

Exploring Factors Affecting the Utilization of Monitoring and Evaluation Data in Decision-Making and Accountability: Perspectives from Monitoring and Evaluation Professionals in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors affecting monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data utilization in decision-making and accountability from the perspectives of M&E professionals in Tanzania. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, and data were collected through a questionnaire in July 2024 from 106 respondents. Data analysis, which included descriptive statistics, was conducted using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. The key factors identified as influencing M&E data utilization are knowledge and skills, organizational culture and support, data quality and accessibility, and institutional and policy framework. Based on these findings, it is recommended that projects and organizations implement appropriate measures to create an environment that promotes effective M&E data utilization.

Keywords: Monitoring and evaluation data, data utilization, informed decision-making, accountability.

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Introduction

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data is a powerful tool that serves multiple purposes, including improving project performance, ensuring accountability, informing decision-making, and supporting sustainability. When utilized effectively, it can lead to more successful and impactful projects. Consequently, organizations or projects allocate significant resources—typically between 3–15 percent of the total budget—along with personnel, time, technology, and infrastructure to design, implement, and manage M&E systems for data generation. While much has been written about M&E data utilization (e.g., Patton, 2005; Nutley & Li, 2018, Rahil, 2017, Taylor & Balloch, 2005, Ferrara, 2022, Yarbrough *et al.* 2011, Hayman, 2013, Newcomer *et al.* 2023, and Cartwright, & Hardie,2012), there is limited information on the factors affecting the use of M&E data in decision-making and accountability.

Understanding the factors affecting monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data utilization offers several advantages. It is a critical step toward developing strategies that promote the use of M&E data in decision-making, accountability, and learning from development interventions. Additionally, it helps to strengthen M&E systems to ensure they generate and disseminate actionable data. Like many fields, M&E faces challenges that impact data utilization, as highlighted by researchers such as Nguliki (2018), Mathayo & Kinyina (2022), Matsiliza (2018), and Dobi (2012). This paper presents findings on the factors affecting M&E data utilization in decision-making and accountability from the perspectives of M&E professionals in Tanzania.

Uses of Monitoring and Evaluation Data

According to Simister (2018), monitoring and evaluation information can be utilized in various ways, with the three most common being learning, accountability, and project or program management. Simister emphasizes the importance of clearly identifying from the start of a project or program who needs to use M&E information, as well as when and how they will use it. Early engagement with potential users increases the likelihood that M&E information will be effectively utilized later on. Project stakeholders—including beneficiaries, implementers, partners, donors, authorities (e.g., local/central government), media, and the public—each have different uses for M&E data. In general, the various uses of M&E data include the following:

- i. *Informed Decision-Making:* Project managers and stakeholders utilize M&E data to make informed decisions regarding resource allocation, program adjustments, and policy changes. This ensures that decisions are grounded in actual data, rather than assumptions or guesswork.
- ii. *Accountability and Transparency:* M&E data is frequently used to report to donors, funders, and other stakeholders, demonstrating how resources have been utilized and

what has been accomplished. This enhances accountability and fosters trust with partners and beneficiaries.

- iii. *Learning and Improvement:* By analyzing M&E data, organizations can identify what worked well and what didn't, enabling continuous improvement. Lessons learned can be documented and applied to future projects, leading to better outcomes and more effective programs. Additionally, M&E data can showcase project successes, best practices, and innovations utilized during implementation.
- iv. *Performance Assessment:* M&E data helps assess whether a project is on track, identify areas where performance may be lagging, and recognize achievements. This enables timely interventions and adjustments, ultimately ensuring the project's success.
- v. *Impact Evaluation:* M&E data helps in understanding the broader impact of a project on the target population or area. It includes assessing changes in behavior, social and economic conditions, and overall well-being resulting from the project.
- vi. *Resource Optimization:* M&E data can highlight areas where resources are underutilized or where costs can be reduced without compromising quality. This facilitates better budgeting and resource management.
- vii. *Reporting and Compliance:* Many projects, particularly those funded by external donors, have strict reporting requirements. M&E data is crucial for meeting these obligations, ensuring compliance with donor expectations, and securing continued funding.
- viii. *Risk Management:* M&E data can reveal emerging risks or challenges that might derail a project. By identifying these risks early, project managers can take proactive steps to address them, thereby minimizing potential negative impacts.
- ix. *Advocacy and Policy Influence:* Well-documented M&E data can be instrumental in advocating for policy changes or gaining support for scaling up successful interventions. It provides robust evidence to back up claims and can be persuasive in influencing decision-makers.
- x. *Stakeholder Engagement:* Sharing M&E data with stakeholders helps maintain their involvement and ensures that their needs and concerns are addressed. It fosters ownership collaboration and strengthens the relationship between the project team and its stakeholders.

- xi. *Sustainability Planning:* M&E data can inform strategies to ensure that the benefits of a project continue after funding ends. This includes identifying successful approaches that can be institutionalized or scaled up.
- xii. *Benchmarking and Comparison:* M&E data allows organizations to compare their project's performance with industry standards, previous projects, or other organizations' projects. This comparison provides insights into relative performance and identifies areas for improvement.
- xiii. *Communication and Public Relations:* M&E data can be utilized in communication materials, such as reports, case studies, and social media, to showcase the project's impact. This not only enhances the organization's reputation but also helps attract further support.

