

Monitoring the EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health – some thoughts for the European alcohol and health Forum 13.11.08

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The EU Platform and RAND's involvement

- The EU Platform was established in 2005 to create a forum for actors at European level who can commit their membership to engage in concrete actions designed to contain or reverse current trends in nutrition, overweight and obesity and their related health problems.
- RAND Europe was engaged in late 2006 to oversee the annual monitoring process for the Platform.
- Our involvement with the Platform has continued into 2008 and beyond.
- We have now contributed to two 'cycles' of monitoring the Platform, which has led to two Monitoring Progress Reports. Our sense is that many lessons have been made and improvements delivered by Platform members.

The EU Platform – some discussion points for the alcohol and health Forum

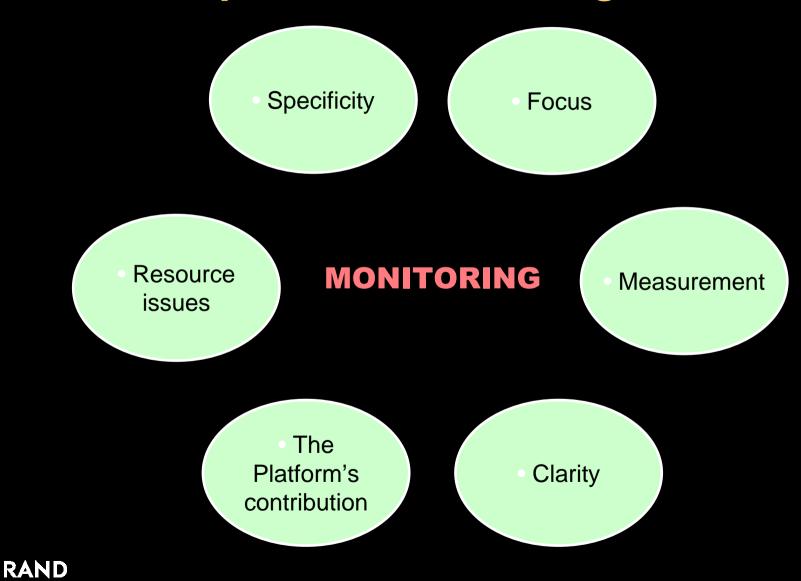
- The Platform was an innovative approach and had to 'invent' ways of working and a number of lessons have been learnt.
 The Forum has the opportunity to learn from these and equip itself more quickly.
- RAND Europe will bring its experience of completing two cycles of monitoring but recognises that there may be differences.
- In this presentation we focus on the particular issues concerning how commitment holders might monitor their activities but we are also happy to engage in a wider discussion about assessing the impact of the Forum as a whole.

What were we asked to do with the Platform?

• Three main functions:

- Compiling the achievements of the Platform in the previous year, as presented in Platform members' monitoring reports.
- Analysing the "quality" of Platform members' monitoring practices
- Offering advice on monitoring to Platform members, if requested

Crucial aspects of monitoring for Members



Specificity

- Commitments should be connected to specific actions and timeframes.
- Commitments should avoid 'feel-good' but unclear aims and the psychological comfort of ambiguity. The entirely appropriate language of marketing and lobbying might interfere with the peculiar language of monitoring.
- Progress is hard to measure with objectives to be achieved only at some indeterminate point in the future.

KEY QUESTION

Does the form state exactly **what** the commitment aims to do, **how** it will be done, and by **when** its actions will be accomplished?

Focus

 Members need to include an appropriate level of information in their monitoring forms. Some forms did not include information that was vital to helping us comprehend the actions in question.

Example: One form stated the cost and timescale of a programme but not what the programme actually entailed.

- Other forms contained much general information that was irrelevant to the actual commitment to be monitored. Often this was statements about the Member's general activities and goals.
- Quantitative data may need contextual information to be interpreted.

Example: it is difficult to assess the significance of a 40% market share if the size and value of the market is not stated.

KEY QUESTION

Does the form include (only) **relevant information** and provide necessary contextual information so a reader can judge the scale of a commitment's impacts?

Measurement

- Successfully identifying measurable inputs and outputs is key to monitoring. However, this should not inhibit organisations from pursuing worthwhile objectives that are difficult to measure.
- It aids monitoring if forms include figures showing progress over time.
 It aids it still further if there is data showing wider trends.
- Initially some of the costs included in certain forms appeared to be spurious. Sometimes the reporting of results were not verifiable.

Example: survey results that did not indicate the number of responses on which these results were based.

KEY QUESTION

Does the form include (preferably quantitative) verifiable data that have been measured accurately and at appropriate intervals, and which are framed in an understandable manner?

Clarity

- Monitoring forms should display simply and clearly what are the intended links between objectives, inputs, outputs and outcomes. This allows lessons to be learned as well as achievements to be celebrated. It helps to improve future action as well as prove past actions.
- To aid this there are appropriate sections in the monitoring form template.
- However, many forms did not provide clear links or separate out activities in this way and appeared to be unsure about what these terms mean.
- But we recognise certain commitments are more difficult to monitor because they cover large areas or contain many different actions. In these cases, it is advisable to think of multiple (interlocking) commitments each with more specific objectives to aid monitoring.

KEY QUESTION

Does the form allow the reader to understand the commitment fully? Does the form offer clear links between objectives, inputs, outputs and outcomes (if present)?

The Platform's contribution

- Since these commitments are part of the Platform, it may be useful for monitoring forms to pinpoint exactly how the Platform has helped or enabled a commitment's achievements. This supports learning about how helpful (or not) the Platform is as a means to improve the lives of citizens.
- This means we can assess the Platform's impact more accurately, since
 it might be possible to establish that an action would not have
 happened without the Platform's support, or would have had less
 success. This information will aid any future evaluation of the
 Platform's success.
- Most forms did not outline the Platform's contribution.

KEY QUESTION

Does the form state how the Platform contributed to the commitment?

Resource issues and the burden of monitoring

- Monitoring requires dedicated resources to function properly.
 These resources need not take the form of money (e.g. paid to external assessors). They could be time commitments made by staff.
- Good results can be achieved by rigorously applying the basic principles of monitoring to your commitment: realistic targets, tracking of inputs, accurate measurement of outputs. The burden is reduced by connecting management information to monitoring information. The burden and anxiety is maximised by waiting until the end of each year to begin to retrospectively sweep up data to demonstrate impact.
- The costs of monitoring is part of the costs of participating in the Forum but can be <u>minimised of factored in from the start.</u>

KEY QUESTION

Are you dedicating the necessary resources and attention to ensuring that the actions and achievements of your commitments are being communicated properly?

Overall comments and suggestions for alcohol Forum

- Some Platform Members have put in great effort to create and improve monitoring practices, and have displayed impressive progress. But some monitoring reports display much less progress.
- Monitoring activities to support external accountability and learning might often be different to the sorts of monitoring that organisations conventionally do for internal purposes. This is not more difficult than the many complex tasks organisations routinely perform but it requires a distinctive 'mindset'.
- However, adopting better monitoring practices is not a large or difficult undertaking and if it is early on connected to internal business management information the additional burden can be very limited. Forum members have this opportunity.
- In today's presentation we have focused on the monitoring of individual commitments. There is another discussion to be had on monitoring the impact of the Platform (and Forum) as a whole.

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