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Essentials of Functional Whole-of-Government Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: The Zambian Case

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ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the 21st century in the year 2000, it has become increasingly impossible to design and implement a development intervention, be it a project, programme or policy without articulating a sound monitoring and evaluation framework. More demanded are functional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. It is for that reason that governments, civil society organisations, non-governmental organizations, bilateral and multilateral agencies have all adopted the agenda of strengthening their systems for M&E. Among others, known benefits from implementing sound M&E include enhancing accountability, feedback and learning. This paper articulates essentials development agencies, and their respective stakeholders need to put in place for their M&E systems to function well. More so, focus is on building stronger whole-of-government M&E systems. Essentially, a typical M&E system would have two sides, both of which would be crucial for a successful and functional whole-of-government M&E system. These are the supply-side and the demand-side. In addition, there are known essentials deemed crucial to a successful whole-of-government M&E system. These include the political and technical issues associated with implementing country systems for M&E. Another essential is the ownership of M&E systems. Further, the paper also presents a comprehensive section showing the fundamental ten steps for building a functional whole-of-government M&E system. When these aspects are understood by governments and carefully institutionalised across structures, M&E would prove to be a useful tool to promote accountability, feedback and learning. It also goes

without saying, that, in the absence of a stronger system for M&E, governments will most likely not tell success from failure, not see success and would fail to reward it. As such, governments would probably never recognize its failures, thus failing to correct it and ultimately fall short of demonstrating development results. Once these happen, such governments would not win public support.

Keywords: monitoring, evaluation, demand & supply-sides, whole-of-government, M&E system, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) functions have become a requirement for development interventions, regardless of whether they were being implemented by government, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), bilateral or multilateral agencies. Therefore, development organisations have created, and more are working to strengthen their systems for M&E to increase accountability, feedback and learning mechanisms. However, to ensure that M&E systems are stronger to meet the desired outcomes, there is need to put in place certain essential features and components which need to work together as a unified system. It is for that reason that we have in place government-wide (whole-of-government) M&E systems, non-governmental organisation M&E systems, civil society M&E systems, bilateral and multilateral agency M&E systems, etc. [66] defines a WoGM&ES as a robust system that not only provides an integrated and all-encompassing framework of M&E practices, principles and standards to be used throughout government institutional structures, but also functions as an apex-level system for information and draws from the component systems in a framework meant to deliver essential M&E products tailored to satisfy information needs of users.

Thus, it is important that good understanding exists about the essential underpinnings of monitoring and evaluation systems and how these systems are supposed to be organised if they are to provide information that would help to transform a country's good governance reform agenda. Such essential ingredients represent a significant trajectory in terms of clarifying areas of success that need to be embraced as Zambia works to develop and sustain its whole-of-government monitoring and evaluation system (WoGM&ES). Any other country system for M&E would also benefit from the utilisation of the M&E essentials.

Essentially, a typical M&E system would have two sides both of which are crucial for a successful and functional WoGM&ES. These are the supply-side and demand-side. In addition, the paper articulates the essentials deemed crucial to a successful WoGM&ES. These include the political and technical issues associated with implementing country systems for M&E. Another essential is the ownership of M&E systems. Further, the paper presents a comprehensive section showing the fundamental ten steps for developing a functional WoGM&ES. The conclusion stresses the importance of these aspects.

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Several experts and development practitioners alike, as well as organisations including governments have stressed the desire for stronger M&E systems. The Zambian Government must build a functional and robust WoGM&ES that seeks to comprehensively provide the much-needed information to support development processes at all levels of governance, namely a

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system that will meet the development expectations of players and stakeholders in the economy and beyond.

The significance of functional national level M&E systems is that benefits are widespread, including giving crucial decision-making information in the course of policy, programme and project implementation. When used properly, information from these systems could help to stimulate development debate through constructive brainstorming on challenges affecting an intervention. In that regard, development managers obtain valuable information for improving their deliverables, thereby assuming control and ownership of development processes [2,46].

