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UTILIZATION OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION (M&E) TOOLS AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY AGRICULTURAL PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY CARITAS IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the utilization of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools and their impact on the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. The study was guided by the research objective which sought to establish the extent to which utilization of M&E tools influences the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by caritas in Meru County, Kenya. The research hypotheses related to the objectives were tested. A pragmatic research paradigm and a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews were adopted. The study found that utilization of M&E Tools which had (R^2 = 0.013 t=1.507 and P=0.134 which is greater than 0.05) had no significant positive relationship between M&E Tools and the Sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for improving M&E practices, including strengthening capacity, enhancing community engagement, and improving resource mobilization.*

KEYWORDS: M&E Tools, Sustainability, Baseline survey, Budget analysis, Logical framework, Stakeholder Analysis, Community Agricultural Projects.

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Community agricultural projects play a vital role in addressing food security challenges and promoting economic development, particularly in rural areas of developing countries like Kenya. These projects are often supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Caritas, which provide resources and technical assistance to empower local communities. However, ensuring the sustainability of these projects remains a significant concern. According to Omondi et al. (2021), sustainable development initiatives require a comprehensive understanding of local contexts, including socio-economic dynamics, environmental factors, and community needs. In Meru County, Kenya, where Caritas is actively involved in supporting community agricultural projects, there is a need for tailored interventions that address specific challenges and leverage local resources effectively.

Nyaga and Gitau (2023) highlight the importance of integrating environmental sustainability into community agricultural projects. They emphasize the interconnectedness between agricultural productivity, environmental conservation, and community resilience, underscoring the need for holistic approaches that promote both socio-economic development and environmental stewardship. Furthermore, Wambua and Mutua (2022) discuss the potential of digital technologies in enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of agricultural development projects. They emphasize the role of digital tools in improving data collection, analysis, and decision-making processes, thereby increasing project transparency, accountability, and impact.

Despite these insights, there is limited understanding of the utilization and effectiveness of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools in community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County. M&E processes are essential for assessing project progress, identifying challenges, and informing adaptive management strategies. However, there is a need to examine the extent to which M&E tools are utilized and their impact on project sustainability.

Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by investigating the utilization of M&E tools and their impact on the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. By identifying best practices, challenges, and opportunities for improvement, the study aims to inform the design and implementation of future interventions that maximize benefits for local communities and promote long-term sustainability.

Statement of the Problem

Community agricultural projects are vital for enhancing food security and economic development in rural areas, particularly in developing countries like Kenya. However, ensuring their sustainability poses significant challenges. Despite the recognized importance of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools in assessing project effectiveness and sustainability, there is limited understanding of their utilization and impact on community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya.

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According to Omondi et al. (2021), there is a lack of clarity regarding the extent to which M&E tools are utilized and their effectiveness in enhancing the sustainability of community agricultural projects in Meru County. This gap in knowledge inhibits the ability of organizations like Caritas to make informed decisions and allocate resources effectively, ultimately affecting the long-term impact and success of these projects.

Therefore, the central problem addressed in this study is the lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the utilization of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools and their impact on the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. This statement of the problem provides a foundation for investigating the utilization and impact of M&E tools on the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya.

Research Question

How does the combined M&E Tools influence sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya?

Study Objective

To determine how utilization of combined M&E Tools influences the sustainability of community-based projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya.

Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between the utilization of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools and the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the utilization of M&E tools in community agricultural projects, particularly in the context of Meru County, Kenya. The recommendations generated will inform Caritas and other development organizations on strategies for improving M&E practices to enhance project sustainability and maximize impact on local communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community agricultural projects, often supported by organizations like Caritas, are crucial for enhancing food security and socio-economic development in rural areas. Effective Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are essential for assessing project progress and ensuring sustainability. This literature review examines the utilization of combined M&E tools, including baseline surveys, budget analysis, Logical Framework Approach (LFA), and Stakeholder Analysis, and their impact on the sustainability of community agricultural projects in Meru County, Kenya.

