

Monitoring Program Progress – The case of Making Markets Work for the Jamuna, Padma and Teesta Chars in Bangladesh



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Synopsis

This case discusses how to monitor results in order to help manage and steer a program. It presents the experiences of M4C in Bangladesh, concentrating on how they track changes in intermediate indicators common to several interventions. The case focuses primarily on M4C's quantitative information gathering, as this is an area many programs find challenging. The case describes how the M4C team structures monitoring to make it more efficient and effective and provides examples of tools that M4C uses. Finally, the case describes how M4C regularly analyses and uses monitoring information to steer interventions and develop its portfolio.

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This case describes how the program has addressed a typical challenge in results measurement. The aim of the case is to provide insights that will be useful to other practitioners facing a similar challenge. The author does not represent the DCED or SDC, nor do the views expressed in the case necessarily reflect the views of the DCED or SDC.

¹ The HPC consortium was led by Hans Posthumus (HPC) and consisted of Aly Miehlsbradt (MCL), Ben Fowler (MSA), Mihaela Balan, Nabanita Sen (OU), Phitcha Wanitphon and Wafa Hafiz (H&S)

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1 The Challenge of Monitoring

This case discusses how to monitor results in order to manage and steer a program. Monitoring is focused on assessing the indicators for activities and intermediate changes in results chains. The benefits of monitoring are generally well understood. Regular information helps program teams to assess if interventions are on track and likely to lead to impact. It also helps teams to identify what is working well and where there are gaps. This understanding can help to improve existing interventions and to design new ones. Gathering information regularly helps program teams to make improvements quickly, avoiding spending time and resources on activities that aren't working well.

Despite the potential benefits, managers and staff often feel that monitoring partners' activities and expected results can be time consuming and expensive. As a result, more emphasis is placed on impact assessment, usually not conducted until relatively late in an intervention life cycle.² An impact assessment cannot be conducted until at least one business cycle, season or year has passed. In practice, impact assessments are often much later than this. In the meantime, there is little information for steering, so the program loses the opportunity to make improvements early. Experience also shows that the monitoring of activities and results which does take place before impact assessments is often *ad hoc*, rather than systematic. This lack of structure often means that important information is not utilized to inform decision-making.

This case discusses the experience of the Making Markets Work for the Jamuna, Padma and Teesta Chars (M4C) program in monitoring their work. M4C gathers both quantitative and qualitative information; both are essential for monitoring any program. However, this case focuses on M4C's quantitative information gathering, as this is an area many programs find challenging. The case describes how the M4C team ensures that monitoring is efficient and effective. It provides examples M4C's monitoring tools, and gives tips on how to save time and money in monitoring. Finally, the case describes how M4C regularly analyses and uses information from monitoring to steer interventions and develop its portfolio. In summary, the case illustrates how to institutionalize monitoring in a manageable and useful way.

2 Introduction to M4C

Making Markets Work for the Jamuna, Padma and Teesta Chars (M4C) is a five-year program in Bangladesh mandated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. M4C is implemented by Swisscontact and Practical Action in collaboration with the Rural Development Academy, Bogra. After a six-month inception phase, the program started implementation in 2012 and will continue until 2016 with a budget of CHF 8 million. The objective of the program is to improve market systems for poor people living in 'chars' of ten districts in North Western Bangladesh. 'Chars' are riverine land formed through soil deposition and erosion. They have an average life span of twenty to thirty years after which the inhabitants must relocate to another char or mainland area. Chars are isolated; it often takes more than an hour to travel there from the mainland. Given this isolation and the chars' vulnerability to floods and erosion, most char dwellers are very poor with few assets and minimal access to basic services and markets.

² Intervention life cycle is described here as the total time frame from when an intervention is started until two years after the end of activities (when results at the goal level of the results chain are likely to be measurable).



In response to these challenges, M4C applies the Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P) approach with the aim of increasing the incomes of char households and reducing their vulnerability. The M4C approach includes:³

1. supporting the formation of producer groups, sales service points and other institutions on chars (depending on the specific char context) in order to establish knowledge, skills, trust and economic relationships between char producers and relevant service providers and market actors;
2. partnering with lead firms (local/national) and government agencies to test innovative business models with respect to addressing wider systemic constraints relevant for char producers in selected sectors.