Since government business is generally implemented across the country, a functional WoGM&ES is needed to help with resource allocation to the neediest areas through evidence-based data and information and results-focused feedback loops [12]. Once this is achieved, it is envisaged that the Zambian Government's predictability in terms of positive public service delivery should be well anchored on a results-based management approach and the capability of sustaining the desired national development path should be pursuable realistically.

A strong view is held among M&E advocates and practitioners that countries should always deliberately try to lead and sustain the building of their WoGM&ESs. It is even preferred that such systems should be owned and led by key stakeholders in the country so that external stakeholders such as donors do not enforce their interests [52]. Elements such as determining what is to be evaluated, which evaluation questions must be asked, which methods should be used and which analytical approaches should be employed are important for countries to own and control. In addition, the manner in which M&E findings are communicated, shared and used is supposed to be in the jurisdiction of the government and its internal structures.

DEMAND AND SUPPLY SIDES OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems comprise two parts: the supply side and demand side. From the supply side, information that feeds into decision-making processes is generated and disseminated to those that use it on the demand side of the system. Therefore, a good match is required between the supply and demand sides when building and sustaining systems for M&E [16, 17, 48].

The supply side involves human skills and capacity development, including adapting appropriate technologies and tools and supporting institutional frameworks [15]. In other words, the supply side of an M&E system generally refers to a range of systemic and institutional aspects such as data collection, capacity, sequencing, leadership, coordination, regulation and oversight [42]. Further, the demand side is concerned with the use of M&E information by actors that include governmental agencies, parliaments, NGOs, civil society organisations, research institutions, universities, the donor community and the general population [23, 42,24]. Similarly, this means that the ways in which these entities are involved to stimulate demand for information could be useful in strengthening the demand side of an M&E system [3,47]. Therefore, care should be taken by ensuring that M&E standards, procedures, tools and principles conform to local requirements. For instance, indicator choices are better developed when they are anchored on country-specific values and norms.

Where they are employed from international agencies, indicators must be appropriate and adapted to local conditions [15, 62].

However, developing M&E systems that respond to the expectations of stakeholders is not easy. For that reason, governments and stakeholders must have solid plans and incentives to compel them to invest in such systems. Building an M&E system is not a one-off activity, but a long process that requires focus and commitment from government and stakeholders. Section 4.4 outlines some of the key aspects that governments must address when building M&E systems. These are considered essentials for building successful M&E systems for the public sector. This is followed by a discussion of the ten steps for building a robust WoGM&ES.

ESSENTIALS OF A FUNCTIONAL WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEM

The Political Aspect of Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) issues are predominantly politically motivated. This aspect is usually embedded in the nature of information that M&E systems provide. Monitoring information and evaluation findings tend to give detailed indications of how public resources are being utilised. However, most implementers do not like to place such information in the public domain for fear of being victimised or condemned by the public and other stakeholders for possible misappropriation. [28] concluded that when results-based information is brought into the public arena, it could change the dynamics of institutional relationships, personal political agendas, planning, budgeting and resource allocations, and general public perceptions of government effectiveness. As a consequence of these strong and deep-rooted vested interests, counter-reformers may emerge in and outside government to oppose all efforts to build systems for M&E.

Governments need to ensure that there are strong institutional arrangements so that the M&E function is implemented with the expected quality. But this requires a long-term M&E system characterised by sustained strategising and planning. M&E systems are often considered threats to government officials and project managers because staff reductions, budget cuts and criticism from higher levels such as donors and civil society groups may arise after poor evaluation findings [29,30,3]. These political dynamics in the management of M&E systems, if not managed well, could lead to poor governance with a broken-down public accountability system allowing vices such as corruption and misapplication of resources. As a result, developing countries have to address this aspect if their WoGM&ESs are to function well [37,32].

The Technical Aspect of Monitoring and Evaluation

The technical issues surrounding the functionality of M&E systems are crucial aspects that require good care by governments and organisations. The areas of concern when designing and building an M&E system include producing relevant, trustworthy and timely information about the performance of government projects, programmes, and policies. Relevant and adequate institutional capacities and skills are also significant in determining a well-performing M&E system. For instance, capacities of successful and comprehensive construction and utilisation of performance indicators denote an important competence [28,27].

