

Evaluating the Role of M&E Tools, Planning, and Budgets in the Success of Conditional Grants Projects: Insights from Meru County, Kenya

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Abstract

This research project delved into an examination of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices' influence on the performance of conditional grants projects within the County Government of Meru, Kenya. The investigation aimed to comprehensively assess the impact of M&E tools, capacity development, planning, and budgeting on the overall success of these projects. Anchored in the principles of principal-agent theory, results-organizational learning theory, and systems theory, this study underscored the significance of M&E practices in enhancing accountability and effectiveness in public service delivery. Conditional grants play a pivotal role in the context of Kenyan devolution, yet their effectiveness is contingent upon the implementation of robust M&E practices. This study sought to unravel the dynamics of how such practices influenced project success in Meru County. The research objectives were structured to assess the influence of M&E tools on project performance, determine the influence of M&E capacity development on project performance, establish the influence of M&E planning on project success, and analyse the relationship between M&E budgets and project performance. The study employed a questionnaire-based approach targeting members of the County Project Coordination Team (CPCT) engaged in five conditional grants projects. Collected data were analysed using inferential statistics such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) or binary regression analysis, depending on research questions and data distribution. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 facilitated quantitative analysis, with results presented in tables for clarity and ease of interpretation. The anticipated findings held significance as they were expected to inform decision-making by providing evidence on the impact of M&E practices, enhance project performance by offering practical recommendations for improvement, contribute to capacity building of personnel involved in M&E activities, improve planning processes by aligning M&E plans with project objectives, and optimize resource allocation through informed budgeting decisions. The study's focus was on CPCT members in Meru County, acknowledging limitations such as reliance on self-reported data and geographical constraints. The study assumed the accuracy of responses, representativeness of the sample, and the significance of the chosen variables.

Key Words: *Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), Conditional Grants, Project Performance, Capacity Development, Public Service Accountability*

Introduction

For regions and countries to prosper socioeconomically, public projects—especially those financed by conditional grants—must be implemented effectively. Thorough monitoring and evaluation of projects directly enhance overall efficacy, thereby fostering the launch of diverse initiatives aimed at positively influencing the socio-political and economic circumstances of residents in each region. Data is gathered systematically and sequentially during the project's execution. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) have become essential for many humanitarian and development organizations. The importance of using M&E approaches from the beginning is emphasized by their critical role in ensuring project success, despite the significant investment of human resources, time, and costs (Khan, 2013).

It is imperative to ensure that project overheads are comprehended and prioritized by management and donor agencies. Additionally, it is imperative to implement the recommendations for monitoring and assessment. The techniques that are based on monitoring and assessment activities are essential for project managers to recognize and understand. Additionally, it is imperative that project performance acknowledge responsibility for the procedures employed, exhibit dedication to them, and have a vested interest in persuading other stakeholders of their long-term value and benefits. On a global scale, the development initiatives of other countries are significantly influenced by prominent donor nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. In order to

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foster sustainable development and good governance, the World Bank (2019) emphasizes the necessity of establishing Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) as a recognized profession in Africa. The inaugural African Monitoring and Evaluation Association was established in 1998 consequently, bringing together individuals and national associations. This platform facilitates the interchange of ideas, arguments, examinations, and the sharing of assessment data, products, and services, thereby improving the African evaluation and research community.

In developing countries, particularly in Africa, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) has become increasingly significant in the past decade, surpassing traditional methods. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential for the long-term sustainability of agribusiness programs in Africa, according to CARE (2012). M&E is the process of assessing the impact of change by examining the processes that involve multiple individuals or groups, each of whom has the potential to influence or be influenced by the change being assessed (Naidoo, 2010). The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts for all Government Policies, Programmes, and Projects are organized by the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate (MED) at Kenya's State Department for Economic Planning. The primary objectives of this position are the surveillance and appraisal of economic trends within the county, sectorial development planning, and navigation, as established by Presidential Executive Order No 1 of 2023. Furthermore, the M&E Directorate is accountable for overseeing the implementation of the National Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (NIMES), a comprehensive M&E framework that has been implemented throughout the nation. Furthermore, it is essential for the development and implementation of a culture of monitoring and evaluation within the public sector.