The ultimate objective of the program is to increase incomes for 60,000 poor households, empowering both men and women with economic opportunities and required skills and knowledge. You can find out more about the program in [this Power Point presentation](#).

3 The Challenge of Monitoring in M4C

There are two main challenges to monitoring in chars:

- Since chars are remote and surrounded by water, different modes of transport are required to get there and to move around. Journeys typically require traveling by car, then boat then motorbike, carriage or foot. This significantly increases the time required to visit the chars, making expensive and time consuming.
- The cropping cycle in chars is from September to April, in contrast to the mainland where crops are grown year round. Therefore most of the intervention activities are scheduled during this period, which squeezes the time for monitoring.



M4C has found that waiting for data from impact assessments (which are usually scheduled during June and July) means the program misses interim information that is vital for informing decision-making (see Box 1). M4C conducts an 'early impact assessment' to check for preliminary results only after the completion of activities under the intervention. A final impact assessment is conducted one to two years after the completion of activities. In addition, impact assessments are often delayed by practical considerations. For example,

³ Taken from the M4C Monitoring and Results Measurement (MRM) manual

M4C often needs to hire research organizations to collect information, which can create delays.

Thus, the M4C team decided that they needed to use other monitoring tools before impact assessments, in order to keep better track of progress. This need became particularly pressing in 2013 when the number of interventions that M4C was implementing rose sharply. At that point, the team started to develop monitoring tools that would assess the progress of activities and various intermediate indicators, keep track of different interventions and inform future plans. The next section describes these tools and gives examples of their use.