Utilization of M&E Tools and the Sustainability of Community Agricultural Projects

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Recent research underscores the importance of integrating multiple M&E tools to comprehensively assess project performance and sustainability. A study by Okumu et al. (2020) emphasizes the value of baseline surveys in establishing a reference point for measuring project impact and progress over time. These surveys provide essential data on project beneficiaries, their needs, and existing conditions, facilitating informed decision-making and resource allocation.

Research by Okumu et al. (2020) suggests that baseline surveys provide valuable data for designing targeted interventions, monitoring progress, and measuring impact. Similarly, Kinyua and Muthuri (2021) argue that budget analysis helps ensure accountability, transparency, and efficient resource allocation, ultimately contributing to project sustainability. Budget analysis is a critical component of M&E, as highlighted by Kinyua and Muthuri (2021). Their research emphasizes the importance of tracking financial resources and expenditures to ensure efficient use of funds and alignment with project objectives. By analyzing budget allocations and expenditures, organizations like Caritas can identify financial bottlenecks, address resource gaps, and enhance project sustainability.

The Logical Framework Approach (LFA) is a widely used tool for project planning, implementation, and M&E. According to Kamau and Nyaga (2022), LFA provides a structured framework for defining project objectives, activities, outputs, and outcomes, as well as indicators for monitoring progress and evaluating impact. By incorporating LFA into M&E processes, organizations can ensure alignment between project activities and desired outcomes, enhancing project effectiveness and sustainability.

The logical framework approach is a major contributor to the sustainability of any community development project. The World Bank claims that the framework can communicate the vital elements of projects throughout their life cycles (Ika, 2012). The framework, in this case, is utilized to design projects, improve the processes of monitoring projects and strengthen the processes of evaluating projects. Therefore, it can be said that M&E tools have continually been viewed as a vital success factor in the sustainability of projects. This has been supported by Gwadoya (2012) who states that M&E tools act as learning tools besides sustainably enhancing the management of resources.

Community participation in projects has been influencing the sustainability of community-based projects. One of the tools used to identify the right stakeholders to be involved in projects is the stakeholder analysis tool. Identifying the right stakeholders makes it easy for the community to be involved in projects. It has been found that community involvement during the initiation and implementation stage of the projects influences ownership of the projects hence community derives satisfaction from this leading to sustainability. The study also found out that community involvement had a substantial influence on the sustainability of donor-funded agricultural projects, followed by M&E then the availability of resources while training of project staff had the least effect on the sustainability of community-based projects. The study disclosed the frequency of monitoring opportunities for improving the sustainability of the projects and which facilitated negotiations and discovery of gaps and suggested the way forward. The study concluded that community involvement, availability of resources, training of project staff and frequent M&E is very vital in the continuity and sustainability of projects funded by churches. The study recommends that there should be enhanced community participation in community-based projects.

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Furthermore, the integration of LFA and Stakeholder Analysis into M&E processes enhances project planning, implementation, and stakeholder engagement, as highlighted by Kamau and Nyaga (2022) and Muriuki and Gitonga (2023). These tools provide a systematic framework for setting objectives, defining roles and responsibilities, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, thereby promoting project ownership and sustainability.

Stakeholder Analysis is essential for identifying and engaging relevant stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle. A study by Muriuki and Gitonga (2023) highlights the importance of understanding stakeholder interests, power dynamics, and relationships to promote collaboration, ownership, and sustainability. By involving key stakeholders in M&E processes, organizations can leverage local knowledge and resources, build partnerships, and enhance project relevance and impact. In the context of donor-funded projects, stakeholders' participation plays a major role in the sustainability of projects.

