Iterative Beneficiary Monitoring: An adaptive approach to enhancing the implementation of World Bank projects

Johannes Hoogeveen and Andre-Marie Taptué

Putting a project into practice is challenging and at times a disconnect exists between what is aspired to in project documents and what happens on the ground. To help project managers ensure that projects are implemented the way they are intended, an agile and adaptive approach to monitoring has been developed. The approach, called Iterative Beneficiary Monitoring or IBM, is demand-driven, produces short reports, and is focused on diagnosing specific barriers to effective implementation. IBM results have improved project implementation practices and gender equity. Scaled-up, this low-cost and adaptive approach to feedback generation has the potential to strengthen project implementation across the World Bank portfolio.

Information on project implementation generally comes from the project’s monitoring and evaluation (M&E). M&E staff keep track of implementation progress, and are expected to flag potential shortcomings. In practice, most project M&E focuses on producing progress indicators for midterm and final reviews, and pays less attention to uncovering implementation bottlenecks. Supervision missions offer another source of information about project implementation. Yet, there is a limit to the information supervision missions can uncover as they tend to go to a small number of purposively selected project activities.

Less biased information about the effectiveness of projects comes from impact evaluations. Typically, these take the form of randomized control trials, or large-scale surveys, such as the Service Delivery Indicator (SDI) Surveys, which measure the quality of service delivery in health and education, or Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETs). The challenge of these data-intensive approaches is that they are expensive and therefore not repeated frequently. They are also time-consuming and rarely deliver results quickly.

Iterative Beneficiary Monitoring complements supervision missions and project M&E by offering an agile, problem oriented feedback loop, that draws from a randomly selected sample of project beneficiaries and which permits project management to adjust implementation activities “on the fly”. The approach provides feedback to project teams through multiple rounds of smaller-scale data collection that allows project teams to identify implementation issues early and take corrective action. IBM collects data directly from beneficiaries but keeps data collection efforts to a minimum by relying on fewer research questions and smaller samples than standard project M&E. This reduces cost, increases speed, and allows IBM to put most of its emphasis on giving feedback that is directly relevant to implementation. Data, once collected, is used to prepare short reports that draw
attention to a limited number of pertinent issues. By collecting data directly from beneficiaries, one of the attractions of IBM is its ability to assess gender aspects.

**The design of an IBM feedback loop begins by getting intimately acquainted with a project and appreciating some of the challenges project staff are facing.** This is time consuming but indispensable to collecting relevant, high quality monitoring information. It is in this phase that trust is built between researchers and project staff. Mutual confidence and understanding is the basis for follow-up once results are produced. Collecting information directly from beneficiaries is at the heart of the iterative feedback approach. There is no pre-set way to collect data and approaches need to fit the issues at hand. Data may be collected using face-to-face interviews, but this tends to be costly and is not the instrument of choice. Often, IBM relies on mobile phone interviews as they are less expensive and avoid travel. Often—and certainly when face to face interviews are held, samples are not very large. Small samples still yield relevant information because in most instances the objective is to identify whether a project is being implemented in the correct manner and to pinpoint specific, actionable issues. When protocols need to be followed (these are often defined in the Operations Manual), few deviant data can already pinpoint a problem. In this sense, IBM is different from evaluation tools aiming to assess the size of the impact of an intervention. In all instances, the golden rule of IBM is that the cost of data collection should be less than $5,000 per round. Such modest spending on data gathering facilitates repeated data collection, thereby allowing project teams to continuously improve their projects.

**When doing IBM it is important to keep data collection concise and to resist the temptation to collect more than is strictly necessary.** A project management team can only handle so many issues at any given time, and small samples and short questionnaires simplify enumerator training, reduce the cost of supervision, and make it possible for individual enumerators to travel on public transport or by motorbike to collect data, as opposed to entire data collection teams traveling in four-wheel drive vehicles.

**Small samples may suffice to uncover problems**

*In Dar es Salaam questions had been raised about the price charged for water at water kiosks. A survey of 24 kiosks revealed that prices systematically exceeded the tariff set by the regulator.*

![Bar chart showing prices charged at water kiosks for 20 liters](chart.png)

Source: Uwazi 2010.