Box 1: Why monitoring is important to M4C

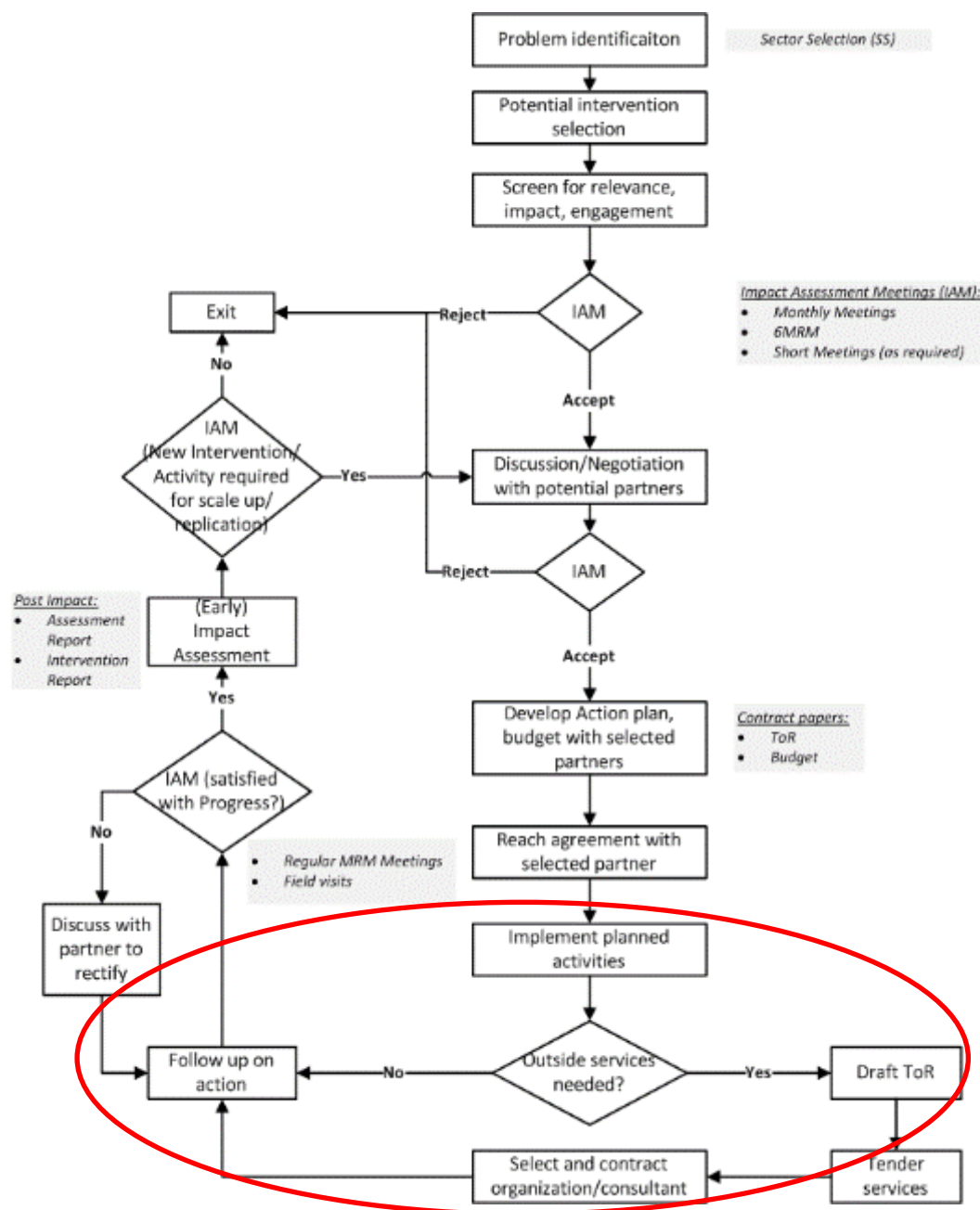
The Market Development Director of M4C shared an experience where, if M4C had waited for the results of an impact assessment, they would have missed the opportunity for steering an intervention in the appropriate direction. M4C was working on an intervention with two agricultural input companies to introduce a particular variety of maize seeds to chars. These maize seeds were expected to give high yields. Several demonstration plots were established to promote the maize seed to farmers. Monitoring of the demonstration plots revealed that the seeds were indeed generating high yields on chars. Based on this finding, M4C decided it would be beneficial to work with the same companies to promote the seeds in other areas. Had they waited to check results of the demo plots only when impact assessments were scheduled three months later, they would have missed the opportunity to expand the intervention in the ongoing season and would have had to wait for the next agricultural cycle. Thus the Director explained that, 'In order to ensure quality in our work, we need to check signs quickly that show whether our activities are working or not.'

4 M4C's Monitoring Tools

In order to keep track of activities and intermediate changes, M4C came up with a set of tools with which to monitor interventions. These tools were developed to assess progress common to a number of M4C's intervention results chains. Not every tool is used to monitor every intervention. Sometimes one tool is used, while at other times a combination of tools are used, depending on the intervention.

The tools are used to monitor changes when activities are implemented and initial signs of change start taking place. Figure 1 shows in red at what stage this monitoring is done. As the diagram shows, M4C regularly discusses the findings from monitoring to understand whether expected changes are happening and take remedial actions if they are not. If expected changes are happening, M4C may decide to expand the intervention within the same agricultural cycle.

Figure 1: M4C's Implementation Management Cycle⁴



The M4C team tries to streamline information collection by engaging private sector partners and sub-contractors in data collection where appropriate. The private sector partners are those that are interacting commercially with the char households, providing access to goods and services and/or purchasing char products. The sub-contractors are consulting firms and local NGOs with whom M4C cooperates in program implementation

⁴ Taken from a presentation made by Tahmid Arif, MRM Manager M4C on the DCED Standard in Project Management, used for a DCED webinar in March 2015.

Note on M4C's Qualitative Information Collection

In addition to collecting data using these monitoring tools, M4C also collects qualitative information in order to track the quality of implementation and the nature and depth of change. M4C has introduced a practice whereby, after every field visit, the relevant staff member has to write a short email describing his or her findings. These mostly consist of anecdotes, observations and qualitative information. The information from the emails are brought together at the end of the month and the qualitative findings are shared in the monthly progress report and discussed in M4C's regular monthly planning meetings. Sometimes, when a story is particularly interesting, M4C records the story in the form of a short case study.