Several organizations often design M&E systems without adequately considering how the information will be used afterward. This approach is flawed. Rick Davies (1996) highlights a common issue: many M&E systems involve significant effort and enthusiasm in their setup, but less attention is given to data generation and analysis, and even less to the actual use of the information. To prevent this outcome, organizations must clearly define: who will use the M&E information; what it will be used for; when it will be needed; and how it will be utilized. Engaging with potential users as early as possible helps assess their needs and increases the likelihood that M&E information will be effectively used later on (Simister, 2018).

Planning for the dissemination and use of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data is crucial to promote its effective utilization. M&E data generation is just the first step in the data utilization value chain, which also includes dissemination, data use, and data storage. Insufficient use of M&E data can lead to resource wastage and missed opportunities for data-driven, evidence-based decision-making, accountability, and learning. Numerous sources emphasize the low usage of M&E data in decision-making and accountability (Patton, 2005).

Objective

This study aims to explore the factors affecting the utilization of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data in decision-making and accountability. The findings are based on the perspectives of M&E professionals in Tanzania. Consequently, this paper contributes to promoting data-driven, evidence-based, and informed decision-making, accountability, and learning in development projects and programs within Tanzania. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the major factors affecting the utilization of monitoring and evaluation data.

2. To determine the extent of M&E data utilization in projects and programs.
3. To suggest recommendations for enhancing the utilization of M&E data.

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, including the population and sampling methods, data collection and analysis processes, and the profile of respondents who participated in the study. It provides a rationale for the methodological choices made and details the research ethics observed, such as consent and confidentiality. Respondents provided informed consent to participate, and personal identity information was not collected. Individual responses were aggregated, ensuring that findings cannot be linked to any specific respondent.

Research design

A cross-sectional quantitative study design was employed to explore the factors affecting the utilization of monitoring and evaluation data in Tanzania. The researcher aimed to understand the current state of data utilization, and thus, a one-time data collection was deemed sufficient to identify the existing factors influencing M&E data utilization in projects and programs across Tanzania.

Population and Sampling

This study targeted monitoring and evaluation (M&E) professionals and practitioners in Tanzania. These M&E experts are involved in the design, implementation, and management of M&E systems. Additionally, they are integral to the management team that utilizes M&E data for data-driven, evidence-based decision-making, accountability, and learning. Thus, M&E experts are both on the supply side, as they generate the data, and on the demand side, as they use the data. Given their dual role, the study population is expected to provide rich insights into the factors affecting the utilization of M&E data.

Since the population size of monitoring and evaluation professionals and practitioners in Tanzania is unknown, the study utilized purposive and convenience sampling methods. Requests for participation were made through various groups and networks of M&E professionals and practitioners, inviting them to volunteer to respond to the study questions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed an eight-question questionnaire designed to capture respondents' profiles, factors affecting M&E data utilization, and their comments. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions to allow for narrative data. Only individuals who are M&E

professionals or practitioners were eligible to participate in the study. The questionnaire was digitized using the Kobo Toolbox platform, and data collection occurred online from July 17th to 26th, 2024. A total of 106 M&E professionals and practitioners in Tanzania participated. Additionally, document review was conducted to gather secondary data on the subject matter, employing a mixed-methods approach in data collection.

After data collection, the study data were organized, collated, cleaned, coded, and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviations, were computed as appropriate. The findings of the study form the basis of this paper.

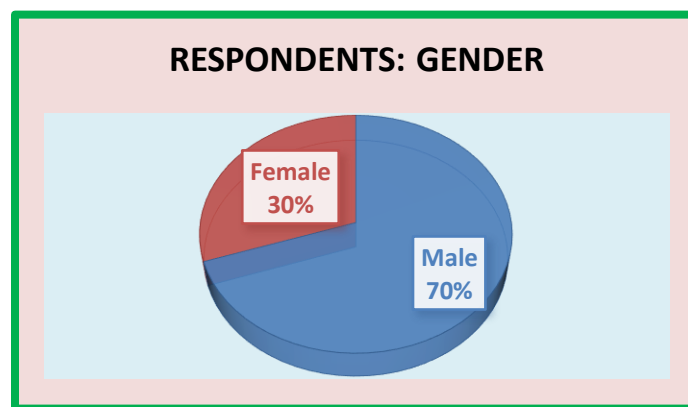
Respondents Profile

The profile of the respondents who participated in the study includes gender, training in monitoring and evaluation, experience in monitoring and evaluation, employers, and level of involvement in M&E activities. The profiles of the study participants are presented below:

Gender

The study included both female and male respondents. Of the total participants, 74 (69.8%) were male, and 32 (30.2%) were female. Figure 1 presents respondents' gender.