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Consequently, governments should have well-trained employees who are able to carry out these functions effectively. For many developing countries, this may be a challenge, but governments need to invest significantly in these areas to ensure M&E responsibilities are handled by technically qualified civil servants. [65] cautions that failure to have in place technically skilled managers and government officers in building successful national M&E systems that are credible and trustworthy to bring high-quality information is a challenge.

Ownership of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

The incapability of developing countries to build and sustain their own M&E systems is probably the leading factor in creating institutions and systems that promote good governance and poverty reduction [60,42,15]. There are notable levels of satisfaction from among development actors around the globe that control and ownership of M&E systems by governments themselves would provide stable and sustainable enjoyment of the benefits offered by such systems [24,23]. But the reality is that many poor countries rely on donor support to conduct M&E functions and build M&E systems. It is even more problematic because these countries borrow almost every aspect of M&E from the developed countries [28]. This is not to say it is unnecessary to seek improved ways of building M&E systems, but the challenge concerns the dependence that poor countries have given themselves to developed nations.

"Countries in the developing world often look to the richest countries, the members of the OECD, and adopt the public sector management tools that these countries typically employ, such as M&E and performance budgeting" [36]. This situation is obviously going to lead to more problems regarding the sustainability of these M&E systems in developing countries. As a better and more sustainable alternative, [28] contend that developing countries first need to create greater demand for M&E information and to utilise it proactively to inform policy and decision-making processes. Through such use of M&E, these countries would then inculcate a culture of building and strengthening their own results-based M&E systems in their institutions, and this would lead to stronger ownership of these systems. This will be unavoidable because the experience of creating these M&E systems would differ in dynamics and scope between the developing countries and their counterparts in the developed countries, despite the practical lessons that could be drawn from successfully implemented systems in developed countries [39,59].

TEN STEPS FOR BUILDING A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEM

The work that goes into building and sustaining a functional WoGM&ES is immense and long term in nature. The clear steps on how to build such systems are still matters of debate among practitioners because countries are at different stages of developing M&E systems. However, M&E practitioners and experts in the field have elaborated stages that are crucial to developing functional M&E systems. It is therefore important in this research study to bring out the general aspects that comprise steps towards building and sustaining a country's WoGM&ES. When assessing and analysing Zambia's WoGM&ES, appreciating the stages the system has undergone or requires to undergo becomes significant. [28] have elaborated a classical ten-step process to consider when building a national M&E system for governments. Figure 1 below elaborates.

This paper therefore adopts the ten steps and uses them to establish a basis for understanding the process of building and sustaining a successful WoGM&ES for Zambia's public sector.

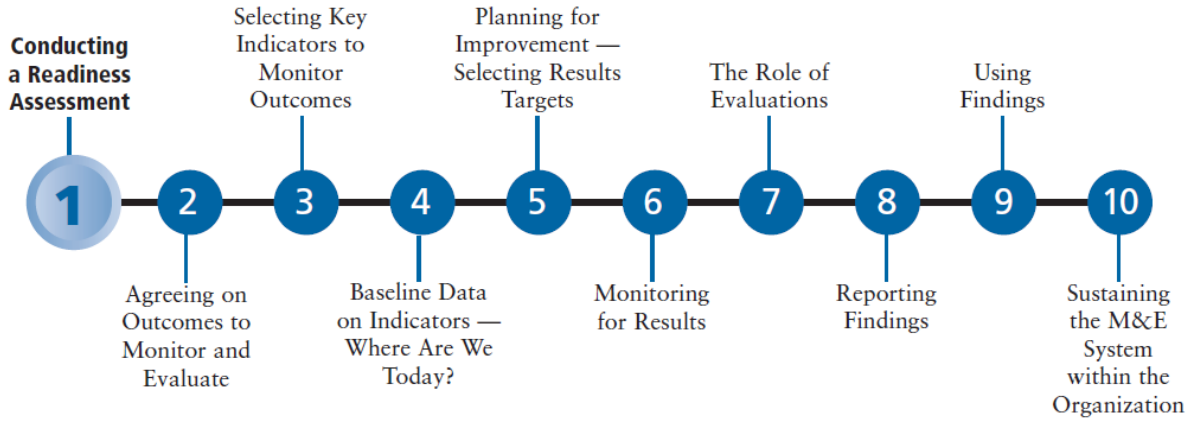

Figure 4.1: Ten generic steps for building a country monitoring and evaluation system
Source: Kusek and Rist, 2004, p.39