The tools below collect primarily quantitative information.

4.1 Market Feedback Report Tool

The Market Feedback Report Tool was prepared to monitor the sales of agro-input retailers and purchasing farmers. In January 2013, some staff from the M4C team went to Kurigram District in northern Bangladesh and spoke to a Market Promotion Officer in charge of promoting inputs for one of their partners, an agricultural input company. M4C had worked with that particular partner to promote better use of quality inputs (seeds, fertilizers and pesticides) in chars. M4C supported the agricultural input company to train retailers and farmers on the use of inputs with the expectation that they would, in turn, pass on the information to other farmers. In the meeting with M4C, the Market Promotion Officer provided information regarding the uptake of inputs in chars. The M4C team realized that even the input company relied on this informal means of collecting information and that there was no formal structure for collecting feedback on char farmers' early responses to new agricultural inputs. The M4C team realized that useful information on the uptake of inputs could be gathered before the impact assessment scheduled for June.

It is common practice in M4C that when any team member develops a new idea to help the project, it is discussed in the monthly planning meetings. So in the next meeting, the team that went to Kurigram District suggested that M4C should create a structure to collect regular feedback from market players on the adoption of new agro-inputs.

In response, the team came up with the Market Feedback Report Tool. This tool helps M4C monitor interventions designed to increase char farmers' crop yields through appropriate use of better agricultural inputs. The tool not only shows the extent to which farmers are adopting the inputs but also provides information on the likely sustainability of the business model. The following information is collected:

- changes in knowledge, behavior and practice of retailers and farmers;
- perceptions of retailers and farmers about input companies;
- supplies of products to the chars;
- business status of agricultural input companies in terms of numbers of retailers who carry their products and client farmers in chars.

The information is not only useful for M4C to track progress but also useful for partner companies to monitor their own businesses. Information is collected every six months, and later cross-checked with data from an early impact assessment and final impact assessment.

The Market Feedback Report Tool has been useful for informing various important decisions. For instance, in one case the information indicated that, while a particular agricultural input company was promoting its products heavily, they did not have a good distribution network. This feedback was immediately shared with the partner company and the team encouraged the company to put more effort into reaching retailers. On another occasion, information from the Market Feedback Report Tool enabled M4C to show an agricultural input company how much its own sales had increased and thus convince them to pay for a greater share of intervention costs. A sample Market Feedback Report Tool can be found [here](#).

Tip 1:

In order to save time, M4C involves Market Promotion Officers of agricultural input companies in data collection. The Market Promotion Officers visit chars extensively during the cropping season, so they do not need to make a separate visit to collect information. An M4C team member interviews the Market Promotion Officers who gather information during their char visits. This practice also ensures that in future the companies have the capacity to collect such information, which is also useful for their business planning.

4.2 Demo Tracker Tool



Many interventions in M4C have demonstration plots in order to promote particular products or services and cultivation practices. The demo plots are thought to be a more 'hands-on', teaching by doing approach, compared to other promotional strategies. Thus, M4C need to know whether these demo plots are effective in reaching farmers and changing their knowledge and practice.

When M4C first started implementation, monitoring of demo plots was done on an *ad hoc* basis. Information was only collected in a structured way during the early impact assessments, after a season had passed. In 2013 and 2014, when M4C's activities increased significantly, the team realized that it was vital for them to know whether these activities were leading to the desired results *while* they were being carried out. Otherwise, it was too late to rectify problems with the demo plots or use them as a basis for scaling up.

Tip 2:

In order to save time, M4C shares the responsibility for data collection for the Demo Tracker Tool with their sub-contractors and the Market Promotion Officers of the agricultural input companies. Data is collected using the same table that is filled in later in MS Excel. Separate visits aren't made for data collection, but rather data is collected when team members visit chars to oversee intervention implementation.

In response, M4C developed the Demo Trackers Tool. This tool captures the status of demonstration plots, costs incurred, and benefits at the time of the harvest. Using this tool, M4C collects the following information:

- name, contact for each demonstration farmer;
- cultivation method (seeds, pesticides, micro-nutrients used);
- production costs, yields, revenue and profits from demo plots.

