

Unpacking the Barriers to Effective Monitoring and Evaluation in Donor Funded Construction Projects: Evidence from Ghana

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Abstract

Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are vital to the successful delivery of donor-funded construction projects. But in most developing nations like Ghana, such projects still face enduring performance issues. This research examines the underlying problems hindering M&E effectiveness in donor-supported construction projects and determines strategic interventions for progressing monitoring mechanisms. On the basis of evidence collected from 40 practitioners of construction through systematic surveys, this research employs descriptive statistics in comparing the frequency and intensity of certain barriers. The research cites in poor stakeholder engagement, budget limitations, institutional vulnerability, and politicization as overriding constraints on M&E. Practical answers such as leadership from senior management, capacity development, and participatory approaches are suggested. The research contributes to project management scholarship through bringing evidence from a developing context together with state-of-the-art M&E theory. It provides hands-on advice to policymakers, donors, and contractors who seek to enhance governance, accountability, and performance in complex infrastructure projects.

Keywords: Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E); Donor-Funded Projects; Construction Project Management; Institutional Theory; Stakeholder Engagement; Ghana

1. Introduction

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are critical in improving the performance, transparency, and accountability of projects, especially donor-funded projects. Donor-funded building projects have been at the core of filling developing nations' infrastructure gap, for example, in Ghana. Nevertheless, even with enormous investments and well-documented guidelines, the majority of such projects do not meet their intended impacts because of incompetent project implementation and incompetent monitoring and evaluation processes.

In Ghana, donor-funded construction projects, such as those supported by the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and various bilateral donors often face performance challenges including project delays, budget overruns, and substandard quality. These inefficiencies are commonly attributed to deficiencies in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. According to recent project audit reports and implementation reviews, lapses in stakeholder engagement, insufficient baseline data, inadequate capacity, and the politicization of project oversight have constrained effective M&E outcomes. Although several policy frameworks emphasize the need for integrated M&E practices, implementation on the

ground has remained inconsistent and poorly institutionalized. Past studies have also focused on M&E in development projects in general, but few have done so, to say the least, taking into account the construction sector—because of its capital intensity, visibility, and developmental significance. Even less empirical work within Ghana, too, explores the actual project manager and implementing partners' challenges towards applying M&E in donor-funded construction.

This research attempts to fill this gap by evaluating the primary issues undermining quality M&E for Ghanaian donor-funded built environment schemes. The research is based on primary data gathered from built environment professionals such as architects, engineers, and project managers with direct experience of such programmes. In this way, the research seeks to establish the highest constraints and suggest practical interventions. The findings of this research will contribute to both academic literature and practical policymaking. Theoretically, the study identifies how institutional and stakeholder drivers interact with each other to determine M&E effectiveness. Practically, the study provides guidelines on how M&E systems can be enhanced to achieve maximum project outcomes in Ghana.

1.1 Research Objectives:

1. To explore the nature and scope of M&E practices in donor-funded construction projects in Ghana
2. To identify key challenges and bottlenecks in the M&E processes
3. To propose strategies and institutional reforms that can enhance M&E effectiveness

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the existing literature on M&E in project contexts. Section 3 outlines the methodology used in the study. Section 4 presents and analyzes the results. Section 5 discusses key insights and implications. Section 6 concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

Donor-funded construction projects play a pivotal role in advancing infrastructure in developing countries, including Ghana. Such projects are intended to improve social amenities, stimulate economic growth, and enhance institutional capacity. Despite their importance, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) remains a persistent challenge. Most recent Sub-Saharan African studies reveal that development organizations often exert substantial leverage with host institutions whose M&E systems tend to be disconnected from reality on the ground (Sawadogo-Lewis et al., 2022).

M&E's primary function is to provide timely information to inform decision support that is data-driven and to keep projects on track. In practice, however, donor-funded contexts frequently reduce M&E to a compliance mechanism, more focused on upward accountability than on internal learning or adaptive management (Kotschy et al., 2025). This compliance-style method commonly causes a disconnect among metrics being measured for assessment purposes and practical conditions present out in the field.