The significance of these integrated systems is especially apparent in counties such as Meru, where they play a crucial role in the examination and administration of conditional grant and donor-funded projects. County governments are essential players in this context and have a crucial responsibility in supervising and executing these initiatives. The decentralized nature of CIMES is intended to acknowledge and tackle the distinct requirements, priorities, and difficulties that are exclusive to each county. This method not only guarantees a comprehensive comprehension of local dynamics but also encourages a cooperative and adaptable response to the many development efforts financed through conditional grants. Kenya's focus on efficient usage of conditional grant funding in counties like Meru is vital for attaining sustainable socio-economic success as the country advances its developmental agenda. These programs not only enhance infrastructure, social services, and economic prospects at the county level, but also exemplify a cooperative endeavor including national and county governments, donor agencies, and local communities. The success of these programs depends on transparent governance, strong project management, and the capacity to adjust plans based on real-time feedback from the field

Literature Review

Conditional grants, a substantial type of intergovernmental support, are generally accompanied by precise objectives and outcomes. To achieve these objectives, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) technologies are essential for tracking progress, ensuring accountability, and enabling evidence-based enhancements in initiatives. This literature review examines empirical research investigating the relationship between the utilization of M&E tools and the overall success of conditional grant projects in various circumstances. In the domain of conditional grant projects, numerous monitoring and evaluation tools are extensively utilized. Logical frameworks (Logframes) serve as organized and visual depictions of a project's objective hierarchy, clarifying the connections among inputs, actions, outputs, results, and final impact (Kusek & Rist, 2004). This tool proves instrumental in establishing clear connections between project interventions and intended results. Performance indicators, another crucial tool, offer quantifiable measures that track progress toward specific project objectives (Clear, 2012). The importance of well-defined and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) indicators aligned with the project's logframe cannot be overstated.

The facilitation of learning and adaptation stands as another crucial impact of M&E tools. They generate valuable insights into what works, what doesn't, and why in the context of conditional grant projects (Clear, 2012). This knowledge is essential for making necessary adjustments during project implementation and informing the design of future programs. However, challenges persist in the effective use of M&E tools within conditional grant projects. Indicator selection is not always straightforward, with the challenge of choosing relevant and measurable indicators that accurately reflect project objectives and track critical aspects of performance (Dafflon & Madiès, 2013). Additionally, the usefulness of M&E tools heavily relies on the quality of collected data. Inadequate data collection processes, insufficient sample sizes, and poor data management practices can undermine the ability of M&E tools to provide reliable insights (Olive, 2018). Capacity gaps among project stakeholders can hinder the selection, development, and use of appropriate M&E tools (Mugabe & Kanda, 2018). Furthermore, resource constraints, both human and financial, may limit the effectiveness of M&E activities, including data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Conditional grants offer a powerful mechanism for governments to achieve specific policy goals by channelling resources towards targeted areas. However, maximizing the impact of these programs requires robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems (Dafflon & Madiès, 2013). To be effective, M&E goes beyond simply collecting data; it encompasses a systematic approach focused

on performance measurement, analysis, and the use of insights for continuous improvement. A key factor in ensuring strong M&E systems is the development of capacity at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. This literature review explores the empirical evidence highlighting the strong connection between M&E capacity development and the successful performance of conditional grant projects. Empirical research demonstrates that careful attention to M&E tool selection and design contributes significantly to project success. The process of developing a logframe forces project managers to critically examine the logic behind planned interventions, fostering improved project design from the outset (Kusek & Rist, 2004). Performance indicators allow for regular progress tracking, keeping projects on course and ensuring resources are used efficiently. The insights generated through M&E data enable evidence-based decision-making; project managers and policymakers can identify underperforming areas and make necessary interventions in a timely manner (Mugabe & Kanda, 2018). Ultimately, well-designed M&E tools lay the foundation for learning. Rigorous data collection and analysis during implementation reveal successes and shortcomings, informing future projects and maximizing the long-term impact of conditional grants (World Bank, 2010).

Effective M&E planning begins with a clear articulation of project objectives. This process forces stakeholders to critically analyse the causal links between proposed interventions and desired results, ensuring that activities are meaningfully aligned with broader goals (Kusek & Rist, 2004). The next essential element is the development of performance indicators. Ideally, these indicators should be SMART, allowing for quantifiable tracking of progress against predefined targets (Clear, 2012). Equally important is establishing a comprehensive data collection plan. This involves identifying appropriate data sources, selecting suitable collection methods, determining sampling strategies, and outlining data management protocols (Mugabe & Kanda, 2018). Finally, a well-developed M&E plan includes allocating the necessary resources, both in terms of budget and human expertise, to support M&E activities throughout the entire project lifecycle (Olive, 2018).

Rigorous M&E planning directly contributes to improved accountability. By establishing clear targets and tracking progress transparently, responsible agencies demonstrate that resources are being used effectively for their intended purpose (Clear, 2012). Furthermore, well-articulated M&E frameworks promote a results-oriented culture, shifting the focus from mere compliance with requirements to achieving meaningful outcomes. The insights generated from M&E planning empower decision-makers by providing data-driven evidence upon which sound judgments can be made (Mugabe & Kanda, 2018). Interventions can be adjusted, strategies refined, and resources reallocated as needed, optimizing the chances of project success and maximizing the return on investment of public funds.