The intervention implementation team is responsible for ensuring the data is collected during the cultivation season and they share the actual data collection with partners (see Tip

2). Data from the Demo Tracker Tool tables are later compared with findings from the impact assessment to triangulate findings.

The M4C team has used findings from the Demo Tracker Tool to help make decisions. For instance, M4C once stopped working with an agricultural input company, because the chili seed that they promoted did not yield the promised results. Information from the Demo Tracker Tool is also shared with private partners to inform decisions on where to focus efforts. For instance, M4C has expanded work with several private sector partners whose products yield good results. A sample Demo Tracker Tool can be found [here](#).

4.3 Cost Benefit Analysis Tool

The Cost Benefit Analysis Tool extracts data from the Demo Tracker Tool to understand whether the promoted inputs and cultivation practices in the demonstrations have made a difference to the profits of the demo farmers. The Cost Benefit Analysis Tool is only used at the end of the season, as it requires completed data from the Demo Tracker Tool. It summarizes the following information:

- average yields, costs, product prices, revenues and profits per crop per individual private partner company;
- a brief analysis of the findings on yields, costs, prices and profits.

Tip 3:

The data does not need to be entered separately for the Cost Benefit Analysis Tool. It is linked to the Demo Tracker Tool, so that it extracts data from it automatically. This data is combined with additional field data to yield the summary Cost Benefit Analysis Tool.

The Cost Benefit Analysis Tool gives an overall picture of changes resulting from working with a particular private partner on a particular product and/or service, rather than analyzing individual demonstration plots. The aggregate information makes a clearer case for assessing the work with a particular company. This tool does not require much additional work as it automatically extracts the information from the Demo Tracker Tool.

The Cost Benefit Analysis Tool is very helpful because it allows the team to analyze the profits of demo farmers and to see why profits have changed. This provides an indication of what changes other farmers might experience. For example, costs might be lower than before, because lower quantities of pesticides were used. The M4C team uses the Cost Benefit Analysis Tool regularly to analyze whether work with partners has been effective and to determine how to proceed with future interventions. For example, the Cost Benefit Analysis Tool for one particular input company showed that, on average, demonstration farmers ended up paying much less for paid labor because the company's herbicide was very effective. Prior to this finding, the partner business was focused on the mainland, rather than the chars. When this finding was communicated, the partner put more effort in promoting the herbicide in chars as he realized this could be a new market for the company. A sample Cost Benefit Analysis Tool can be found [here](#).

4.4 Sourcing Report Tool

The Sourcing Report Tool allows M4C to monitor the volume of produce that traders and contractors source from farmers in chars and supply to processing companies. The tool also monitors added value and profits for traders and contractors. The tool is used in interventions where the traders and contractors provide information to contracted and pre-selected char farmers on cultivation and post-harvest methods and then buy products from them. The traders and contractors benefit from a guaranteed supply of quality products, while the farmers are assured of sales at a market price.



Initially, M4C planned to assess the interventions only during impact assessments. However, impact assessments only interview a sample of traders and contractors, on the basis of which results are extrapolated for the rest of the traders and contractors. M4C decided that information from a sample would not give a sufficiently complete picture of results in the context of chars. A simple format for collecting this information regularly could gather important information on progress, which could be cross-checked later during impact assessment.

In response, the team designed a Sourcing Report Tool that collects the following information:

- name and contact of each contractor/trader;
- number of char farmers they purchased from, volume purchased, price paid and total value of purchase;
- volume of supply from the contractor/trader to a company/larger trader on the mainland.

The Sourcing Report Tool is filled out monthly during the harvest season, which lasts from two to three months. Collecting data during the harvest season helps to ensure that all data is correctly recorded. The information collected from the Sourcing Report Tool is later used during impact assessment to estimate the number of farmers reached, along with prices paid to them, etc. During impact assessment the information is cross-checked with farmers to see whether they did indeed receive the reported prices from traders/contractors.