For Ghana, institutional capacity deficits, a lack of baseline data, and low-quality indicators have been cited as recurring barriers to effective monitoring (Agyekum-Mensah & Knight, 2017). In addition, recent reviews indicate that several implementing agencies also fail to adopt a results-based culture, thus defeating both data credibility and principles of accountability (Asare-Nuamah, 2023). In the absence of a reliable baseline dataset or indicators relevant to a given context, a meaningful monitoring process for performance remains haphazard and hard to assess. Institutional theory provides an explanation of the perpetuation of such issues. Organizations may implement externally mandated practices for reasons of legitimacy and not because they are made more efficient (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Donor-mandated M&E templates and frameworks are used in donor-driven environments to provide a consistency

guarantee but tend to be superficially adopted. This "ceremonial compliance" produces box-ticking that never results in learning and adaptive project management (NDPC, 2024).

Stakeholder theory offers additional explanatory capacity. Donor-funded construction activity has stakeholders such as government ministries, contractors, beneficiaries, and overseas donors. Inadequate coordination among the players leads to overlapping roles, slow decision-making, and compromised transparency (Musonda & Pretorius, 2019). Inadequate participatory planning leaves out significant stakeholders, particularly the local population and project workers, hence undermining ownership of outcomes and authenticity of data. Capacity issues remain the overbearing issue of contention. Results show that receiving agencies are inclined to have low human capacity, up-to-date IT systems, and funding needed for efficient M&E (Sawadogo-Lewis et al., 2022). These constraints are most pronounced in construction works, where monitoring involves technical competence, engineering knowledge, and prompt recording of information. Additionally, bureaucratic procurement procedures are inclined to hesitate even after risk recognition.

Logistical constraints are part of the reason for this. Poor road network connectivity, intermittent internet access, and frequent power outages make field visits challenging and hinder timely data transmission. These infrastructural deficiencies are worse in rural and locationally remote projects where monitoring is already limited.

The other issue of concern is over-reliance on external short-term consultants. Although the consultants may have technical competency, short-term contracts produce spotty knowledge transfer and inadequate institutional learning. Local capacity should be invested in through long-term investment rather than cyclical consultancy-based evaluation (Bamberger et al., 2022).

In spite of these limitations, recent research refers to facilitation factors for driving M&E in donor-funded projects. For example, harmonization of donors' reporting requirements has been suggested as a means to lower the reporting burden on recipient organizations (World Bank, 2021). Participatory M&E methods by frontline implementers and community have been shown to improve accountability, data saliency, and acceptance of results (Asare-Nuamah, 2023).

Digital transformation also opens enormous potential. Feedback loops and real-time monitoring can be enabled by cloud platforms, GIS mapping, and mobile-based data collection, provided with ongoing capacity-building programs (Kotschy et al., 2025). DHIS2 and KoboToolbox, having already been piloted in low-resource environments, suggest the potential of technology to streamline monitoring.

Follow-up studies also highlight the importance of mainstreaming M&E throughout the entire project cycle management. Mainstreaming M&E in line with project design, implementation, and closure results in coherence and ensures that outputs inform decisions (Bamberger et al., 2022). Mainstreaming M&E in governance ensures that findings from evaluation are more likely to be rolled forward.

But there are empirical gaps. Few Ghanaian studies offer a sophisticated explanation of the interaction of institutional, operational, and contextual elements in determining M&E effectiveness in donor-funded construction projects. Closing the gaps calls for context-sensitive, adaptive, and learning-based M&E approaches above compliance.

Generally, the literature recognizes M&E issues in donor-funded construction projects as aggravated in nature. These issues arise from institutional tension, poor coordination of stakeholders, capacity constraints, and infrastructure constraints. Change in the system in the future is needed to improve, focusing on learning, inclusivity, and flexibility. There should be a paradigm change towards context-

oriented and politically aware M&E systems to achieve sustainable outcomes in donor-funded construction projects.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach to investigate the barriers that constrain effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in donor-funded construction projects in Ghana. A quantitative methodology was considered appropriate due to the need to obtain measurable, generalizable insights from a targeted group of construction professionals. This approach also enabled statistical comparison of response patterns and the identification of dominant trends in M&E practices within the construction sector.

The research is grounded in a positivist philosophical paradigm, which assumes an objective reality that can be understood through systematic observation and measurement. The adoption of this approach was guided by the research questions, which sought to examine the prevalence and perceived severity of M&E challenges, and to identify statistically supported patterns for policy and managerial intervention.