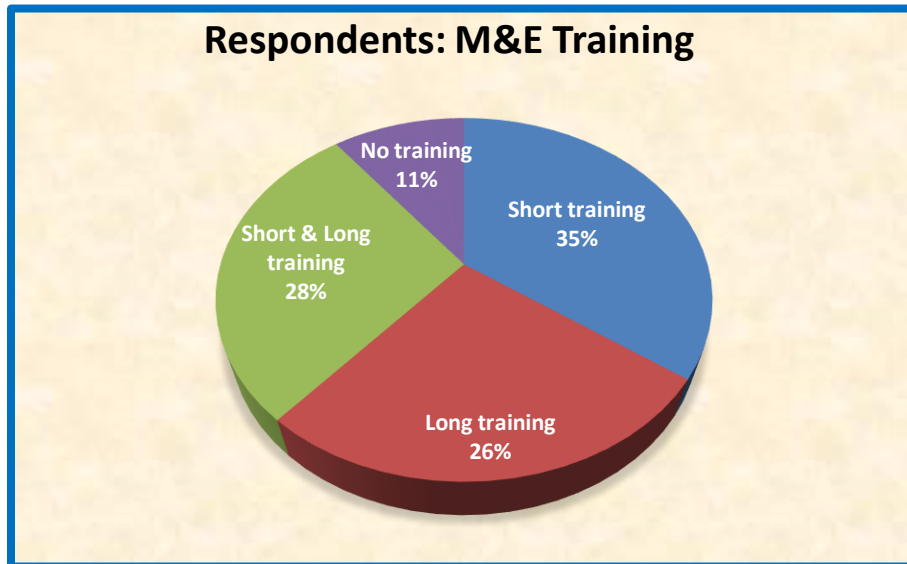
Figure 1: Respondents' gender



Training in monitoring and evaluation

Overall, 90% of the respondents had formal training in monitoring and evaluation. Specifically, 37 (34.9%) had short-term training, 28 (26.4%) had long-term training, 30 (28.3%) had both short and long-term training, and 11 (10.4%) had no formal training in monitoring and evaluation. figure 2 presents M&E training by the respondents

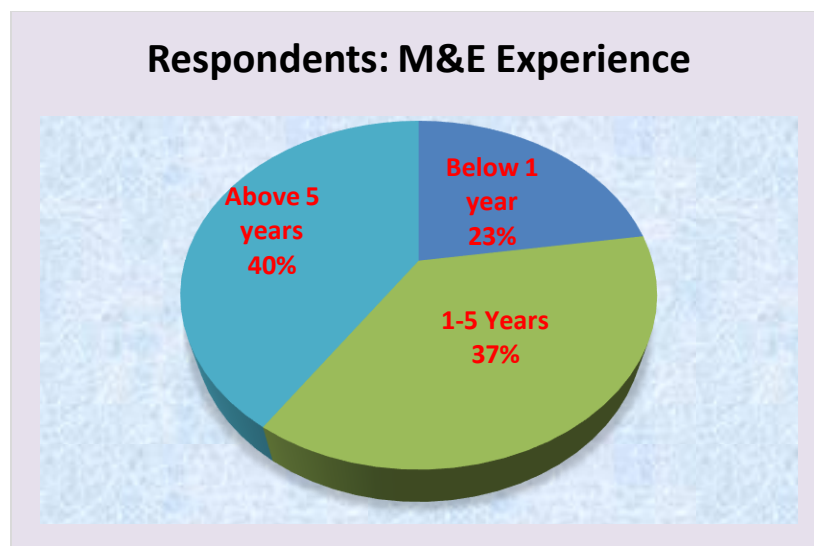
Figure 2: M&E training by the respondents



Experience in Monitoring and evaluation

The majority of respondents had over two years of experience in M&E activities. Specifically, 39 (36.8%) respondents had 2-5 years of experience, and 43 (40.6%) had more than 5 years of experience. In contrast, 24 (22.6%) respondents had less than 1 year of experience in M&E-related activities in Tanzania. Figure 3 presents respondents experience in M&E.

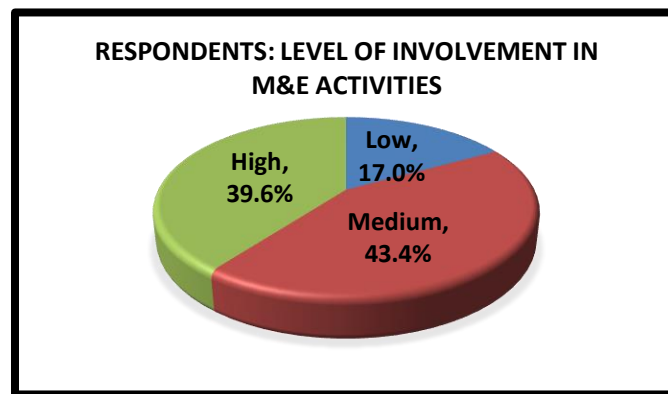
Figure 3: Respondents experience in M&E



Level of involvement in M&E activities

The study aimed to assess the level of involvement in M&E activities in respondents' previous or current occupations. The findings revealed that 18 (17%) respondents had low involvement, 46 (43.4%) had medium involvement, and 42 (39.6%) had high involvement in M&E activities. Figure 4 presents a level of involvement in M&E activities

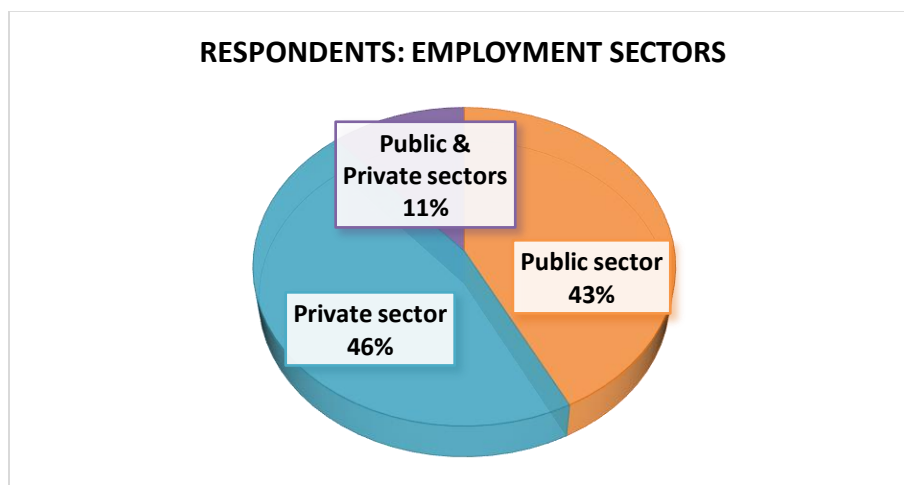
Figure 4: Respondents' involvement in M&E activities