Stakeholders are defined by Aaltonen and Kujala (2010) as persons or institutions actively involved in, with, or whose interests are impacted by project implementation, whether positively or negatively. As a result, stakeholders tend to have a substantial influence on the project, project members and project's deliverables. On the other hand, the budget limitation is the major hindrance to project sustainability. This implies that the utilization of budget effectively as a tool of monitoring and evaluation is a key factor in the success of any project. Various scholars like Bahrami, Bazzaz and Sajjadi (2012) have indicated that since the process of implementing projects costs money, then the amount of money incurred in that process depends largely on the ambition of the people who implement projects. This means that if projects are to be sustainable, then money and other valuable resources such as time and human resources need to be deployed effectively. At the same time, stakeholders should determine right from the early stages of a project the viability of their projects to determine whether it would be worth pursuing them or not. In so doing, they develop rough estimates of the money they require to run their projects effectively.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) plays a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of community agricultural projects. In the context of Meru County, Kenya, where Caritas is actively involved in supporting such initiatives, recent research has shed light on the significance of M&E tools in enhancing project outcomes. Omondi et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of incorporating participatory M&E approaches in community agricultural projects, highlighting how such methods empower local stakeholders and contribute to project sustainability. Their study underscores the need for Caritas and similar organizations to engage community members actively in the monitoring and evaluation process to ensure the relevance and long-term impact of interventions.

Building on this perspective, Wambua and Mutua (2022) explore the role of digital technologies in M&E within agricultural development projects in Kenya. Their findings indicate that the adoption of digital M&E tools not only improves data collection and analysis but also enhances transparency and accountability, thereby promoting the sustainability of interventions supported by organizations like Caritas. Furthermore, Nyaga and Gitau (2023) emphasize the importance of incorporating indicators related to environmental sustainability and climate resilience into M&E frameworks for agricultural projects in Meru County. Their research underscores the interconnectedness between agricultural productivity, environmental

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conservation, and community resilience, highlighting the need for comprehensive M&E systems that capture these dimensions.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the integration of key concepts related to community agricultural projects, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools, and project sustainability. The framework provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between these concepts and guiding the analysis of data collected during the study.