3.1. Target Population and Sampling Strategy

The study targeted professionals directly involved in planning, execution, or evaluation of donor-funded construction projects in Ghana. These included project managers, architects, engineers, quantity surveyors, and procurement officers. These roles were considered essential due to their firsthand experience in M&E processes, compliance with donor reporting standards, and interface with external stakeholders.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed. This was justified given the specificity of expertise required from participants and the focus on those who have had experience with donor-funded projects within the last five years. A total of 40 valid responses were obtained from professionals operating primarily in Accra, where the concentration of donor-backed infrastructure projects and national-level agencies is highest.

The sample size, though modest, is consistent with prior studies on M&E in developing contexts (e.g., Ika et al., 2010; Amoatey et al., 2015). Moreover, the homogeneity of the respondent group in terms of professional exposure and project involvement supported the use of a smaller but focused sample.

3.2. Instrumentation

Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire, designed based on prior literature and contextualized to the Ghanaian donor-funded construction environment. The questionnaire consisted of three parts:

- Section A: Demographic information (e.g., profession, years of experience, education level)
- Section B: Extent of involvement in M&E activities, tools used, and institutional support
- Section C: Respondents' perception of key M&E challenges and proposed strategies, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)

The questionnaire items were derived from themes identified in the literature and aligned with best practices in M&E design frameworks. Content validity was established through review by two senior academics and a practicing evaluator with donor-funded project experience. Following this, a pilot test involving five respondents was conducted to identify ambiguities and ensure clarity. Minor revisions were made to item phrasing and sequencing

3.3. Ethical Considerations

The Author obtained ethical clearance from the institutional board in charge of this. Additionally, all par-

ticipants were provided with informed consent before completing the questionnaire. They were assured of anonymity, voluntary participation, and the use of their responses strictly for academic purposes. No personal identifiers were recorded, and data were stored securely.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over a four-week period using both online and paper-based formats. The researcher personally distributed and collected printed questionnaires from selected firms and professional networks. An email follow-up system was also used to engage busy professionals and improve response rates.

3.5. Data Analysis

The responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS Version 25.0. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, standard deviations, and relative importance indices (RII) were employed to summarize participant characteristics and rank key challenges. This enabled the identification of common barriers, the intensity of agreement among respondents, and potential strategies for improvement.

To ensure internal consistency, a Cronbach's alpha test was performed, yielding a value of 0.84, indicating strong reliability of the scale. Results are presented using appropriate tables and graphs for clarity. The structured nature of the analysis allowed for objective interpretation of challenges and facilitated triangulation with existing literature and field reports.

4. Results

This section presents the key findings from the data collected through the structured questionnaire administered to 40 professionals involved in donor-funded construction projects in Ghana. The analysis is presented in two parts: (1) demographic characteristics of respondents, and (2) perceptions of challenges in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices.

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The respondents comprised a cross-section of built environment professionals. As shown in Table 1, the sample was predominantly made up of engineers (35%), quantity surveyors (27.5%), and project managers (22.5%). The majority (60%) had over 10 years of professional experience, and 80% reported direct involvement in M&E activities on donor-funded projects.

Table 1

<i>Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 40)</i>	
Characteristic	%
Profession	
Civil/Structural Engineers	35
Quantity Surveyors	27.5
Project Managers	22.5
Architects / Others	15
Years of Experience	
1–5 years	10
6–10 years	30
Over 10 years	60

Source: Author's Survey Data (2025)

Direct M&E Involvement

Yes	80.0	No	20.0
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Note. M&E = Monitoring and Evaluation.

4.2. Challenges to Effective M&E in Donor-Funded Construction Projects

Respondents were asked to rate 14 potential challenges to M&E effectiveness using a 5-point Likert scale. Relative Importance Index (RII) was used to rank the severity of each challenge, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Key Challenges to Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)		
Challenge	Mean	RII
Lack of political will / undue political interference	4.5	0.9
Inadequate training and capacity among M&E personnel	4.35	0.87
Absence of baseline data	4.28	0.86
Poor stakeholder engagement and participation	4.18	0.84
Inadequate funding for M&E activities	4.15	0.83
Delays in releasing project funds	4.1	0.82
Weak institutional frameworks and overlapping mandates	4.05	0.81
Unclear or inconsistent performance indicators	3.95	0.79
Low prioritization of M&E at project design stage	3.9	0.78
Lack of independent external evaluators	3.88	0.78
Over-reliance on donor reporting templates	3.8	0.76
Poor data management and documentation systems	3.75	0.75
Limited community-level accountability mechanisms	3.65	0.73
Bureaucratic delays in M&E reporting	3.6	0.72

Source: Author's Survey Data (2025)

Note. M&E = Monitoring and Evaluation; RII = Relative Importance Index.

