation helps to enhance learning from original concerns and problems faced by the initiative and timely action. Apart from measuring the effectiveness of the initiative, participation also helps to build ownership, accountability and transparency and empowers stakeholders.

In the context of capacity building, results-based monitoring and reporting can promote and facilitate staff development as well as increase the organisation's capacity to contribute evidence-based knowledge to the field (Tam 2013). Also, knowledge of the difference that the project is making can help to enhance stakeholder commitment and buy-in for development projects as well as enhance a culture that supports learning and improvement (Tam 2013).

The researcher contends that participatory results-based project planning, monitoring and reporting systems are likely to yield the required quality standards while avoiding both cost and time schedule overruns. Consequently, such systems can significantly contribute to enhanced impact of the related initiatives.

Generally, there was a limited number of studies, mostly based on formal reports, in the literature on the implementation of the RBM approach. In Zimbabwe, studies from the perspectives of individual stakeholders were almost missing, consequently creating a knowledge gap which this study sought to help close.

Research design

The qualitative study employed the use of interview, observation snowball and desktop strategies for data collection. The qualitative approach was determined to be most suitable for the exploration of behaviour, perspectives as well as experiences of the people under study, including the subjective interpretation of social realities (Holloway 1997). That is, it allowed the researcher to discover and understand the individual and shared meaning relating to

the execution of the monitoring and reporting function in the context of RBM (Taylor, Kermode & Roberts 2007). Interviews were selected as they attempt to derive meanings from individual accounts and experiences with the subjects' words as the unit of analysis (Creswell 2002).

Semi-structured questions regarding the project and programme implementation processes were used during the interviews. Observation was feasible because the researcher was part of the development system under investigation while reports selected were accessible to the researcher in the contests of consultancies for programme performance review. Notes were taken during the observations and later analysed in conjunction with other data gathered from the interviews and document review processes.

For the interviews, a Principal Director and a Director responsible for coordinating the adoption and implementation of the RBM approach helped to identify potential sources of relevant information comprising a group of 990 managers. This group of managers included Permanent Secretaries, Principal Directors, Directors and Deputy Directors who had attended the inaugural RBM training workshops in 2005 and were leading the implementation process in their respective government ministries. They were thus perceived to possess relatively deeper understanding of the concept than the rest of the stakeholders. Using the purposive sampling method, 50 participants were selected from this group based on their willingness to participate in the study.

The Malaysian blueprints including the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), Government Transformation Programme (GTP), the New Economic Model as well as reports on the implementation of the transformation programme were reviewed to obtain data for this study. Similarly, a 2006 report entitled 'How Chile Successfully Transformed Its Economy' by Hernán Büchi Buc, former minister of finance and also president of the International Economy Center in Santiago, Chile, was also reviewed. The report highlighted the characteristics of the country's transformation model and the implementation of the related programmes. The exceptional economic performance and the resulting welfare improvement in both Malaysia and Chile have been recognised internationally and it was for this reason that the reports were selected for review.

Other documents reviewed included reports on the implementation RBM within public institutions, research papers, books, newspaper and internet articles as well as professional journals, which were determined to be adequate for addressing the research questions. The researcher notes that official documents reflect an official position rather than the reality, thus posing the risk of compromising the quality of data. The use of the newspaper and internet articles helped as a basis for comparison and support for such data.

According to Radnor (2002), the interpretation of data occurs from the beginning of the research process to the end

as the researcher seeks to reveal patterns and explanations and thus derive findings. Content and thematic analyses were used in analysing data for this study; then, findings were presented in line with the research concerns. The discussion was based on the findings and literature on the features of successful implementation of RBM with a focus on the monitoring and reporting function. The presentation of findings was enriched by including the responses and comments from interviewees.

There were the usual limitations inherent in research, particularly the time constraint and the need to delimit the area of research such that some elements were not considered. Consequently, the sample may not be fully representative of the population being studied. As with all research methods, the generalisation of findings is made with caution. Also, recommendations for further research may help address these limitations.

Findings
Capacity, project monitoring and reporting
Analysis of the data obtained revealed that the capacity for implementing RBM and all its functions, particularly monitoring and reporting, was seriously lacking. Typical responses from interviewees included the following:

- Frankly, I don't think there is (1) a grasp of what RBM stands for. Secondly, I don't think there is a grasp of what it intends to do for the service and thirdly I don't think there is a grasp of how we are supposed to go about it. (Male permanent secretary, 50–55 age group)
- The point I am trying to make by way of the weak roll-out is to centrally state that the concept is good – what is not good is the comprehension. (Male principal director, 40–50 age group)
- There are very few people who have an idea of what RBM is (Female deputy secretary, 40–45 age group).