Respondents' employers

Concerning the sectors where respondents were employed in roles related to monitoring and evaluation: 45 (42.5%) had worked in the public sector, 49 (46.2%) had worked in the private sector, and 12 (11.2%) had worked in both the public and private sectors. Figure 5 presents respondents' employment sectors.

Figure 5: Respondents employment sectors



Findings

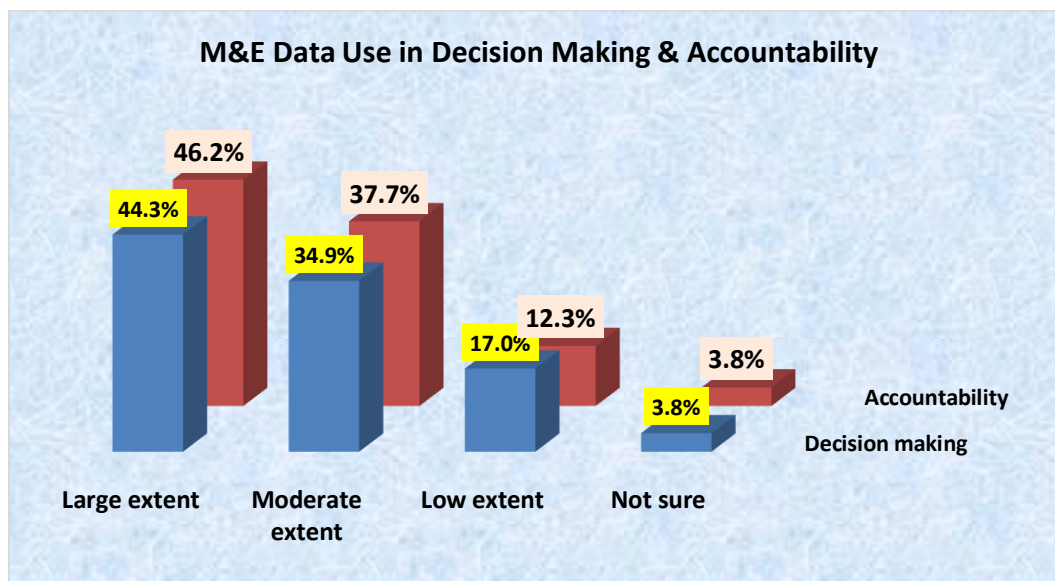
Extent of using M&E data

Decision making: The study findings on the extent to which M&E data is used for decision-making are as follows: 44.3% of respondents indicated that M&E data is used to a large extent for decision-making. 34.9% reported that M&E data is used to a moderate extent. 17% of respondents stated that M&E data is used to a low extent. Additionally, 3.8% of respondents were unsure about the extent of M&E data utilization for decision-making.

Accountability: The study findings on the use of M&E data for accountability are as follows: 46.2% of respondents reported that M&E data is used to a large extent for accountability. 37.7% indicated that M&E data is used to a moderate extent. 12.3% stated that M&E data is used to a low extent for accountability. Additionally, 3.8% of respondents were unsure about the extent of M&E data utilization for accountability.

The findings indicate that the use of M&E data for decision-making and accountability is moderate. To enhance the effectiveness of M&E data utilization, it is crucial to implement policies, strategies, and plans that promote its use. The following figure presents the findings on M&E data utilization in decision-making and accountability from the perspectives of M&E professionals in Tanzania. The figure below presents M&E data use in decision-making & accountability. Figure 6 presents M&E data use in decision making and accountability.

Figure 6: M&E data use in decision-making and accountability



Factors affecting M&E data utilization

The study identified and categorized the factors influencing the utilization of M&E data in decision-making and accountability into four key categories. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which these factors impact the use of M&E data. The factors are detailed as follows:

1. *Knowledge and Skills*: This category examines the level of understanding and expertise that M&E professionals and stakeholders possess regarding data analysis, interpretation, and utilization. It includes factors such as training, experience, and familiarity with M&E tools and techniques.
2. *Organizational Culture and Support*: This category assesses the organizational environment and its support for M&E practices. It includes the presence of a data-driven culture, leadership support, and the allocation of resources for M&E activities.
3. *Data Quality and Accessibility*: This category evaluates the quality and availability of M&E data. It includes aspects such as the accuracy, relevance, reliability, completeness, and timeliness of the data, as well as how easily it can be accessed and utilized.
4. *Institutional and Policy Framework*: This factor considers the policies, procedures, and institutional frameworks that govern M&E practices. It includes the existence of guidelines, regulations, and frameworks that support or hinder the effective use of M&E data.

These factors are crucial for understanding how they influence the effectiveness and efficiency of M&E data utilization in decision-making and accountability processes.