As shown above, the top-rated constraints were political interference (RII = 0.90), inadequate capacity (0.87), and lack of baseline data (0.86). These findings indicate that both structural and human-resource related barriers are prevalent.

4.3. Proposed Solutions by Respondents

Respondents also suggested practical interventions to strengthen M&E. These include:

- Dedicated budget lines for M&E from project inception
- Capacity building programs for project staff and M&E officers
- Participatory M&E frameworks to improve stakeholder accountability
- Adoption of digital M&E platforms for data tracking and transparency

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a confluence of institutional, political, and capacity-related challenges that undermine effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in donor-funded construction projects in Ghana. These challenges are consistent with extant literature and reflect broader systemic issues faced in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

The most critical challenge, as identified by respondents, was political interference. This aligns with earlier studies by Ika et al. (2010) and Diallo & Thuillier (2005), who noted that politicization of project decision-making often disrupts objective evaluation and accountability mechanisms. In the Ghanaian context,

respondents indicated that political actors sometimes influence contractor selection, bypass evaluation protocols, or undermine independent assessments for political expediency.

The second most cited barrier was the inadequacy of technical capacity among M&E personnel. This resonates with findings by Amoatey et al. (2015) and Kusek & Rist (2004), who argue that many M&E units operate without skilled staff or formal training in results-based monitoring frameworks. Respondents in this study emphasized the need for continuous professional development, especially in applying modern evaluation tools and digital platforms.

The absence of baseline data and clearly defined performance indicators further complicates M&E efforts. Without baseline benchmarks, it becomes difficult to measure change or attribute project outcomes to specific interventions (Bamberger et al., 2006). This weakness often leads to anecdotal or incomplete reporting, which is insufficient for rigorous donor oversight or adaptive learning.

The study also found that stakeholder engagement in M&E design and implementation was weak. Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) posits that inclusive engagement enhances legitimacy and decision quality. Yet, many projects in this study exhibited top-down M&E designs with minimal beneficiary involvement, limiting community accountability and project ownership.

Furthermore, the reliance on donor-defined templates and inconsistent institutional frameworks was highlighted as a limiting factor. While standardization can support cross-project comparability, it may also constrain responsiveness to local realities and introduce bureaucratic rigidity (Mosse, 2004; OECD, 2010). Institutional Theory offers additional insight into these findings. The persistence of weak institutional capacity, overlapping mandates, and lack of enforcement mechanisms reflect deeper structural constraints. Formal M&E frameworks may exist on paper, but their adoption is often symbolic or selectively applied—a phenomenon DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe as “institutional isomorphism without substance.” Taken together, these findings suggest that technical fixes alone (e.g., software or indicators) are insufficient. Instead, M&E reforms must address the political economy of development projects, including power asymmetries, institutional fragmentation, and the incentive structures of implementing agencies. As such, this study contributes to a growing call for context-sensitive, participatory, and politically aware approaches to M&E design and implementation (Eyben et al., 2015).

From a practical standpoint, the results underscore the importance of:

- Ensuring independent evaluation mechanisms free from political interference
- Institutionalizing continuous training and mentorship for M&E staff
- Integrating community-driven accountability mechanisms into M&E frameworks
- Aligning donor requirements with national systems to reduce duplication and reporting fatigue

These recommendations can enhance not only the technical robustness of M&E systems but also their credibility, transparency, and developmental impact.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the challenges associated with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of donor-funded construction projects in Ghana. Drawing on the experiences of construction professionals involved in such projects, the research has surfaced key constraints to M&E effectiveness and highlighted the institutional and political dynamics shaping current practices.

The findings show that despite the formal existence of M&E systems, implementation remains uneven and often superficial. Political interference, limited technical capacity, and the absence of baseline data emerged as the top-ranked barriers. These are not merely operational inefficiencies but symptoms of

deeper structural and governance issues. Consistent with Stakeholder Theory and Institutional Theory, the results affirm that effective M&E requires both functional systems and an enabling institutional environment that supports transparency, accountability, and learning.

