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The role of monitoring and evaluation in implementing South Africa's NDP 2030: A conceptual and documentary review

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Abstract

South Africa has faced socio-economic challenges in the past, worsened by the apartheid government. The country experienced poverty, unemployment, and inequality primarily for Black Africans. To address ongoing issues of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, the National Development Plan 2030 has been created and is currently being implemented, and for effective implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation are crucial. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in the implementation of the South African National Development Plan 2030, guided by Results-Based Management (RBM), supported by the Theory of Change (ToC). This study adopts a qualitative, desktop research design, using a conceptual and documentary review approach. The study relies on secondary data, utilizing document analysis to collect information from various sources, including policies and journals. Data is then examined thematically. The findings reveal that challenges include misalignment of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices, limited data, capacity constraints, and low stakeholder engagement. The study suggests enhancing capacity-building, improving data systems, and aligning M&E frameworks with NDP to enhance evaluation effectiveness and promote sustainable development. The study contributes to ongoing discussions on public sector reform and development planning in South Africa. Accurate and timely data, aligned with performance indicators, is crucial for successful NDP implementation, enabling informed decision-making, progress tracking, and meaningful change.

Keywords: National Development Plan; Monitoring; Evaluation; Monitoring and Evaluation; Development; Implementation; Public administration

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1. Introduction

South Africa has long struggled with entrenched socio-economic challenges, a legacy exacerbated by the apartheid regime, which systematically marginalized Black Africans and restricted their access to resources, education, and economic opportunities (Matyana and Thusi, 2023). Despite the democratic transition in 1994, poverty, unemployment, and inequality remain persistent, particularly in rural areas and urban informal settlements, highlighting the slow pace of transformation in addressing historical injustices. In response, the post-apartheid government has implemented various socio-economic programmes, including the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and, more recently, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, designed to provide a long-term framework for tackling these challenges (Matyana and Thusi, 2023).

While the NDP 2030 explicitly prioritizes poverty alleviation, job creation, and inequality reduction as central objectives, the effectiveness of these policies is undermined by systemic issues such as corruption, skills shortages, and societal resistance to change. This tension between ambitious policy frameworks and persistent structural barriers underscores the complexity of translating development plans into tangible socio-economic outcomes in South Africa.

The NDP 2030 builds on this context by setting an ambitious agenda to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 through promoting social cohesion, mobilizing citizen participation, fostering an inclusive economy, building capabilities, enhancing state capacity, and encouraging collaborative leadership to tackle complex socio-economic challenges (Presidency Republic of South Africa, 2012). By articulating these strategic priorities, the plan recognizes that sustainable development in South Africa requires not only economic growth but also coordinated societal effort and effective governance structures. Central to this agenda is the reduction of youth unemployment, which remains a critical barrier to social and economic transformation, to lower the overall unemployment rate from 24.9% in June 2012 to 14% by 2020 and 6% by 2030 (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2020).

Achieving this goal is essential for providing meaningful opportunities to young people, breaking cycles of poverty, and enhancing national productivity. However, current statistics for youth unemployment are particularly severe, exceeding 60% for the 15-24 age group, and many South Africans are excluded from the labor market entirely. This indicates that youth unemployment remains very high, exposing persistent structural constraints such as skills mismatches, limited access to quality education and training, and inadequate economic absorption of the labour force. This gap between policy aspirations and socio-economic realities illustrates the ongoing challenges in translating long-term development strategies into measurable outcomes and highlights the need for adaptive, well-coordinated policy interventions and sustained institutional support to overcome entrenched inequalities.

Auriacombe and Meyer (2020) assert that the South African government has committed to building a capable developmental state by strategically directing available resources toward achieving the objectives of the NDP. This commitment reflects an understanding that development requires not only policy articulation but also the institutional capacity to implement and monitor progress effectively. Within this framework, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) promotes performance Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) as a central management tool, enhancing government capacity and strengthening the effectiveness of service delivery initiatives (The Presidency, 2014). The emphasis on M&E underscores the recognition that without systematic oversight, even well-designed policies risk failing to translate into meaningful outcomes for citizens. Moreover, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) mandates the creation of a united and democratic state that utilizes public resources efficiently and ensures equitable service delivery, providing a legal foundation for developmental governance.