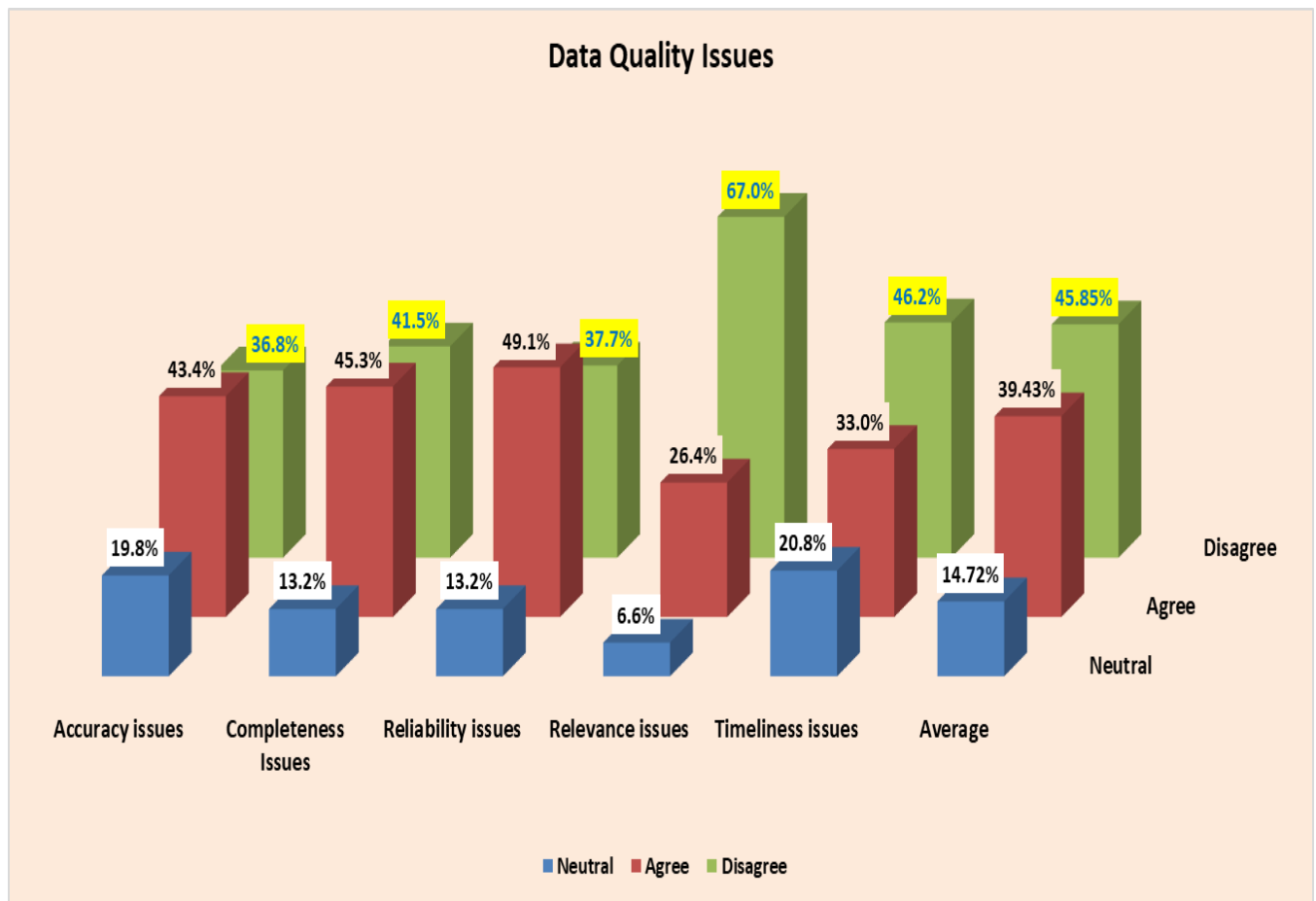
Data Quality and Accessibility

Overall, 39.43% of the respondents agree that data quality issues contribute to the lower utilization of M&E data. Specifically, accuracy, completeness, reliability, and timeliness are identified as key data quality issues impacting M&E data utilization in Tanzania. Conversely, relevance is the only data quality characteristic for which 67% of respondents agree that the importance of M&E data utilization is generally recognized. This suggests that while there are challenges in other aspects of data quality, the relevance of M&E data is well understood and appreciated by stakeholders.

Given the above findings, while the M&E data generated is considered relevant, there are significant gaps, including errors (inaccuracy), missing data (incompleteness), data variations (unreliability), and delays (untimeliness). Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen M&E systems to ensure the generation of high-quality data that can effectively support decision-making and

accountability. The figure below illustrates specific responses regarding quality issues that affect M&E data utilization. Figure 7 presents M&E data issues.