Step 1: Conducting a Readiness Assessment

A readiness assessment is the first critical aspect that needs to be considered when building any strong and sustainable M&E system [28,53]. Likened to the construction of a building, the readiness assessment stage represents an important part, beneath the ground, not seen, yet critical in holding all that is above it. The focus of this stage is on undertaking a thorough assessment of a country's current status in terms of understanding, capacity, and use of existing M&E arrangements. The readiness assessment is therefore the analytical framework on which the holistic status of a country's M&E capacity is determined and a plan for improvement is drawn and implemented [34,65]. Therefore, the undertaking of a r1eadiness assessment is not intended to examine whether a country may develop a WoGM&ES, but to assess the current status of that country's M&E arrangements.

To that extent, a readiness assessment usually considers such aspects as existing organisational, political, policy, legislation and cultural factors and contexts. In other words, a readiness assessment addresses issues such as whether M&E champions were present, the barriers threatening the creation and building of M&E systems, ownership issues and who was likely to oppose the systems [18,56]. For [3], these complexities and nuances of the wider country contexts are usually ignored, yet are critical for the rest of the preceding stages. Hence, [28] observe that many approaches recommend governments and organisations to go straight into building systems for M&E, disregarding the critical step of readiness assessment. Thus, without first taking stock of what is working and what is not leads many development agencies into building systems that fail to give expected information, thereby becoming redundant and unsustainable in the long run [34,63,64,33,49].

Further, the readiness assessment step is explicit in what it aims to achieve. This stage advances a strong argument against most experts, who look only at the 'what' questions: for instance, what are the goals? What are the indicators? Such experts forsake the critical 'why' questions, for example, why do we want to measure something? Why is there a need in a particular country to think about these issues? Why do we want to embark on building sustainable results-based M&E systems? It is because of these pertinent 'why' questions on which the readiness

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assessment step is premised [28]. There is more work to actualise this kind of objective, yet the results of such efforts are key to the development of a successful results-based M&E system [28,63,12,13].

Step 2: Agreeing on Outcomes to Monitor and Evaluate

Governments implement development interventions with the aim of achieving results that influence citizens' living standards positively. Otherwise, without being certain of the intended outcomes, government efforts would not be challenged for quality assurance by stakeholders. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll (1865) stated: 'If you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there' [1]. Step 2 builds on the first and assumes that a country or organisation is in a position to move forward in building a results-based M&E system. The second important undertaking is to agree on the outcomes so that where the country is going in the long term is known.

For a given WoGM&ES to be built and sustained, it is essential that outcome setting is done appropriately. Such results-based M&E systems are developed according to a deductive approach in which inputs, activities, and outputs are all derived and flow from the setting of outcomes and the ultimate desired impact(s). [28] add that indicators, baselines and targets (covered in subsequent steps), including all crucial elements of the performance framework are derived from and based on the setting of clear outcomes. Thus, the setting and articulation of outcomes first provides a good platform for designing measurable performance indicators [16,26].

A government, in consultation with stakeholders, thus has the task of ensuring that appropriate outcomes are well chosen and defined. A WoGM&ES that is developed with good outcomes has a high chance of collecting, analysing and providing information (feedback) that is useful to influence various processes for stakeholders positively [32,13].

Step 3: Selecting Key Performance Indicators to Monitor Outcomes

A successful M&E system is supposed to have a well-chosen and collectively shared set of performance indicators to serve as the basis for change or result measurement. 'Indicators' refer to variables that are quantitative or qualitative, simply and reliably designed to measure achievement of a given intervention under implementation [28,58]. The tracking of performance changes is made in relation to an organisation's stated outcomes [28,31,37]. After the outcomes are determined in the process of building a WoGM&ES, the next task is to choose and define the indicators. Essentially, indicators should be developed for all levels of a results-based M&E system to have certainty that those indicators are in place to monitor and measure progress against all the elements of a results chain (that is, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts). This kind of indicator tracking and measurement is critical to providing evidence-based feedback, on which transformational improvements would be made [60,63,7].