The finding is supported by the literature which showed that most funding and supporting organisations for national development programmes lacked the capacity for monitoring and reporting in terms of both staffing and skills, thus limiting their ability to assist the related beneficiaries. Consequently, projects were poorly implemented and the function of monitoring and reporting was not ordinarily performed. Below are details of the findings.

According to the managers, most implementers of projects often regarded the function of monitoring and reporting a theoretical box-ticking paper exercise rather than a useful tool to support quality implementation. Such perception led to the submission of false or invalid data as evidenced by some of the statements made by most of the managers interviewed:

- For monitoring purposes here, we give the task of writing everyone's key results to one person who is perceived to have an idea of what RBM. He does all the writing and we just sign. This is because most of us do not have an

idea of what is required in those report forms. (Female permanent secretary, 50–55 age group)
- You find that the same form which was done three years ago was just adjusted here and there and submitted. And normally very few people, if any, look at these papers. (Male director, 50–55 age group)

The managers explained that the then existing monitoring and reporting tools were perceived to be highly complex and difficult for implementers to understand. Consequently, the function of completing them was confined to a few individuals within the organisational units with the majority of staff regarding the monitoring and reporting function to be irrelevant to their daily tasks. Furthermore, the limited number of periodic reports submitted by projects showed significant variances in format, type of data used (qualitative, quantitative or both) and focus on activity completion, while others were incomplete and focused on simple outputs. Such inconsistencies made comparison and consolidation of information from different reports problematic.

This finding is in line with the literature which shows that the presentation of false performance data as well as manipulation, to cover up inadequate performance, was prevalent in most organisations while the RBM approach was perceived to be a mere technical reporting exercise rather than an effective management tool (Kusek & Rist 2001).

Similarly, the UNDP Monitoring and Evaluation focal points revealed that there was no systematic use of findings from the monitoring and reporting functions for the United Nations-funded projects and programmes implemented by the public sector. From observation, a significant number of available progress reports included statements such as 'failure to undertake monitoring due to pressures on staff time' giving an indication that the function was only undertaken when time permitted. It can be argued that the function was conducted merely for mandatory reasons rather than considering it to be an essential activity in programme management. Literature shows that capacity for project implementation, monitoring and reporting can be effectively built through learning from the experiences, practices and operations. It can be further argued that the practices also limited the opportunities for effective capacity building.

According to the literature, development results can only be effectively achieved when organisations consistently nurture a culture of continuous improvement where monitoring and reporting functions are executed for improvement rather than for compliance (Mackay2006). That is, effective implementation of projects significantly depends on the production of monitoring information that is valued, consistently demanded and used by key stakeholders. Kusek & Rist (2001) add that timely execution of monitoring and reporting processes can provide credible and useful information for learning lessons and decision-making, while delays can lead to loss of control of the implementation process as well as loss of impact of the project. Furthermore, the main strength of monitoring and reporting systems lies in

their capacity to convey information on the success, failure as well as impacts and outcomes. Against this background, it can be contended that inadequate performance in the monitoring and reporting function compromised the potential benefits and also contributed to the limited impact of development projects.

Prevailing culture and the performance measurement function

The managers revealed that the then prevailing culture did not support active demand and effective use of monitoring information demonstrated by the near total absence of feedback on performance reports. The authors of the reports also did not request such feedback. Typical responses from some managers in the central development programme coordinating agency included:

- These performance reports are prepared by ministries and submitted for review. However, there was no feedback so the Ministries do not get to know how they have performed. (Female permanent secretary, 55–60 age group)
- The problem is that there has not been any feedback on the reports submitted. (Deputy director, 40–45 age group male)

This shortcoming had persistently been identified earlier through an assessment by the World Bank. It was concluded that the interest in improving the monitoring and evaluation policy and processes expressed by the Zimbabwe Government central planning authorities, since the late 1980s, was not shared throughout the government structures (Brushett 1998).

According to the literature, the lack of knowledge about monitoring and reporting as well as its benefits is a significant barrier to demand for resulting information, usage of the tool, the gaining of experience as well as knowledge regarding the function (Mackay 2006). Also, the absence or systematic non-usage of monitoring findings significantly defeats the whole notion of regarding monitoring systems as powerful management tools for improving performance (UNDP 2009). That is, valuing and acting upon evidence on what works and what does not contribute significantly to the improvement of performance. Furthermore, the building or strengthening of monitoring and reporting systems can significantly impact the transformation process towards a results-oriented culture (UNDP 2009). Explicitly, the promotion of culture and the strengthening of monitoring and reporting systems reinforce each other and consequently contribute to the improvement of organisational performance. It can be argued that the lack of demand for monitoring information led to non-usage of the related systems which perpetuated the lack of knowledge and poor implementation of programmes as it also inhibited the related capacity building processes.