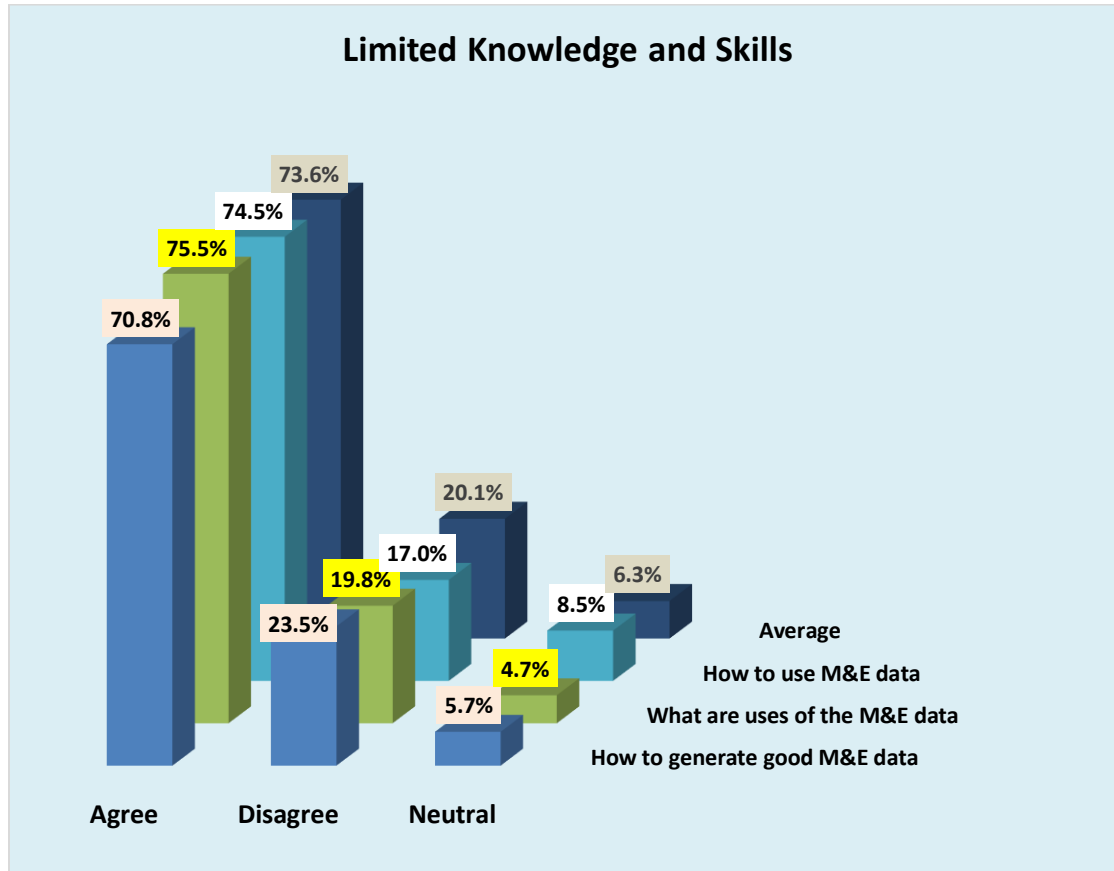
Figure 7: M&E data issues



Knowledge and Skills

The study examined whether limited knowledge is a factor affecting the utilization of M&E data in decision-making and accountability. A significant majority (73.6%) of respondents agree that limited knowledge impacts M&E data utilization. Specifically, this includes a lack of understanding of (i) how to generate quality M&E data, (ii) the uses of M&E data, and (iii) how to use M&E data for decision-making and accountability effectively. The figure below presents findings on limited knowledge of M&E data utilization. Figure 8 presents the M&E knowledge limitation.