Indicator selection and definition are important requirements for a successful WoGM&ES. Otherwise, it becomes challenging to recognise success or achievement when it occurs. Also, the assurance as to whether institutional effort is leading towards achieving outcomes is not certain in the absence of clearly defined indicators [28,65,53]. Governments need to be precise and committed to the process and type of overall and specific indicators adopted in their WoGM&ES [6,12].

Step 4: Setting Baselines and Gathering Data on Indicators

When the identification and selection of key performance indicators (KPIs) to monitor outcomes are done, the next crucial phase is establishing baseline data (Step 4). During this step, the present status of a given indicator relative to the overall outcome is measured and appreciated. For [28], the significance of this stage is that no one can project progress or any form of performance into the future (target setting) without establishing an appropriate baseline. According to [23], the first measurement of an indicator is what denotes a baseline. Thus, this condition assists in determining or projecting future changes and upon which progress tracking is anchored. Therefore, by using well-measured baselines, decision makers and other development actors get to know about current circumstances long before they project targets for an intervention. In this way, setting realistic targets works for all development efforts, giving governments an edge in leading the process of nation building and inclusive development because they understand the recent levels and patterns of performance [47,58,22].

The process of determining the baseline starts by i) establishing or generating baseline data on selected indicators; ii) building information for each indicator baseline; iii) identifying data sources for indicators; iv) designing, planning and comparing chosen data collection methods; v) establishing the significance of conducting pilots; and incorporating vi) data collection and use of lessons from successfully implemented WoGM&ES [28,21,33].

Step 5: Planning for Improvement and Setting Realistic Targets

A target is "a specified objective that indicates the number, timing and location of that which is to be realized" [28]. In other words, targets are the quantifiable and qualifiable levels of the indicators that a country, society or organisation wants to achieve by a given time [25,28]. The process of determining targets against stated indicators is another significant task for a successful WoGM&ES. To be precise, target setting is the final step in the process of building performance frameworks. Target setting follows a deductive process of breaking down the selected indicators into what is achievable in a specified period towards the attainment of a given outcome [9,29].

Hence, an M&E system with indicators whose targets are not well selected and defined will not provide credible information for use in decision making. Targets are vital for measuring changes against the agreed-upon indicators throughout the process of implementing an intervention [63,65].

Step 6: Monitoring for Results

Step 6, monitoring for results, follows the selection of targets and completion of the performance-based framework. In this step, a system that ensures that the data required to inform various processes of decision making are described and collated. Thus, the data from this system are used as evidence for performance tracking and measurement of changes for development interventions. The primary intention of this step is to appreciate requirements for a results-based M&E system. Such a system is understood to be necessary to inform and better manage all governmental and organisational resources [1,5,4]. In addition, at this stage it becomes significant to acquire and critically manage all programme and project inputs, activities, outputs and the intermediate outcomes. [6] share this view when they emphasise that often development implementers use a variety of organisational tools such as inputs,

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staffing plans, budgets and activity plans. However, for this kind of management to work, a results-based WoGM&ES would require appropriate alignment with annual plans and other organisational strategies.

The crucial aspects of emphasis under Step 6 include: i) identifying key monitoring types and levels; ii) providing linkages between implementation-monitoring and results-monitoring; iii) incorporating key principles in building an M&E system; iv) identifying the needs of every system for M&E; v) taking into account the data quality triangle; vi) performing data analysis; vii) attaining results using partnership; and viii) conducting pre-tests for data collection instruments [28].