One critical aspect is the allocation of budgets specifically for monitoring and evaluation activities within conditional grants projects. The development of a comprehensive M&E plan, embedded in the project Project and budget, is crucial for effective implementation. This includes delineating resources for data collection, analysis, reporting, and capacity development in M&E (Olive, 2018). Adequate budget allocation ensures the availability of necessary tools, technologies, and expertise, directly influencing the quality and effectiveness of the evaluation process. Empirical studies emphasize the role of budgetary allocations in determining the selection and utilization of M&E tools and techniques. Kusek and Rist (2004) highlight that the choice of tools, such as logical frameworks, performance indicators, and reporting templates, is influenced by the financial resources allocated to the M&E component. A well-funded M&E budget enables the deployment of advanced tools and technologies, facilitating more accurate data collection, analysis, and reporting, thereby enhancing overall project performance.

A crucial aspect of M&E is its role in facilitating learning and adaptation within projects. The World Bank (2010) highlights that adequate budget for monitoring and evaluation enable the generation of valuable insights and lessons learned during project implementation. This learning process is vital for adjusting, refining strategies, and informing the design of future projects. A robust M&E budget, therefore, contributes not only to the success of the current project but also to the continuous improvement of future initiatives. Despite the recognized importance of monitoring and evaluation budgets, challenges exist in their effective implementation. Dafflon and Madiès (2013) identify limited financial resources as a significant challenge, particularly in smaller or less developed contexts. Additionally, competing priorities within government budgets may result in insufficient allocations for M&E activities, impacting the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of the evaluation process.

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Methods

This study used principal-agent theory and organizational theory. The Principal-Agent theory provides a valuable viewpoint for understanding the dynamics and potential difficulties that exist in these interactions, particularly in the context of conditional grant schemes. The thesis formulated by economists Jensen and Meckling (1976) explores the inherent conflicts of interest that might occur when a principal assigns authority to an agent to act on their behalf. The Principal-Agent hypothesis revolves around the idea of a possible mismatch of interests between the principal and the agent. Although the principal aims for certain results, the agent may possess different objectives and incentives that may conflict with reaching the principal's planned outcomes (Eisenhardt, 1989). This discrepancy is frequently attributed to two fundamental factors: Asymmetric information and varying risk preferences. To mitigate these challenges and ensure the success of conditional grant programs, Principal-Agent theory suggests several key strategies. Contracting and Incentives involve designing contracts that clearly outline expectations, performance metrics, and consequences for non-compliance to incentivize agents to align their actions with the principal's goals (Eisenhardt, 1989). Performance-based funding, tying funding to achieved outcomes, is an illustrative example. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) through robust systems enable the principal to gain insights into the agent's activities and assess progress toward program objectives (Kusek & Rist, 2004). Regular monitoring and rigorous evaluation enhance accountability. Relationship Building and Trust are crucial in establishing a collaborative relationship built on trust and open communication, mitigating information asymmetry, and aligning incentives (Manski, 2004). Involving the agent in the program's design and planning phases fosters a sense of ownership.

Organizational learning theory stresses the importance of utilizing knowledge gained from experience to inform future actions. M&E practices, when well-designed and implemented, contribute significantly to organizational learning within agencies responsible for managing conditional grant projects (World Bank, 2010). In this context, the Organizational Learning Theory emerges as a guiding beacon, unravelling the intricate processes through which organizations assimilate, disseminate, and apply knowledge to enhance performance and realize enduring objectives. Organizational learning theory contends that learning extends beyond individual cognitive processes, encapsulating a collective endeavour within organizational structures (Easterby & Baldwin, 2008). This communal learning materializes through diverse channels, encompassing individual enlightenment, knowledge dissemination via communication and collaboration, and organizational mechanisms fostering the creation and application of knowledge. The realm of conditional grant projects finds a nexus with organizational learning theory, especially in the orchestration of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) practices. Data gleaned through M&E serves as a cornerstone, offering profound insights into project triumphs and tribulations, instigating opportunities for reflection and knowledge cultivation. A meticulous analysis of M&E data empowers organizations to identify areas for enhancement, scrutinizing data enables organizations to pinpoint areas where project activities fall short, prompting strategic adjustments or even comprehensive revisions to project design (World Bank, 2010). Uncover unexpected outcomes, M&E data serves as a lens, revealing unanticipated consequences or unintended positive impacts, guiding organizations in refining their approach for subsequent endeavours. Develop knowledge repositories, systematically capturing and documenting lessons from prior projects enables the creation of invaluable knowledge repositories, shaping future decision-making and capacity building.