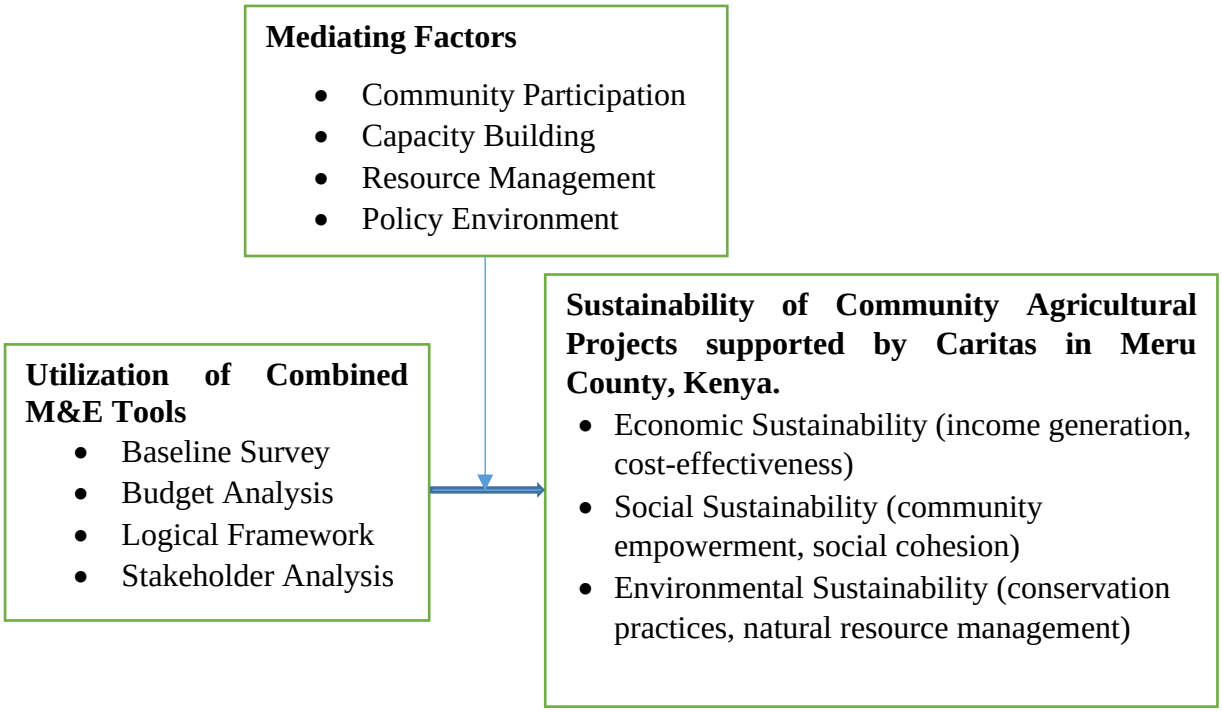

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework on the utilization of combined monitoring and evaluation tools, and sustainability of community-based agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya.

Summary of Literature

In summary, recent literature emphasizes the significance of participatory and environmentally-focused M&E approaches in enhancing the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. The utilization of combined M&E tools, including baseline surveys, budget analysis, Logical Framework Approach (LFA), and Stakeholder Analysis, plays a crucial role in enhancing the sustainability of community agricultural projects. By systematically assessing project inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes, organizations can identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement, leading to more effective and sustainable interventions. Future research should

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focus on exploring innovative approaches to M&E and assessing their effectiveness in improving project sustainability in the context of community agricultural development.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research methodology employed in the study to investigate the utilization of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools and their impact on the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. The methodology encompasses research design, data collection methods, sampling techniques, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. This approach allows for triangulation of data from multiple sources, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. The quantitative component involves surveys to assess the utilization of M&E tools, while the qualitative component includes interviews to explore stakeholders' perspectives and experiences in greater depth.

Target Population

The target population for the study was 59 farmer groups with a total of 997 members (Table 3.1) plus the 24 Caritas project staff as illustrated in Table 3.2.

Table 1: Study Target Population for Farmer Groups

Sub-county	No. of Groups	Members		Total
		Female	Male	
Buuri	31	271	174	445
Tigania West	14	158	124	282
Imenti Central	14	139	131	270
Total	59	568	429	997

Source: Caritas Meru Records (2020)

Sample Size for Farmer Groups

The sample size for this study was 51 farmer groups consisting of 153 officials of the groups. Since the population for Project staff is small the researcher did not sample them, but used census to include all of them in the study. Therefore the total number of respondents in this study was 153 farmer groups' leaders plus the 24 Caritas project officers. Hence the total sample size was 177 (Table 3.3 and Table 3.4 respectively).

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Table 3: Sample Size Determination for Farmers groups

Sub-county	Target Population	Sample size		Percentage
		Farmer Groups	3 top officials per group	
Buuri	31	27	81	52%
Tigania West	14	12	36	24%
Imenti Central	14	12	36	24%
Total	59	51	153	100%

Sampling Techniques

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who have direct involvement or expertise in community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County. The sample includes project beneficiaries, Caritas staff, local government officials, and other key stakeholders. The sample size will be determined based on the principles of saturation, ensuring that data collection continues until thematic saturation is reached and no new information emerges.

Data Collection Methods

A structured questionnaire was administered to project group leaders and Caritas staff to gather quantitative data on the utilization of M&E tools. The survey included closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items to assess the influence of utilization of M&E tools on the sustainability of, such as frequency of data collection, use of indicators, and perceived effectiveness of M&E processes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including Caritas program managers, agricultural extension officers, and local government representatives. The interviews explored stakeholders' perspectives on M&E practices, challenges faced, and strategies for improving M&E effectiveness in community agricultural projects.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency. To summarize the utilization of M&E tools. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically, following a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data to identify recurring themes and patterns.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS/RESULTS

The research aimed to investigate the utilization of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools and their impact on the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. The study focused on four primary M&E tools: baseline surveys, budget analysis, Logical Framework Approach (LFA), and Stakeholder Analysis. The findings provide insights into the effectiveness of these tools in promoting project sustainability, identifying challenges, and suggesting areas for improvement.