Step 7: Evaluative Information to Support Decision Making and Results Culture

In the previous steps, the focus was on 'monitoring', and not on 'evaluation'. The emphasis was on articulating the need to organise a robust M&E system that could provide continuous tracking of performance to help managers administer their duties informatively [7-11]. However, since monitoring data do not provide the basis for ascribing causality and attributions for change, evaluation findings become critical to bridge this gap. [46] defined evaluation as an assessment of a planned, ongoing or a completed intervention with a view to determining its relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. The incorporation of lessons learned into decision-making processes is the major intention of commissioning and undertaking evaluations for development interventions. Thus, it is now appropriate to examine the evaluation function in M&E systems. The emphasis should be on the complementarity of evaluation to monitoring exercises. Therefore, as complementary and methodologically different undertakings, it is important that governments that should seek to develop their results-based WoGM&ES should attend fully to both monitoring and evaluation. More importantly, these systems need to be built with a known intention, that of obtaining evidence-based evaluation findings and information for use by government officials and partners on informing decisions such as those pertaining to public resource management [28, 14, 19-22].

Step 8: Analysing and Reporting Findings

"Reporting is too often the step to which evaluators give the least thought" [28]. To that extent, analysis and reporting ensure that performance information, which is derived from monitoring and evaluation, is utilised as a tool for management. The undertaking and commitment to in-depth analysis and reporting performance findings is supposed to be given prominence since they determine a number of success factors, such as the content of reports, periods of reporting, and the targeted audience for disseminating the reports. In addition, the technical capacities of government and organisations are assessed based on the methodological dimensions of gathering, assessing, analysing and reporting [65,26,25]. Aspects of focus under Step 8 include: i) utilisation of monitoring information and evaluation findings; ii) identifying the audiences and providing them with appropriate information; iii) presenting performance data in a non-technical and understandable format; and iv) managing poor performance results appropriately [28,31].

Step 9: Using the Findings

The fundamental aim of building and sustaining a stronger WoGM&ES is to utilise the results and findings generated from it. Such results-based M&E systems are crucial to performance

improvement by development agencies, including governments. Organisations and governments endeavour to create M&E systems not only to produce continuous results-based data and information, but ultimately to have those results and feedback in the domains of appropriate users in a timely manner to inform public management processes [28,35,38,40,41]. In summary, therefore, the focus of Step 9 is on: i) the way in which performance findings are used; ii) the added benefits of utilising the findings: and iii) the availability of strategies for information sharing [43-45].

Step 10: Sustaining the Monitoring and Evaluation System Within Government

Step 10 is the final stage of the model and has to do with sustaining the WoGM&ES. The emphasis is that instead of being regarded as short-term undertakings, M&E systems should be seen as long-term efforts [50,51]. Thus, sustaining such systems in governments and organisations recognises the long-term process involved in ensuring M&E data and information uptake. Of particular interest under Step 10 are i) six critical components of sustaining WoGM&ESs, which are results oriented (demand clear roles and responsibilities, trustworthy and credible information, accountability, capacity, incentives); ii) the role of incentives and disincentives; iii) challenges in sustaining a results-based M&E system; iv) evaluation and validation of M&E systems and information; and v) positive cultural change experienced or stimulated by M&E in governments and organisations [28,54-56].

CONCLUSION

The main aim of the paper was to provide a discussion of the essentials needed to build a stronger whole-of-government M&E system in general and the Zambian case in particular. Accordingly, it articulated the most important aspects by providing an understanding that M&E systems are crucial to keeping up with good governance tenets of transparency and accountability and inclusive and participatory sustainable development towards the attainment of poverty reduction and improved living standards of people. Conceptually, the paper highlighted elements that governments must address if their WoGM&ESs were to be robust, sustainable and relevant to their development processes and aspirations. The paper discussed the need for governments to ensure that the supply and demand sides of their M&E systems were fully developed in a balanced manner. Should an M&E system have a more developed supply side than a demand side, it risked being redundant for non-uptake of its results. Another challenge involves a strengthened demand side, while the supply side is weak. In such instances, stakeholders or users may continue to make decisions informed by information without evidence, thereby implementing failed policies, programmes and projects [4,58,57]. In addition, the paper cautioned that political and technical issues and ownership of M&E systems constitute central determinants of success. The paper ends by listing the ten steps that are significant when building a robust WoGM&ES [28,61,44].

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