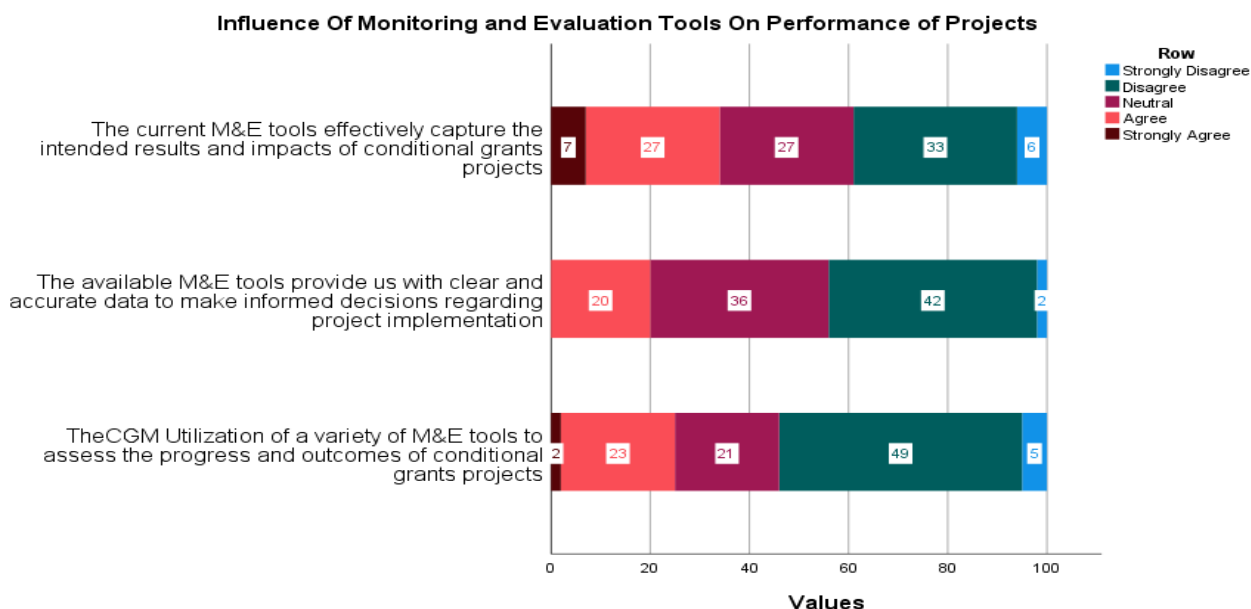
The research study was conducted in Meru County, Kenya, with a specific focus on conditional grants projects within the county. Meru County, located in the central region of Kenya, was a beneficiary of conditional grants aimed at stimulating development and improving people's livelihoods. These grants had financed projects in infrastructure, health, education, and agriculture. However, the successful implementation and performance of these projects had been a subject of interest and scrutiny. Throughout its history, Meru County has encountered challenges in project execution, characterized by delays, cost overruns, and unsatisfactory outcomes. These issues have raised concerns about the efficient utilization of conditional grant funds and the overall project effectiveness. The county administration has recognized the necessity of implementing strong monitoring and evaluation procedures to improve project performance. The study targeted 100 members of the CPCT drawn from the five conditional grant projects currently funded in Meru County; National Agricultural and Rural Inclusive Projects (NAGRIP), Sustainable Energy Technical Assistance Projects (SETA), Kenya Informal Settlement Improvement Program 2 (KISIP 2), Kenya Urban Support Program (KUSP), and Community Road Empowerment project (CORE). The study used questionnaires and key informant interviews. This study employed a descriptive research approach to investigate the impact of monitoring and evaluation techniques on the performance of conditional grants projects in Meru County. Descriptive statistics were used in quantitative data analysis to provide fundamental insights into the characteristics of respondents and overall trends connected to the variables being investigated. The analysis of qualitative data involved the use of thematic analysis, which employed a coding method to discover themes aligned with the aims of the study.

Results

Monitoring and Evaluation Tools and Performance of Projects

Under the Influence of Monitoring and Evaluation Practices On Performance of Projects; three practises under study were; Utilization of M&E Tools, Effectiveness of M&E Tools for Decision-Making and M&E Tools for Capturing Project Results and Impacts. The findings are illustrated in the figure 1

Figure 1: Influence of Monitoring and Evaluation tools on Performance of Conditional Grants Projects

