



Ethnography for Conducting Research on Large-Scale Monitoring and Evaluation Efforts in the Global South

Melissa Rae Goodnight

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL

Introduction

- Research on evaluation (RoE) can not only facilitate a better understanding of diverse evaluation designs and processes but also investigate the social meaning and consequences of evaluations.
- For the field of evaluation to best serve the public good in a diversity of countries, a more expansive, nuanced and culturally insightful view of evaluation context and theory is essential.
- A crucial approach for developing and promoting better theories and practices is conducting more research on evaluation in Global South countries as a means to 1) study the components and practices of M&E efforts that originate locally; 2) test, refine, and expand current evaluation frameworks and practices for these evaluation contexts; and 3) develop responsively new evaluation theory from the ground.
- India’s unique characteristics as an evaluation context—its geopolitical significance, population’s diversity, and scale of civil society and government—can expand the field’s assessment of current theories and practices that are not only typically derived from Western contexts but also smaller-scale evaluations. Consequently, the following ethnographic case study in India provides a beneficial foundation for an empirical exploration.

Methodology

- A multi-state ethnographic study of a groundbreaking large-scale monitoring and evaluation (M&E) effort in India, called the *Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER) that investigates the rural primary education system.
- The study relied on (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) observations, and (3) document analysis to examine ASER’s purpose and goals, design and measurement choices, implementation, dissemination of findings, and influence.

The Ethnographic Case

ASER relies on thousands of volunteer fieldworkers using simple learning tests and surveys to collect educational data in rural schools and households, and ASER is conducted independently from the government by civil society organizations. ASER has been elevated as a low-cost, citizen-engaged evaluation model and translated to countries throughout the Global South as a solution for closing the global data gap on learning. Such a model evidentially transcends many challenges (e.g., resources, scale, transparency, political interference, and linguistic diversity) with the evaluation and monitoring of public systems in large middle- and low-income countries. ASER is an interesting case for exploring the ethnography of M&E because of its transnational significance, scale, methodological innovations, and diverse non-Western context.

Findings

Ethnography can be used to conduct empirical studies of large-scale monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts in non-Western contexts toward understanding the features outlined in *Table 1*.

Ethnography Can Produce Data to Analyze	
History	The origins, development, and initial goals of M&E efforts
Design	The decision-making around methodology, participatory structure, and data collection strategies
Implementation	The process of M&E execution in all its phases with attention to an array of issues (i.e., fidelity to design, equity of participation)
Influence	The social, political, and technical (e.g., new methodologies or strategies) consequences for the evaluand and stakeholders
Theory	The relevance or quality of existent theory to explain M&E meaning and phenomena; the generation of new theory from the ground

Table 1: M&E Features that Can Be Investigated Via Ethnography