Utilization of Combined M&E Tools

Baseline surveys were effectively used to gather initial data on the socio-economic conditions of project beneficiaries. This data was crucial for setting realistic targets, designing relevant interventions, and monitoring progress. The availability of baseline data facilitated the tracking of changes over time, allowing for a clear assessment of project impact on beneficiary livelihoods.

Budget analysis revealed that many projects faced issues with financial management, including under-spending or misallocation of funds. Regular budget reviews helped in identifying these issues early. Proper budget analysis ensured better financial oversight and resource allocation, contributing to the efficient use of funds and financial sustainability of projects.

LFA was instrumental in structuring project planning and implementation. It provided a clear framework for defining objectives, activities, outputs, and outcomes, along with indicators for monitoring progress. The use of LFA enhanced project coherence and alignment with both donor expectations and community needs, leading to more systematic and measurable project outcomes.

Stakeholder Analysis identified key stakeholders and their interests, enabling the project teams to engage effectively with different groups, including local communities, government officials, and other NGOs. Effective stakeholder engagement fostered collaboration, knowledge sharing, and resource mobilization, which were critical for the sustainability of the projects.

The combined use of M&E tools led to more effective project planning, implementation, and evaluation. Projects that utilized these tools reported higher agricultural productivity, improved livelihoods, and greater resilience among beneficiaries. The systematic use of M&E tools ensured that projects remained on track to achieve their objectives, contributing to sustained benefits for the community.

Engaging stakeholders through regular M&E activities promoted transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. Stakeholders felt more invested in the projects, leading to stronger community ownership and commitment. Increased stakeholder engagement enhanced the social sustainability of projects by building trust and ensuring that the projects met the real needs of the community.

Budget analysis and LFA helped identify inefficiencies and gaps in resource allocation, enabling better financial management and strategic resource deployment. Improved resource management practices contributed to the economic sustainability of projects by ensuring that resources were used efficiently and effectively.

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DISCUSSION

The objective was to determine how utilization of combined M&E Tools influences the sustainability of community-based projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. The findings reveal that there was a positive correlation between the utilization of Monitoring and evaluation tools and the sustainability of community-based agricultural projects. These findings imply that an increase in the utilization of monitoring and evaluation tools leads to an increase in the sustainability of the community agricultural project by Caritas in Meru County and vice versa. The findings from this study highlight the critical role that combined Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools play in the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. This discussion section interprets these findings, compares them with existing literature, and explores their implications for policy and practice.

Integration and Effectiveness of M&E Tools

The integration of baseline surveys, budget analysis, Logical Framework Approach (LFA), and Stakeholder Analysis was shown to significantly enhance the effectiveness of community agricultural projects. This aligns with Omondi et al. (2021) and Wambua and Mutua (2022), who emphasize the importance of a multi-faceted M&E approach for comprehensive project assessment and management.

Baseline surveys provided essential data that informed project design and allowed for the measurement of changes over time. This foundational step is critical for setting realistic targets and tracking progress, as supported by Okumu et al. (2020). Accurate baseline data enable project managers to tailor interventions to the specific needs and conditions of the beneficiaries, thereby increasing the relevance and impact of the projects.

Effective budget analysis facilitated better financial oversight and resource allocation. Kinyua and Muthuri (2021) underscore the importance of financial management in project sustainability, noting that regular budget reviews help in identifying discrepancies and ensuring efficient use of funds. This study's findings reinforce the need for robust financial monitoring systems to enhance accountability and transparency.

The LFA provided a structured framework for project planning and evaluation, ensuring that project activities were aligned with desired outcomes. Kamau and Nyaga (2022) highlight the benefits of using LFA to establish clear objectives, indicators, and milestones, which this study confirms as crucial for systematic project management and improved sustainability.

Stakeholder Analysis facilitated effective engagement with key stakeholders, promoting collaboration and ownership. Muriuki and Gitonga (2023) discuss how stakeholder engagement enhances project relevance and sustainability, a finding echoed in this study. By involving stakeholders in M&E processes, projects were able to leverage local knowledge and resources, fostering a sense of community ownership and commitment.