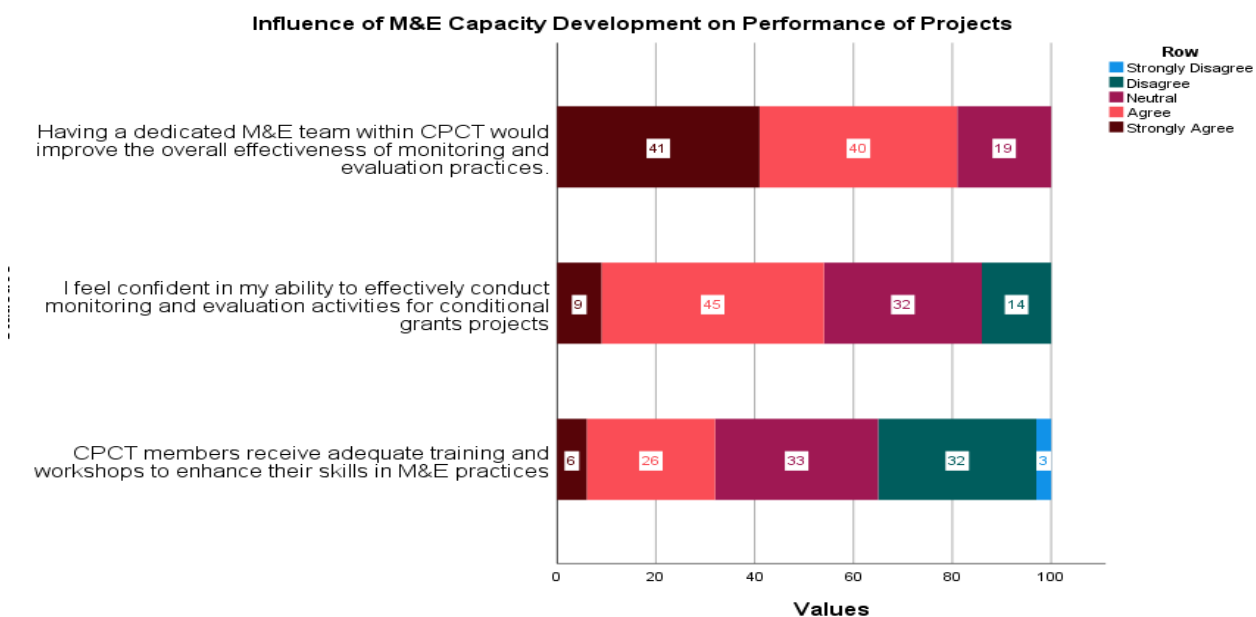


The majority of respondents (53%) perceive that the County Government of Meru (CGM) effectively employs a range of M&E tools to monitor and evaluate conditional grants projects. However, a significant proportion (41%) expressed neutrality, indicating a lack of clarity or strong opinion on this matter. A small minority (4%) disagreed with this assessment. Respondents were evenly divided on the effectiveness of available M&E tools in providing clear and accurate data for informed decision-making. Approximately half (45%) agreed with the statement, while another 45% remained neutral. Only a small fraction (10%) expressed strong opinions, with 8% strongly agreeing and 2% disagreeing. The majority of respondents (73%) indicated that the current M&E tools effectively capture the intended results and impacts of conditional grants projects. Nevertheless, a considerable portion (20%) remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty about the tools' capacity. A smaller group (7%) disagreed with the statement.

M&E Capacity Development and Performance of Conditional Grants Projects

Figure 6 presents survey results related to influence of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) capacity development within the CPCT on performance of projects. Three statements were assessed, and the responses were categorized into five levels of agreement: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Here are the findings:

Figure 2: Influence of M&E Capacity Development on Performance of Conditional Grants Projects