Participation

Most stakeholders, including end users, implementers of projects and civil society, were ordinarily excluded from both project planning and implementation processes. Consequently, monitoring data from these groups which were essential for promoting sound performance, were also excluded. In the same context, the monitoring reports ordinarily focused on output such as the development of training tools, the number and levels of attendance relating to training sessions delivered. The substantive, issues regarding improvements in life experience of end users and realisation of intended objectives were not addressed.

As one senior manager in the public service remarked:

> Most Ministries are doing desk exercises. We have not reached a stage where we go to our clients and find out if we have made a difference. (Female permanent secretary, 55–60 age group)

Similarly, another manager interviewed remarked:

> After some years, we will be confident enough to invite our clients to get their views, because right now we are too scared because they would be saying everything we are doing is wrong. (Male director, 45–50 age group)

Discussion

The above findings showed a sharp contrast to the case in Malaysia, one of the success stories in the development arena. The nation recorded significant progress in transforming from an agricultural and commodity-based low-income economy to a successful middle-income economy and was in the process of transforming into a high-income country by 2020 (PEMANDU 2010; UNICEF 2013). Such success was reportedly achieved through effective design and implementation of development projects in a business environment that was highly participatory, an evidence-orientated environment with strong emphasis on sound monitoring and reporting systems.

The related performance monitoring system included proactively gathering input and feedback periodically from stakeholders including the general populace through Open Days, surveys and periodic reports that were disseminated extensively. In the same context, decisions made in management meetings were cascaded to lower levels to offer them an opportunity to discuss and make alternate suggestions to the higher level. The resulting information was effectively utilised for adjustments in current and future project design and policy decision-making. For example, the funding of future programmes and projects depended on the delivery of programme milestones and outcomes as measured by the related key performance indicators articulated during the planning phase.

Similarly, Chile is regarded as a success story with well-performing home-grown monitoring and reporting systems that intensively utilise the information obtained from the related processes. For example, monitoring information is reported in full to the Congress, which greatly appreciates it and effectively uses it in decision-making processes (Mackay 2006). Such processes help magnify the value of monitoring and reporting functions as well as enhance their efficacy.

Literature shows that active participation of stakeholders in the development of plans and performance indicators reportedly leads to the production of more realistic plans that can be more effectively monitored to produce critical performance information. In addition, the effective sharing of information from related processes contributes to increased knowledge and motivation, which consequently facilitates empowerment and promotes accountability and transparency. Furthermore, such inclusion provides an opportunity to build the necessary capacity among stakeholders as it offers new ways of assessing and learning from more inclusive and responsive changes to needs and aspirations. It can be argued that a combination of the positive elements derived from active participation and use of the performance information ultimately led to high levels of performance within the related projects and programmes.

Conclusion

The objective of the study was achieved as analysis of data pointed to the essence of a sound results-based monitoring and reporting function in enhancing the achievement of development results as confirmed by findings from organisations that emphasised the same. On the contrary, the findings in the Zimbabwe public service pointed to inadequate performance of the function and subsequently the overall performance of the related development programmes. Also, the analysis of data showed that the level of capacity as well as the then prevailing culture contributed significantly to this shortcoming.

Recommendations

Ensuring the timely availability of quality, up-to-date performance information in an appropriate format is essential for enhancing the performance of development programmes. This can be achieved through the institutionalisation and use of sound results-based monitoring and reporting systems that emphasise the effective participation of all key stakeholders, particularly the end users.

Key stakeholders should be continually sensitised on the essence of the monitoring and reporting function to help change their mindsets towards the tool and to enhance their appreciation of its efficacy. Also, instilling a change in the prevailing culture to one that values evidence on what works and what does not promotes the effective use of such evidence as well as learning for improvement, which can prove to be highly effective.

Best practices form success stories relating to the design and use of sound results-based planning, monitoring and reporting systems, which can be replicated elsewhere with the necessary adjustments to adapt to the related environment. For example, the use of related findings to influence funding decisions for future programmes and reward for the delivery of milestones also can be a sound technique for motivating stakeholders to value the monitoring and function and subsequently improve programme performance. Also, the

formulation of development programmes including pilot areas, aimed at enhancing the capacity for monitoring and reporting, can prove to be highly effective. In the same context, incentives and sanctions can be considered.

The creation of a powerful champion in the sensitisation process has proved to be a key success factor as demonstrated by experiences in several countries including Chile, Australia and Colombia (Mackay 2006). Such an individual can be a powerful government minister or other official who has the capacity to strongly advocate for the institutionalisation and execution of the function and also advocate for the allocation of resources to develop the necessary tools.

Overall, long-term commitment, persistence, celebration of progress and the rewarding of successes are essential for improving the monitoring and reporting function as well as programme performance.

Taking into consideration the limitations of any research, this study opens up a number of possibilities for future research. It is, therefore, recommended that further research be conducted on experiences with monitoring and reporting. Such research can include the use of the same organisations on different samples, including end users of the related services, or different entities altogether.

Acknowledgements

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