Tip 4:

M4C shares the responsibility of data collection for the Sourcing Report Tool with their sub-contractors. Contractors and traders are relatively bigger businesses that keep records of sales. Thus, the information for the Sourcing Report Tool can easily be collected with one trip or phone call.

Monitoring contractors and traders helps M4C to track whether they are doing good business in chars and to help them with further activities and interventions to boost

business. For instance, using data from the Sourcing Report Tool, M4C convinced a big agro-processing company to source red chilies from the char traders. In another instance, the Sourcing Report Tool showed that traders weren't buying many chilies from char farmers. Further investigation revealed that it was expensive for traders to buy from chars because the traders didn't have enough capital to buy in bulk. It was too expensive to pay high transport costs to go to the chars, and then buy in small quantities. M4C is thus planning to link traders with a microfinance institute to help them bulk buy from chars. A sample Sourcing Report Tool can be found [here](#).

4.5 Farmers Meeting Outreach Tool

The Farmers Meeting Outreach Tool is used to monitor the number of farmers reached through farmers' meetings and trainings by different public and private sector partners. While M4C previously noted these figures during activities, they were not recorded systematically, thus making it difficult to find and aggregate the information.



In response, M4C came up with a format to collect data on:

- the number of meetings conducted, segregated by sector and partner;
- the number of farmers who attended each meeting (male and female);
- comments on the likely overlap of farmers between the meetings.

The Market Promotion Officers from the agricultural input companies help M4C to collect this information. Part of the Market Promotion Officers' responsibilities is to monitor these meetings, so they can easily fill in information on how many people attend and the likely overlap of the participating farmers with other meetings.

Tip 5:

The M4C Monitoring and Results Measurement Team can easily compile the Farmers Meeting Outreach Tool monthly by checking on the monthly progress report presentations and MS Excel file where all the numbers are aggregated. The Implementation Team makes monthly presentations where they report on the number of farmers trained or reached through meetings (among other things). The MRM team uses these figures to compile the data for the Farmer Meeting Outreach Tool.

The M4C team uses the findings from the Farmers Meeting Outreach Tool to check progress towards targets and to help set targets for the annual business plan. Information on outreach to farmers through meetings and trainings provides information on the success of these activities, and provides some early indications of the likely number of farmers who will use and benefit from particular products, services or markets. It also helps the program to monitor the inclusion of female participants. A sample Farmers Meeting Outreach Tool can be found [here](#).

4.6 Progress Report for Sales and Service Centers Tool

A common problem faced by char farmers is that they are unable to purchase products or services, or even make sales, because they do not have enough bulk. To mitigate this problem, M4C often helps in organizing farmers into producer groups and then, where feasible, enabling them to form a sales and service center to buy or sell in bulk. The performance of the sales and service centers, as well as their sustainability, is often a key link in enabling char farmers to purchase inputs and services and sell their crops.

The Progress Report for Sales and Service Center Tool was created as a means to monitor the business performance of the sales and service centers. As with the Sourcing Report Tool, putting this information together in one format helps the program to ascertain whether the individual sales and service centers are performing adequately. In particular, the Progress Report for Sales and Service Center Tool collects the following information:

- activity per sales and service center (collective buying, collective selling, services offered, etc.);
- number of member farmers per sales and service center;
- business performance per sales and service center (volume and value of transactions, transaction costs, income of sales and service center).

Tip 6:

M4C saves time by delegating information collection to the sales and service center managers. The information for the progress report is maintained by the sales and service centers and collected monthly throughout the season by the implementation team when they visit the sales and service centers. Keeping track of their own progress motivates the members of the sales and service centers to expand their work. On the other hand, with little effort M4C collects vital information to ensure that the sales and service centers are running effectively.

The M4C team uses findings from the Progress Report for Sales and Service Center Tool to help gauge how well markets are working for char farmers. This helps M4C determine when and how to take remedial action if markets are not developing. For example, when sales of maize from chars seemed low, M4C tried to boost transactions by linking large trading companies with smaller traders so that the large companies could buy maize from chars through the smaller traders. A sample Progress Report for Sales and Service Center Tool can be found [here](#).