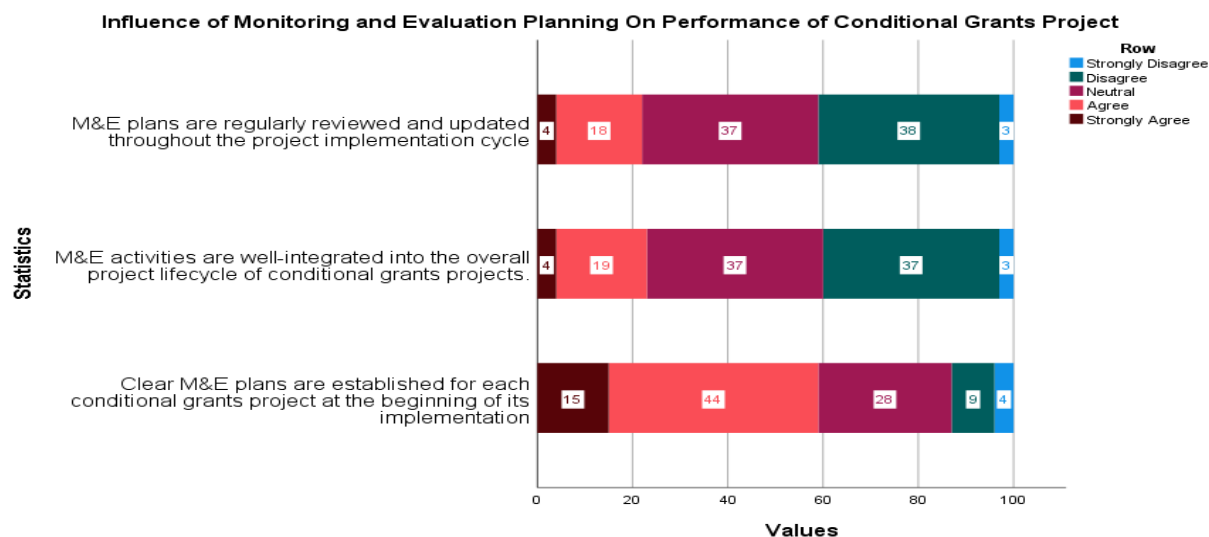


The adequacy of training and workshops for CPCT members received mixed reviews. While 26% of respondents agree and 6% strongly agree that the training and workshops provided are sufficient to enhance their M&E skills, a significant portion—32%—disagrees, and 3% strongly disagrees. Additionally, 33% of respondents are neutral on this issue, indicating a wide range of opinions about the effectiveness of the current training initiatives. Regarding confidence in conducting M&E activities, the responses are more positive but still varied. A majority, with 45% agreeing and 9% strongly agreeing, feel confident in their ability to effectively carry out M&E tasks for conditional grants projects. However, 32% of respondents are neutral, suggesting that some may still have reservations or lack confidence. A smaller group, 14%, disagrees with the statement, though none strongly disagreed. The strongest consensus emerged around the idea of having a dedicated M&E team within CPCT. A substantial 81% of respondents support this idea, with 41% strongly agreeing and 40% agreeing that it would improve the overall effectiveness of M&E practices. Only 19% of respondents were neutral, and notably, no one expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with this proposal.

Monitoring and Evaluation Planning and Performance of Conditional Grants Project

Figure 3 presents the results of a survey assessing perceptions about the effectiveness of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) planning in conditional grants projects. The three statements assessed are: M&E plans are regularly reviewed and updated throughout the project implementation cycle; M&E activities are well-integrated into the overall project lifecycle of conditional grants projects; Clear M&E plans are established for each conditional grants project at the beginning of its implementation.

Figure 3: Influence of Monitoring and Evaluation Planning and Performance of Conditional Grants Project



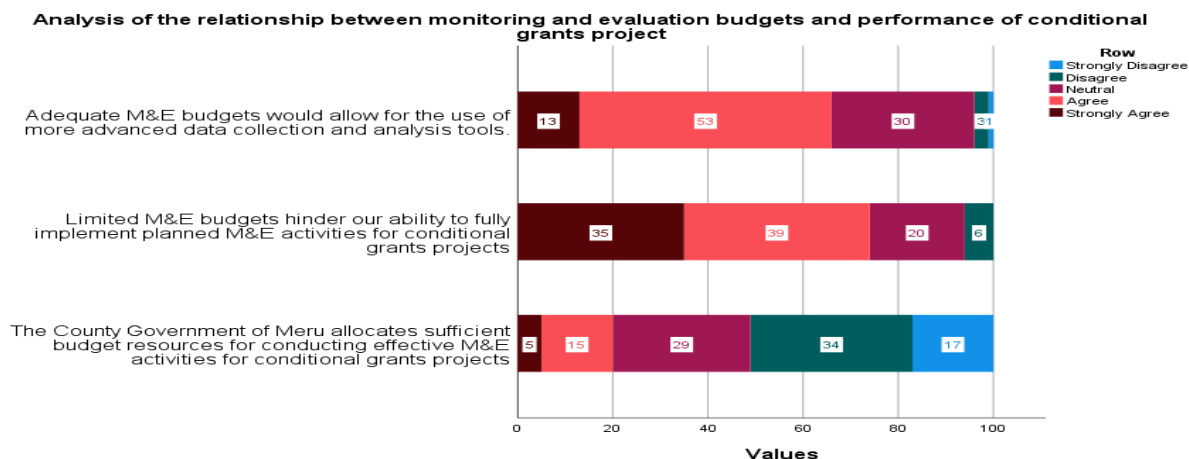
Regarding the establishment of clear M&E plans at the beginning of each project, the responses are relatively positive. A majority of respondents, 44%, agree that clear M&E plans are established at the outset, and 15% strongly agree. However, 28% of respondents are neutral; indicating that some may not be fully convinced of this practice's consistency. A smaller portion of respondents expressed dissatisfaction, with 9% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. When it comes to the integration of M&E activities into the overall project lifecycle, the responses are more critical. A significant 37% of respondents disagree, and 3% strongly disagree, indicating that they do not believe M&E activities are well-integrated into the project lifecycle. Additionally, another 37% of respondents are neutral on this issue, suggesting uncertainty or a lack of clear evidence of integration. Only 19% agree and 4% strongly agree that M&E activities are well-integrated.

Regarding the regular review and updating of M&E plans throughout the project implementation cycle, the feedback is similarly cautious. A notable 38% of respondents disagree, and 3% strongly disagree, indicating that they do not believe M&E plans are consistently reviewed and updated. Another 37% remain neutral, while only 18% agree and 4% strongly agree with this statement. Overall, the findings suggest that while there is some agreement on the establishment of clear M&E plans at the beginning of projects, there are significant concerns regarding the integration of M&E activities into the project lifecycle and the regular updating of M&E plans during implementation. Many respondents either disagree with or are neutral about these practices, indicating potential areas for improvement in M&E processes.