Despite these institutional frameworks, progress under the NDP has been uneven; while certain priorities have advanced, critical areas continue to lag, a concern amplified by the proximity of the 2030 deadline. The Presidency (2025) highlights the urgent need to eradicate extreme poverty, including reducing the proportion of individuals living in households with a monthly income below R419 per person. However, existing social assistance mechanisms, such as the R370 grant, remain insufficient to meet basic needs, illustrating the persistent gap between policy intent and the lived realities of vulnerable populations. This discrepancy points to structural limitations, resource constraints, and implementation challenges that continue to hinder the attainment of the developmental state envisioned in both the NDP and the Constitution.

Statistics South Africa (2008) emphasizes that in democratic states, robust statistical systems are essential for evaluating and measuring the impact of policies, estimating progress toward national priorities, and assessing the effectiveness of interventions targeting social challenges such as crime and poverty. This underscores that reliable data is not merely technical but foundational to informed decision-making and strategic governance. The constitutional mandate for efficiency and ethical use of resources further reinforces the importance of effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a mechanism for ensuring that public funds achieve their intended outcomes. In this regard, Masilo et al. (2021) differentiate between monitoring, which provides continuous oversight to support management and accountability, and evaluation, which delivers deeper insights into programme performance and the nature of change. Similarly, Mviko (2015) argues that an effective M&E system not only enhances accountability but also strengthens managerial competencies and service delivery, highlighting its role in improving both governance and operational outcomes.

Expanding this perspective to an international context, the OECD (2025) notes that integrating evaluation with performance budgeting and spending reviews facilitates evidence-informed policymaking and promotes fiscally responsible governance. Furthermore, the OECD (2022) defines evaluation as a structured, evidence-based assessment of public interventions, examining their relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability, demonstrating that evaluation serves as a critical tool for understanding both short- and long-term policy outcomes. Collectively, these perspectives highlight that systematic M&E is indispensable for bridging the gap between policy design and tangible socio-economic results, ensuring that interventions are both accountable and responsive to public needs.

Mabizela and Zwane (2023) assert that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is central to assessing organisational activities, identifying gaps, and strengthening governance through accountability, highlighting its role as a mechanism for ensuring that public institutions operate effectively and transparently. In a similar vein, Mahlala (2024) describes M&E as the cornerstone of public service effectiveness, emphasizing that without systematic assessment, the quality and impact of government programmes cannot be reliably measured. Mle (2014) reinforces this perspective by noting that a robust M&E framework is essential to ensure that government initiatives are actively implemented rather than stagnating, illustrating how M&E directly influences programme execution and service delivery outcomes.

The Public Service Commission (2014) further situates the rise of M&E within a global context, linking its growth to increasing demands for transparency and accountability in institutions managing public resources, and underscoring its significance in enhancing public trust. Despite its critical role, integrating M&E into planning and operational processes in South Africa continues to face persistent challenges, including limited capacity, resource constraints, and uneven institutional adoption, which both restrict the full potential of M&E and highlight areas for strategic improvement. This tension reflects the ongoing need to strengthen M&E systems to ensure that policies translate into measurable, effective outcomes.

Although DPME produces extensive monitoring reports, diagnostic reviews, and evaluation findings, these documents present implementation challenges in fragmented or sector-specific ways. They do not offer a con-

solidated analytical framework that explains how and why these challenges persist in relation to NDP implementation. Furthermore, existing literature tends to describe challenges rather than propose a structured analytical model for understanding their interconnections. This study fills this gap by proposing a new way of structuring NDP-related monitoring and evaluation challenges into coherent analytical categories. Through a conceptual and documentary review, the paper synthesises existing evidence and reorganises M&E constraints around systemic themes such as institutional capacity limitations, data governance weaknesses, evidence-use barriers, and intergovernmental coordination issues. This analytical structuring provides a deeper understanding beyond the narrative descriptions found in DPME reports. The study therefore contributes new insights by offering a framework that enhances interpretation, strengthens conceptual clarity, and supports more effective evidence use in NDP implementation.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section focuses on the introduction, followed by a second part discussing the problem statement, motivation, and contribution of the study. The literature review includes both theoretical and empirical frameworks that shed light on the link between M&E and the National Development Plan 2030. The third part presents background information on the research methodology. Afterward, the study provides an analysis of the findings, including discussions and implications. Finally, the paper concludes with key points, recommendations, future research directions, and limitations.