Moreover, the study reveals that M&E practices are often donor-driven rather than owned by implementing agencies or communities. This misalignment creates tensions between compliance and learning objectives, as local stakeholders may view M&E as an external imposition rather than an integral part of project success.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing literature that critiques the technocratic framing of M&E. While tools and indicators are essential, they must be embedded within governance frameworks that incentivize honest reporting, constructive feedback, and course correction. This reinforces recent calls for more politically informed and participatory evaluation systems, especially in fragile or hybrid governance contexts.

The research also demonstrates that practical improvements are possible. Respondents suggested several actionable strategies, including the integration of digital M&E systems, capacity-building programs, and community accountability mechanisms. These measures can enhance the credibility, usefulness, and sustainability of evaluation efforts, provided they are supported by political will and institutional leadership.

6.1. Implications for Project Management Practice

The results have direct implications for project managers, donors, and public institutions involved in infrastructure delivery. Project managers must be trained not only in technical aspects of M&E but also in stakeholder management and data governance. Donors should prioritise alignment with local systems and invest in long-term capacity development rather than short-term compliance metrics. Government agencies must strengthen institutional mandates, reduce duplication, and harmonize reporting structures across ministries and development partners.

6.2. Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights, it has some limitations. First, the sample was limited to 40 professionals, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across regions or sectors. Second, the research relied on self-reported perceptions, which can be influenced by social desirability bias. Finally, the study focused solely on construction projects, and findings may not generalize to other types of donor-funded interventions such as health or education programs.

6.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations, the following areas are recommended for future research:

1. A comparative study of M&E practices across different donor sectors (e.g. education, health, infrastructure) to examine sectoral variations in challenges and responses.
2. A longitudinal analysis of how M&E capacity evolves over the lifecycle of large-scale infrastructure projects.
3. The role of digital platforms and real-time data tools in improving transparency and stakeholder engagement in M&E.
4. An exploration of community-based participatory evaluation models in urban versus rural infrastructure projects.
5. An institutional ethnography of how M&E mandates are interpreted and enacted within donor agencies and local government institutions.

In conclusion, effective M&E is not just a technical exercise but a governance function. Ensuring its success requires strategic coordination, political support, and a shared commitment to results and learning. Donor-funded construction projects offer a critical testing ground for improving the legitimacy, quality, and accountability of development investments. As Ghana and other LMICs continue to expand their infrastructure portfolios, strengthening M&E systems must be a national priority.

7. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to the theoretical understanding of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) challenges in the context of donor-funded construction projects, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. While much of the existing literature focuses on operational challenges (e.g., data gaps, funding delays), this research adopts a more integrative lens, linking institutional and stakeholder theories to empirical observations from the Ghanaian context.

First, by applying Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the study reveals how formal M&E frameworks often mask weak enforcement and implementation. Despite the presence of M&E policies and donor-mandated reporting structures, these often exhibit ceremonial compliance rather than functional performance. This aligns with the concept of institutional isomorphism, where organizations mimic formal standards without fully embedding them in practice. The study thus contributes empirical validation of this theoretical construct in the underexplored domain of infrastructure monitoring in low-income settings. Second, the findings extend Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) by demonstrating that lack of stakeholder engagement in M&E processes, particularly community and local government involvement, weakens project legitimacy and undermines accountability. While prior studies have applied stakeholder theory to corporate governance or supply chains, its extension to donor-funded public infrastructure M&E is novel and highlights how participatory shortfalls directly affect performance measurement credibility. Third, the study offers a conceptual shift by framing M&E challenges not only as technical inefficiencies, but also as manifestations of political economy dynamics. This expands the prevailing results-based management discourse to incorporate power relations, institutional fragmentation, and political interference, areas typically omitted from technocratic M&E models. In doing so, the research aligns with recent scholarly calls for "evaluative thinking in complex systems" (e.g. Bamberger et al., 2012; Eyben et al., 2015), and adds specificity by contextualizing such thinking in donor-funded infrastructure delivery. Fourth, the study bridges the gap between theory and practice by proposing a framework that integrates institutional incentives, political contexts, and stakeholder expectations into M&E design and delivery. This framework is adaptable for comparative research across different country or sector contexts, offering potential for theory refinement through cross-case validation.

Finally, the study adds to the limited body of work on M&E systems in African infrastructure governance, particularly in construction, a sector often neglected in evaluation literature compared to health, education, or humanitarian programs. As such, this work provides a foundation for theory-informed policy research in the Global South.

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