Relationship between monitoring and evaluation budgets and performance of conditional grants project

The survey findings reveal notable perspectives on the sufficiency of budget resources allocated for Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) activities related to conditional grants projects within the County Government of Meru. The figure 4 illustrates the findings.

Figure 4: Analysis of the relationship between monitoring and evaluation budgets and performance of conditional grants project

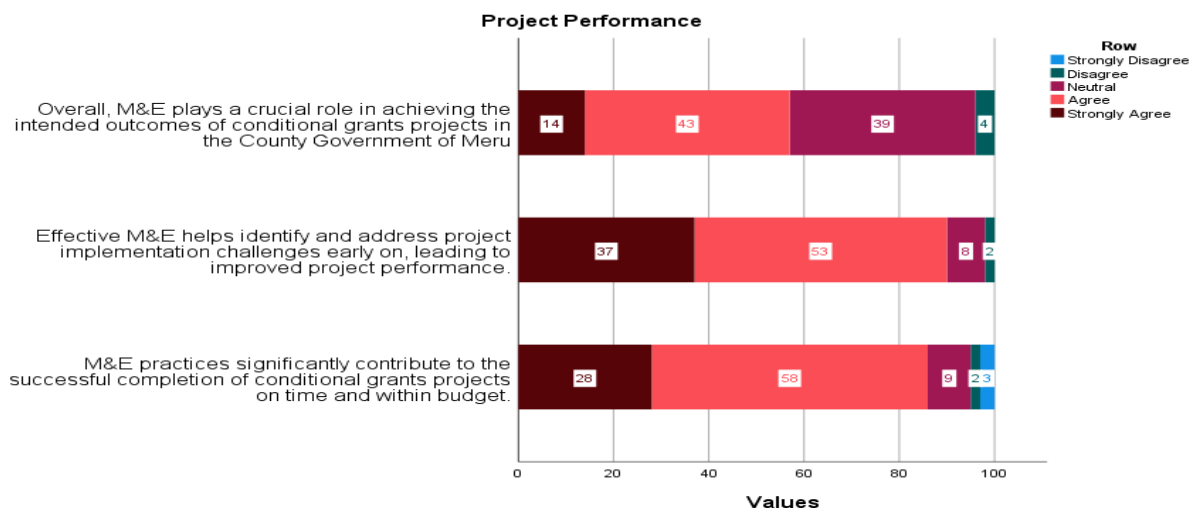


A substantial proportion of respondents, 34%, disagree, and 17% strongly disagree that the county allocates sufficient budget resources for conducting effective M&E activities. This suggests a significant level of dissatisfaction with the current budgeting. Additionally, 29% of respondents remain neutral, indicating uncertainty or mixed views on the adequacy of the financial resources provided. On the other hand, only a smaller portion of the respondents, 15%, agree, and 5% strongly agree that the budget allocation is sufficient, reflecting limited confidence in the current budgeting practices. When considering the impact of limited M&E budgets, a significant majority of respondents, 39%, agree that these constraints hinder their ability to fully implement planned M&E activities. Furthermore, 35% strongly agree, emphasizing the critical impact of budget limitations on project execution. Only 20% of respondents are neutral, and notably, none strongly disagree, which reflects a broad concern across the board about the challenges posed by insufficient funding. Regarding the potential benefits of adequate M&E budgets, a majority of respondents, 53%, agree, and 13% strongly agree that with sufficient financial resources, more advanced data collection and analysis tools could be employed. This indicates a strong belief in the value of increased budgets for enhancing M&E practices. However, 30% of respondents are neutral, suggesting some uncertainty about the actual impact that increased budgets might have. A smaller group, 3%, disagree, and 1% strongly disagrees, showing minimal skepticism regarding the effectiveness of additional budget resources in improving M&E outcomes.

M&E Practices perception and Project Performance

The study sought to get the overall feeling CPCT had of M&E influence over the project performance by three variables which are; M&E practices significantly contribute to the successful completion of conditional grants projects on time and within budget; Effective M&E helps identify and address project implementation challenges early on, leading to improved project performance; and Overall, M&E plays a crucial role in achieving the intended outcomes of conditional grants projects in the County Government of Meru. The findings are as in Figure 5.