5 Analyzing Information from Monitoring

The section above discusses how the individual tools are implemented, but the real benefit lies in analyzing the information to inform program decision-making. The M4C team does this by discussing the findings from the tools in their monthly planning meetings. In preparation for the monthly planning meetings, the implementation team, with help from the MRM team, goes through the monitoring tools and distills all the important information that may be relevant for guiding decisions. They present the information in the form of a power point presentation for the team to discuss at the meeting. Figure 2 shows example slides taken from a monthly meeting, where findings from the monitoring tools at the activity level are shared as 'Hits' and 'Misses' and findings at higher results levels are shared as 'Observations.' Once presented, the findings are discussed in detail so that they can inform decision-making.

Figure 2: Presenting Monitoring Information

HITS	
Topics	Updates
Agricultural Input Company Activities	<p>FFD - Chilli</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed Farmer Field Day (FFD) of JS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACCL (14/14) with 2,220 participants (28% Female) PCL (10/10) with 642 participants (36% Female) NAAFCO (16/16) with 1,850 participants (49% Female) MAL (6/14) with 733 participants (89% Female) <p>FFD- Onion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACCL completed all planned FFDs (2/2) of Jamalpur with 308 participants (3% Female) <p>Demo plots with Signboard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signboards of AICs have been installed in All Maize, Chilli demo plots. Signboards in 81 out of 87 Rice demo plots have been installed and the rest will be installed by 1st week of April'15.
MISSES	
Topics	Updates
AIC Activities	<p>In Sirajganj</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NAFFCO did not install any Signboard in Rice demo plots. <p>In Jamalpur</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACI and PCL missed 8 (4+4) rice farmer meetings ACI missed 1 chilli Farmer Field Day
PG Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual planning workshop in One SSC of Sirajganj could not be conducted yet due to Political unrest. Annual business planning meeting of 3 SSCs at Jamalpur were postponed.
Transport	Installation of Floating Landing Station at Megai ghat, Kazipur has been delayed due to political unrest.
Handicrafts	Dhaka Handicraft completed skills training of 94 out of 150 and could not enroll 6 in the last month.
OBSERVATIONS	
Topics	Updates
Impacts	<p>In Jamalpur</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> After getting information from PG meeting 386 PG members have purchased DMs (Tarpaulin 62 pieces, Net 64 pieces, Polythene 260 pieces). 53 farmers have purchased 1,325 kg NAFFCO mixed fertilizer for jute cultivation which worth BDT 22,525. One SSC member Mr. Kanu Mondal from Damorpur SSC bought maize shelling machine
Systemic Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Md. Sona Mia, MC expanded his business after joining with M4C and hired two <i>chatalis</i> for drying maize. Due to business opportunity shelling service providers are going to the remote chars and providing service. Some maize contractors (Alamin and Nowshad) are purchasing maize for the producers and selling directly to the feed mills

6 The Benefits of Monitoring for M4C

The M4C team relies heavily on the tools discussed above in steering their interventions. In fact, the tools fall under the responsibility of the intervention implementation teams, rather than the results measurement specialists, and are institutionalized within M4C's regular operating processes.

M4C acknowledges that considerable work is required to get the information for the monitoring tools. However they feel that the benefits outweigh the additional work, because it saves them from making unnecessary mistakes and continuing implementation of unproductive activities. The tools have helped the M4C team to structure monitoring so that it is effective and efficient. The challenges of monitoring in the chars have pushed M4C to come up with ways to make the information collection manageable, as discussed in Section 4 above. Moreover the tools have been fine-tuned while being implemented to make them as user-friendly as possible. Now, the M4C team feels that their tools make a significant contribution to their ability to maximize positive impacts for char households with the time and money available.

7 Annexes

1 PowerPoint Presentation on M4C_

www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2610

2 Market Feedback Report Tool.

www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2611

3 Demo Tracker Tool

www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2612

4 Cost Benefit Analysis Tool

www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2613

5 Sourcing Report Tool

www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2614

6 Farmers Meeting Outreach Tool

www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2615

7 Progress Report for Sales and Service Center Tool

www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2616