Data, once collected, are analyzed and offered as feedback to project managers. Because data sets are small, analysis can be rapid and is inexpensive. Reports are to the point and short, rarely more than 10 pages, and are discussed with project staff. World Bank management receives a copy of the report, as do government officials in charge of the project. With reports in hand, the project team can now take measures to address the issues identified. Another round of data collection typically follows, with the aim of assessing improvements and, possibly, identifying new issues that might have to be addressed. The report follows the same route as the previous one. This is repeated on regular basis till the end of the project.
Five steps of the Iterative Beneficiary Monitoring approach

The first IBM activities were executed in the wake of the 2013/14 conflict in northern Mali. In response to this crisis, the World Bank implemented a number of emergency projects which could only be supervised with great difficulty due to the security situation. IBM was designed as an approach to complement field supervision, while at the same time reducing field presence by Bank staff. Once developed, it was realized that IBM has much to offer in secure settings too and by March 2018 IBM has been rolled out to some 30 projects in six countries.

IBM was first applied to a school feeding project. Its feedback allowed the project to reduce payment delays from 3 to 1 months and to triple the number of disbursements made annually. IBM was instrumental in optimizing the allocation of funding for school feeding as well, by assuring that the number of students eligible for the program was accurately recorded.

IBM was also used to monitor the distribution of electronic fertilizer vouchers in Mali and Niger. Amongst the consequences of its feedback was that agreements with mobile phone companies were revisited after it became clear that not all text messages reached beneficiaries as the number of messages that could be sent per minute was too low. The system now receives ‘receipt’ messages when a beneficiary opens his/her text message. IBM also brought about a cleaning of the data base of beneficiaries, after it been noted that there existed unexplained ‘duplicates’, and instigated improved oversight of fertilizer distribution as it became clear that not all beneficiaries received the fertilizer they were entitled to.

IBM facilitated the preparation of the Mali budget support operation by monitoring the creation of rural land commissions and the adequacy of the distribution of fertilizer subsidies. With respect to the latter, quantitative evidence from IBM showing that only a fraction of the beneficiaries had received their vouchers, and that those who had, received it late, proved critical to determining whether prior actions had been met in a satisfactory manner.

Because IBM collects evidence directly from beneficiaries, the approach is effective at monitoring gender aspects. In several instances, pertinent gender biases were uncovered. Beneficiaries of a cash transfer program turned out to be mostly men, as were the beneficiaries of the aforementioned e-voucher programs. Land commissions lacked almost any female members. The adverse gender results uncovered by IBM were not the consequence of bad intentions. Projects were often designed with gender in mind, and in some instances, even employed gender specialists. Invariably Bank staff responded positively to the findings when they received them. Yet, a positive attitude alone is insufficient for ensuring that gender biases are not perpetuated through project design and implementation. In some instances, the lack of gender sensitivity was a genuine oversight and in the case of the e-voucher system the approach to beneficiary registration was changed and women as well as youth were registered as potential beneficiaries, along with household heads. In other

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Selected Results

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instances, there was resistance. The team from the social safety nets project implementation unit objected to addressing the gender bias in the registration process arguing that giving money directly to women might create trouble within households. Upon further reflection, it was agreed that the issue could be addressed by reframing the purpose of the cash transfer program from support to households to support to women. Indeed, the additional financing for the social protection program that is under preparation, takes this approach. Meanwhile Bank management committed to making “gender during project implementation” an agenda item for each concept note and decision review for new projects and continues to encourage the IBM team to collect information on gender outcomes from ongoing projects.

Selected gender outcomes uncovered by IBM

Core requirements to introduce IBM in a country program are a local Bank staff with diplomatic, data collection, and analytical skills, and a small budget to pay for training and data collection. So far, IBM staff have been drawn from the Poverty GP, and the division of labor with the Poverty staff member in charge of IBM, and project manager responsible for follow up on the results has proved to be a fruitful one. In Nigeria, a $100,000 budget, covers a local staff and IBM data collection for six projects operating in the north of the country.

Finally, because of its limited field presence (small samples; phone interviews) and because IBM relies on non-conspicuous means of data collection – interviewers travel by motor bike or on public transport, IBM is suited for conflict areas. Relative to the significant resources the World Bank allocates for Third Party Monitoring, IBM offers a low-cost, agile, and effective complement to ensuring that projects in hard-to-monitor areas are implemented effectively.

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