Impact on Sustainability

The comprehensive utilization of these M&E tools led to enhanced project effectiveness and sustainability. The study found that projects with robust M&E practices reported higher agricultural productivity, improved livelihoods, and increased community resilience. These

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outcomes are consistent with findings by Nyaga and Gitau (2023), who emphasize the positive impact of integrated M&E systems on project sustainability. The systematic use of M&E tools ensured that projects remained on track to achieve their objectives. This alignment between project activities and outcomes is crucial for sustained benefits, as highlighted in the literature (Omondi et al., 2021).

Effective stakeholder engagement was a key driver of project sustainability. By promoting inclusivity and transparency, projects fostered trust and collaboration, which are essential for long-term success. This finding supports the work of Muriuki and Gitonga (2023), who argue that stakeholder involvement is critical for project ownership and sustainability. Budget analysis and LFA helped identify inefficiencies and gaps in resource allocation, leading to better financial management. Efficient resource use is a cornerstone of sustainable development, as noted by Kinyua and Muthuri (2021).

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The utilization of combined Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of community agricultural projects supported by Caritas in Meru County, Kenya. By employing a comprehensive approach to monitoring and evaluating project performance, Caritas can better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by local communities, tailor interventions to their needs, and empower them to take ownership of project outcomes. The integration of quantitative and qualitative indicators enables Caritas to assess various aspects of project effectiveness, including inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. Additionally, involving community members in the M&E process fosters local capacity building and ownership, contributing to the long-term sustainability of the projects.

Furthermore, sustainability requires considering environmental and social factors in project design and implementation. By promoting climate-smart agricultural practices, conservation agriculture, and sustainable natural resource management, Caritas can ensure that agricultural projects are not only economically viable but also environmentally and socially sustainable. Overall, the combination of M&E tools provides Caritas with valuable insights into project performance, enabling continuous learning, adaptation, and improvement. By systematically monitoring and evaluating projects, Caritas can empower local communities to build resilient and sustainable livelihoods in Meru County, Kenya, and beyond.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings from this study on the utilization of combined M&E tools and their impact on the sustainability of community agricultural projects in Meru County, Kenya, suggest several avenues for future research. Addressing these areas will help to deepen understanding and improve the practice of M&E in agricultural development projects. There is a need for Longitudinal Studies on M&E Impact to track the long-term effects of M&E tools on project sustainability. This can provide comprehensive data on how M&E practices influence project outcomes over extended periods, offering insights into the sustainability of benefits and the evolution of project impacts. The focus of the suggested study should be to assess changes in

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agricultural productivity, community resilience, and socio-economic conditions of beneficiaries over time.

A research on Technological Integration in M&E is suggested. The objective is to explore the role of digital technologies in enhancing M&E processes.This is because the emerging technologies such as mobile applications, remote sensing, and data analytics can improve data accuracy, accessibility, and real-time monitoring. The focus of such study should be to evaluate the effectiveness of specific technologies in data collection, analysis, and reporting; identifying challenges and best practices for technology adoption in rural settings.

A study on Capacity Building Strategies to determine the most effective capacity-building approaches for improving M&E skills among project staff and beneficiaries is suggested. The rationale of such a study should be to enhance the skills and knowledge of those involved in M&E for accurate data collection, analysis, and utilization. The study can focus on comparing different training programs, workshops, and on-the-job training methods; assessing their impact on M&E effectiveness and project outcomes.

A study on Environmental Sustainability and M&E to explore the integration of environmental sustainability indicators into M&E frameworks for agricultural projects, is suggested. Such a study is critical because ensuring environmental sustainability is crucial for the long-term success of agricultural projects. The focus of the study ought to be developing and testing indicators for environmental impact assessment; evaluating the effectiveness of M&E tools in promoting environmentally sustainable practices.

Finally, a study to examine how M&E practices address gender and inclusivity issues in community agricultural projects is suggested. The rationale for this is that ensuring that M&E frameworks are inclusive and gender-sensitive can enhance project relevance and impact. The focus area should be assessing the participation of women and marginalized groups in M&E processes; evaluating the impact of inclusive M&E practices on project sustainability and community empowerment.

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