Figure 5: M&E Practices perception and Project Performance



The study findings underscore the significant impact that Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) practices are perceived to have on the success of conditional grants projects within the County Government of Meru. A strong majority of respondents, 58%, agree that M&E practices play a crucial role in ensuring that conditional grants projects are completed on time and within budget. Additionally, 28% of respondents strongly support this view, reflecting broad confidence in the effectiveness of M&E in driving project success. However, 9% of respondents are neutral, indicating some uncertainty about the extent of M&E's contribution, while only a small minority, 5%, express disagreement. When it comes to identifying and addressing project implementation challenges, 53% of respondents agree that effective M&E is instrumental in this regard, and 37% strongly agree. This consensus highlights the critical role of M&E in improving project outcomes. A minimal 8% of respondents are neutral, and only 2% disagree, suggesting widespread acknowledgment of M&E's value in this area. Regarding the overall role of M&E in achieving the intended outcomes of conditional grants projects, 43% of respondents agree, and 14% strongly agree that M&E is essential. However, a notable 39% of respondents remain neutral, indicating some uncertainty about M&E's overall impact. A small portion of respondents, 4%, disagree, reflecting a minority view that questions the effectiveness of M&E in achieving project goals

Discussion

The study's findings provide nuanced insights into Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) practices within the County Government of Meru (CGM), particularly regarding their impact on the performance of conditional grants projects. These conclusions reveal both strengths and areas that require further development, which can be better understood through the lens of several organizational theories. Firstly, Principal-Agent Theory offers an explanation for the mixed views on the role of M&E tools in decision-making. While a significant portion of respondents recognize their value in capturing project outcomes, their inconsistent application in guiding management decisions suggests disconnect between the "principal" (project managers) and the "agents" (M&E practitioners). This misalignment can be addressed by enhancing communication and training to ensure that M&E tools are seen not just as a reporting mechanism but as a critical component of decision-making, aligning both parties' interests and maximizing the influence of M&E on project success.

Secondly, the findings on M&E capacity development highlight the importance of Organizational Learning Theory. The variability in perceptions of training adequacy points to a learning gap within CGM, where the organization's ability to effectively utilize M&E practices is hindered by inconsistent or insufficient knowledge transfer. Addressing these gaps through more practical, targeted, and continuous capacity-building initiatives can enhance organizational learning and improve M&E effectiveness. Developing a feedback loop, where lessons from past projects are systematically integrated into future M&E practices, will help in building a learning culture that enhances performance. Thirdly, the perceptions of M&E planning reflect the need for a Systems Theory approach. The inconsistencies in how M&E activities are integrated and updated throughout the project lifecycle point to a fragmented system where M&E is not fully embedded into the broader project management processes. By adopting a systems perspective, CGM can treat M&E as an integral component of the project management ecosystem, ensuring that it is systematically integrated, regularly reviewed, and adapted in response to changes. This approach would enhance the overall adaptability and responsiveness of projects, leading to better outcomes by ensuring that all project elements work cohesively.

Furthermore, the concerns regarding M&E budgets reflect a significant barrier to full implementation, which can also be examined through Principal-Agent Theory. The financial constraints identified suggest disconnect between the funders (principals) and M&E teams (agents), where limited resources hinder M&E activities. However, simply increasing budgets may not suffice. The efficient utilization of funds requires both parties to align their objectives, ensuring that budget allocations are strategically used to support capacity-building and efficient management practices, thereby optimizing the use of resources for M&E. Lastly, the overall perception of M&E's contribution to project performance is largely positive, with a majority of respondents acknowledging its role in ensuring timely and within-budget project completion. However, the presence of neutral and dissenting opinions reflects the complexity of attributing project success solely to M&E. According to Systems Theory, M&E is one of many interdependent components in project management, and its effectiveness is linked to other factors such as the quality of project implementation, resource management, and external environmental conditions. Therefore, while M&E is crucial, its impact is amplified or diminished by the broader system in which it operates.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the study underscores the pivotal role of M&E in enhancing the performance of conditional grants projects within CGM, while also identifying areas for improvement. Strengthening M&E practices through better integration, targeted training, adequate funding, and a systems-based approach will be essential to overcoming the challenges identified. By viewing M&E as an integral part of the broader organizational and project management structure, CGM can improve project outcomes and foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement. The empirical evidence highlights several key aspects of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) practices within the County Government of Meru (CGM). The majority of respondents view the use of M&E

tools as effective for monitoring and evaluating conditional grants projects, though there is notable uncertainty regarding their role in decision-making. This suggests a need for improved communication and strategic application of these tools. Perceptions of M&E capacity development reveal mixed views on the adequacy of training, indicating gaps in current programs. There is strong support for establishing a dedicated M&E team, which could enhance the consistency and quality of M&E practices. M&E planning shows some agreement on the importance of early-stage planning, but concerns remain about the integration of M&E activities throughout the project lifecycle. Budgetary constraints are identified as a significant barrier to effective M&E, highlighting the need for reassessment of funding allocations. Overall, while M&E practices are generally valued within CGM, the findings suggest areas for improvement in training, planning, and budgeting to enhance their effectiveness in supporting project success.

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