Figure 8: Limited knowledge and skills

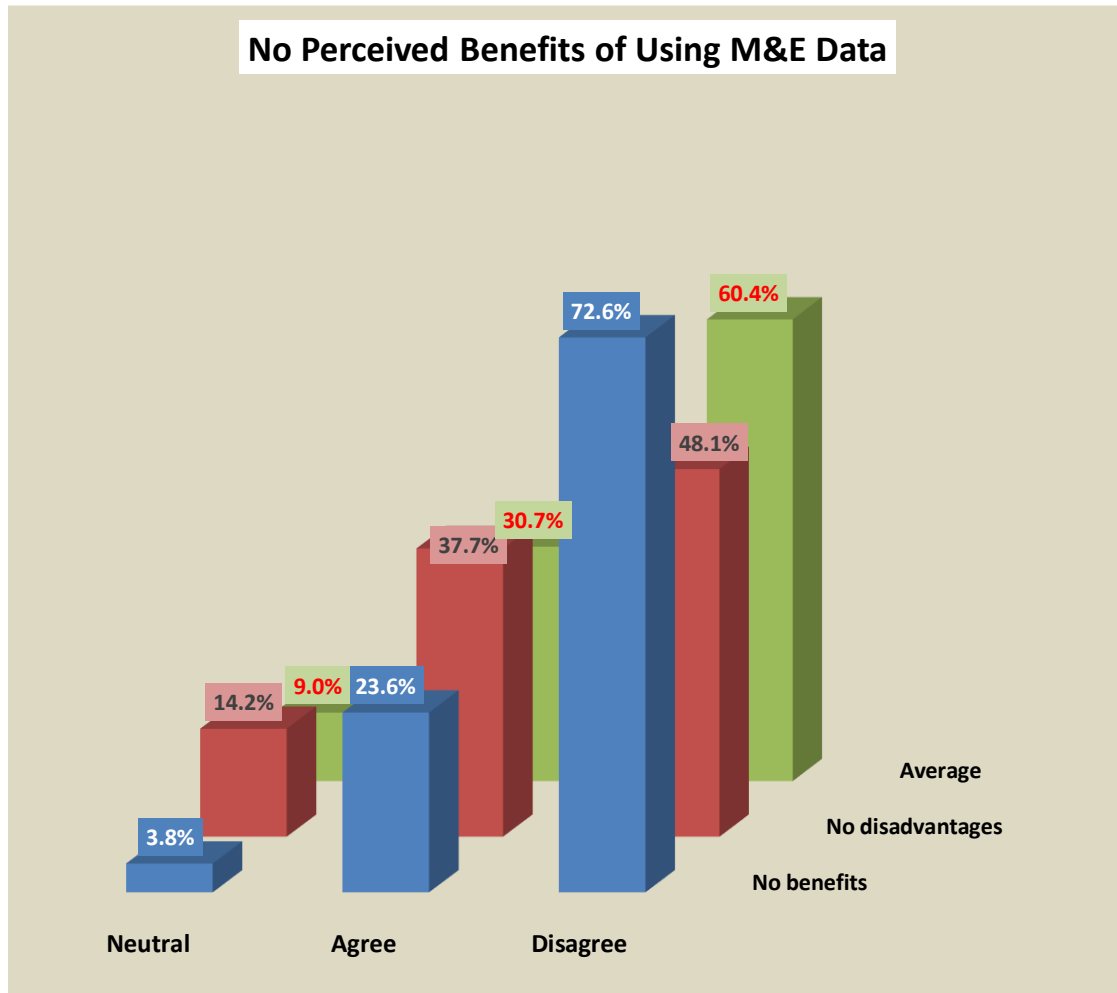


The findings regarding knowledge limitations highlight the critical need for a robust M&E system that not only generates high-quality data but also ensures that skills and knowledge are in place for effective use of M&E data in informed decision-making and accountability. This indicates that organizations should implement policies, strategies, plans, and budgets to create an environment conducive to the utilization of M&E data for informed decision-making and accountability.

Organizational Culture and Support

The benefits of informed decision-making and accountability are often key incentives for increasing the utilization of M&E data. However, the study findings reveal that 23.6% of respondents did not perceive any benefits from using M&E data for informed decision-making and accountability. Similarly, 37.7% of respondents believed that there were no significant disadvantages to not using M&E data for decision-making and accountability. The figure below presents the perception of M&E data utilization benefits. Figure 9 presents perceived benefits.

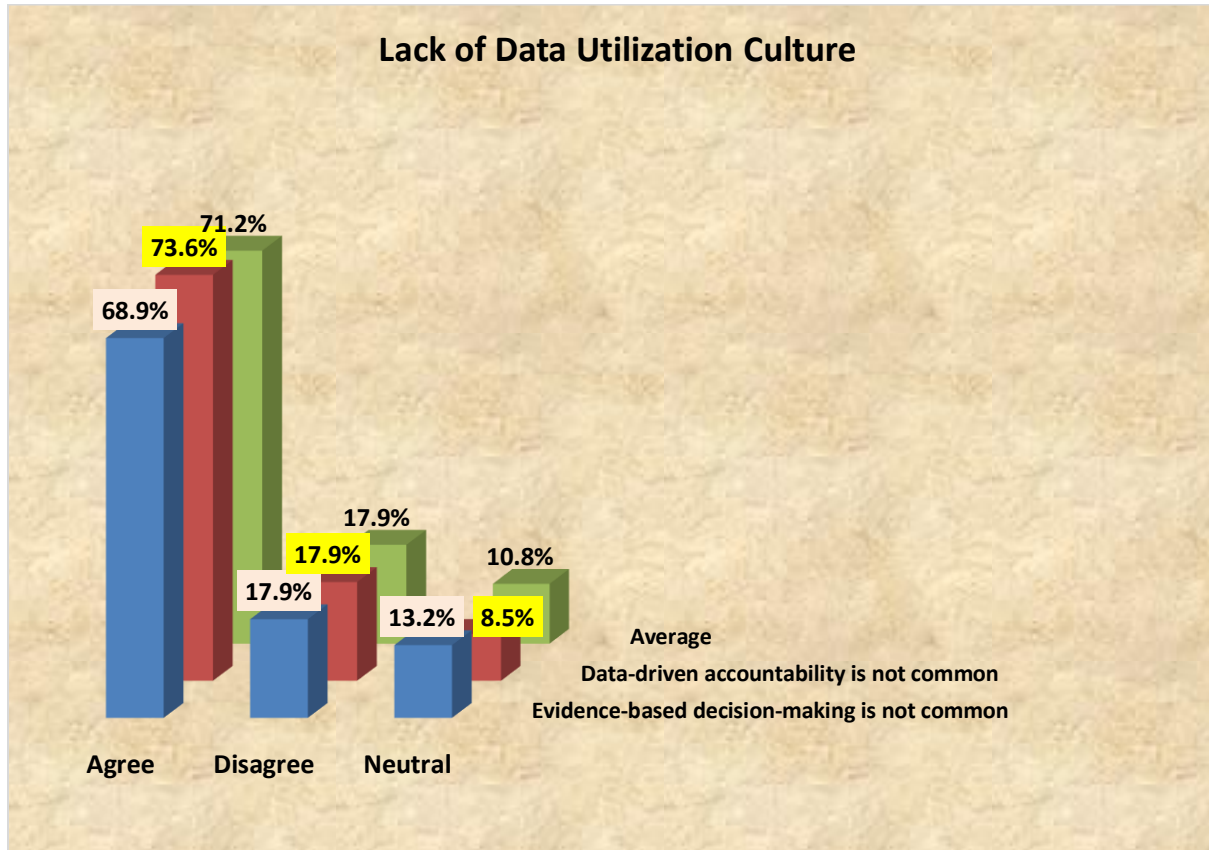
Figure 9: Perception of M&E benefits



Given the findings on the perceived benefits of using M&E data for decision-making and accountability, projects and organizations must enhance awareness and showcase the advantages of M&E data utilization. Additionally, M&E systems should clearly articulate the disadvantages of not employing data-driven, evidence-based decision-making, accountability, and learning.

Routine use of data fosters a culture of data utilization, making it a standard practice in decision-making and accountability. In contrast, without a strong culture of data utilization, M&E data is infrequently used for these purposes. The study findings indicate that 71.2% of respondents agree that evidence-based decision-making and data-driven accountability are not prevalent. The figure below presents findings on the lack of a data utilization culture. Figure 10 presents perception on lack of M&E data utilization culture.

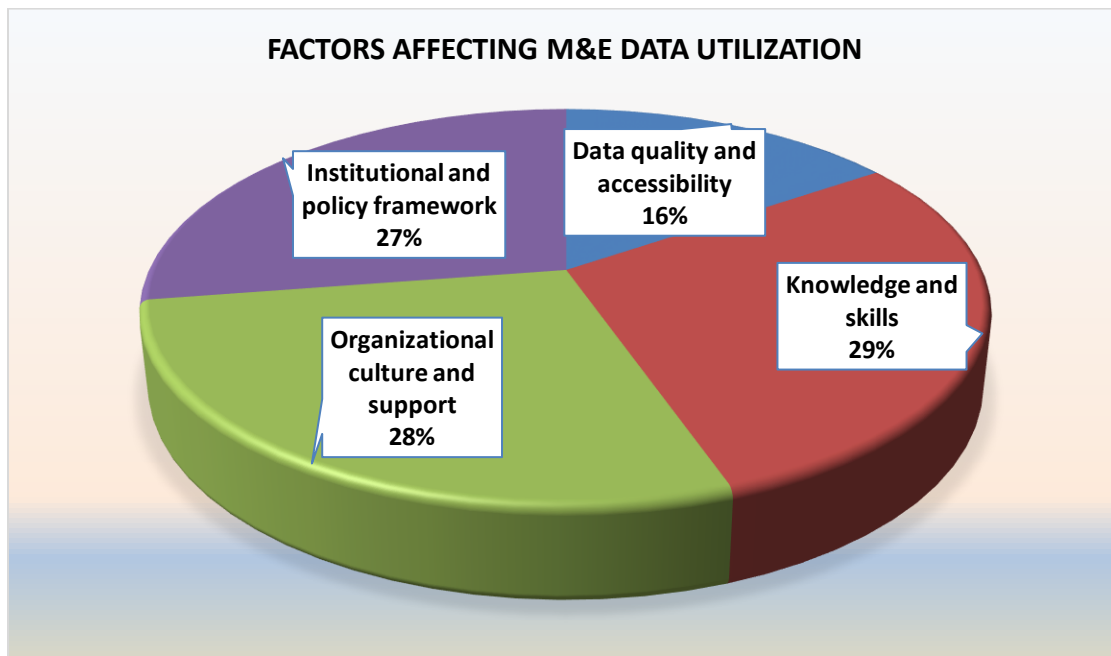
Figure 10: M&E data utilization culture



Creating demand for M&E data is crucial for establishing data utilization as a norm. Based on the findings, projects and organizations should focus on fostering a culture of data-driven, evidence-based decision-making, accountability, and learning. Developing such a culture takes time, so projects and organizations need to implement policies, strategies, and plans that support and nurture a culture of M&E data utilization.

Institutional and Policy Framework

The majority of respondents (80%) indicated that there are no coherent and effectively implemented policies, procedures, and institutional frameworks governing M&E data utilization. Generally, existing M&E policies emphasize data collection and progress reporting but lack a focus on data dissemination and utilization for data-driven, evidence-based decision-making, accountability, and learning. The figure below presents findings on the general status of the factors affecting M&E data utilization. Figure 11 Presents factors affecting M&E data utilization.



When aggregated, findings on the factors affecting M&E data utilization reveal that knowledge and skills, accounting for 29%, are the primary factors influencing M&E data use in decision-making and accountability. Organizational culture and support emerge as the second factor, with a 28% share. The third factor, with 27%, is the institutional and policy framework, which includes the absence of a coherent framework for effectively utilizing M&E data. Lastly, data quality and accessibility contribute 16%, encompassing issues such as accuracy, relevance, reliability, completeness, timeliness, and ease of access and utilization of the data.

Conclusion

This study investigated the factors affecting monitoring and evaluation data utilization in decision-making and accountability from the perspectives of the Monitoring and Evaluation Professionals in Tanzania. Overall, the main factors affecting the utilization of the M&E data for decision-making and accountability are knowledge and skills, organizational culture and support, institutional and policy framework, data quality, and accessibility.

To increase M&E data utilization, it is essential to establish an enabling environment that promotes the quality of M&E data, enhances skills and knowledge, increases perceived benefits, and fosters a culture of data-driven, evidence-based, informed decision-making, accountability, and learning. Achieving this requires that projects and organizations implement supportive policies, strategies, and systems to create such an environment, ensuring that M&E data is effectively utilized in decision-making and accountability processes.

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