1.1. Problem

Despite the centrality of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to the successful implementation of South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, persistent weaknesses in the country's M&E architecture continue to undermine the plan's intended outcomes. Government departments generate substantial monitoring data and participate in evaluation processes led by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME). However, the information produced is often fragmented, inconsistently utilized, or weakly integrated into planning, budgeting, and decision-making processes. As a result, M&E systems have not translated into improved implementation performance, especially in areas central to the NDP, such as employment creation, poverty reduction, capability building, and service delivery improvement. One of the contributing factors to these shortcomings is the insufficient use of effective monitoring and evaluation tools in place to track progress, inform policymaking, and ensure accountability. Although the monitoring and evaluation mechanism has been integrated into national and departmental strategies, its impact on the actual implementation of NDP 2030 remains unclear.

1.2. Research aim

This study aims to explore the role of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in the implementation of the South African National Development Plan 2030, and provide recommendations to address the challenges impeding effective NDP.

1.3. Research questions

- How are current M&E systems aligned with NDP 2030 targets on poverty, unemployment, and inequality?
- What conceptual foundations and policy framework inform the role of monitoring and evaluation in the implementation of the NDP 2030?
- How can the structuring of M&E challenges be improved to strengthen accountability, coordination, and learning across government departments responsible for NDP delivery?

1.4. Motivation of the study

This paper contributes to existing knowledge by proposing a new way of structuring NDP-related monitoring and evaluation challenges, moving beyond the descriptive reporting found in DPME documents and much of the literature. Through a desktop-based conceptual and documentary review, the study synthesizes M&E constraints into coherent analytical categories such as institutional capacity, data and evidence governance, coordination limitations, and evidence-use gaps. This structured approach offers a clearer understanding of how and why M&E systems struggle to influence NDP implementation outcomes. The contribution, therefore, lies in providing an analytical framework that enhances interpretation, supports more strategic policy responses, and strengthens the integration of M&E within South Africa's long-term development planning. It adds to theoretical knowledge while providing empirical insights relevant to South Africa.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

2.1.1. Theoretical framework: results-based management, public performance

This study relies on Results-Based Management (RBM) theory. According to the United Nations Development Group (2011), RBM is a management strategy in which all actors, contributing directly or indirectly to achieving a set of results, ensure that their processes, products, and services contribute to achieving desired outputs, outcomes, and higher-level goals. RBM emphasizes measuring outcomes and impacts, rather than just activities or outputs, making it relevant for evaluating the South African National Development Plan (NDP) 2030.

Masombuka and Thani (2023) note that performance management and critical evaluation of government program outcomes became a hallmark of President Jacob Zuma's administration. In the context of the NDP, RBM provides a framework to assess whether programs targeting poverty, unemployment, and inequality produce measurable impacts, such as whether skills development initiatives effectively translate into job creation (Theme 1: misalignment of M&E with NDP goals). When monitoring focuses on outputs rather than outcomes, RBM assumptions about the causal link between activities and results are violated, and this is evident in the NDP, where training programs often do not correspond to actual employment opportunities.

Thwala et al. (2020) argue that performance indicators must consider multiple factors to ensure that outputs and outcomes align with organizational goals. In the NDP context, this principle relates to poor disaggregation of data for inequality reduction, where indicators fail to capture differences by region, gender, or socioeconomic group. RBM assumes that accurate and detailed data allow policymakers to detect inequities and take corrective action. When data are aggregated or incomplete, as observed in South Africa, this assumption breaks down, making it difficult to identify who benefits from programs and how outcomes contribute to reducing inequality.

According to Abrahams (2015), M&E practitioners must monitor the performance of national and provincial departments and collaborate across sectors. This principle is directly linked to Theme 3: limited use of M&E evidence in shaping policy decisions, where evaluations exist but are underutilized in planning or adjusting interventions. RBM assumes that evidence informs decision-making to achieve outcomes; however, when findings are ignored or poorly communicated, interventions may continue despite being ineffective. This illustrates a breakdown in the RBM feedback loop that connects monitoring, evaluation, and policy adaptation.

Capacity limitations and institutional weaknesses also map onto RBM assumptions. Effective RBM requires sufficient human, technical, and organizational capacity to collect data, analyze it, and implement findings. In

the NDP, recurring staff shortages, inadequate analytical skills, and fragmented information systems prevent evidence from translating into policy or programmatic improvements. From a ToC perspective, this disrupts the assumed causal pathway between activities and outcomes: even if interventions are theoretically sound, they may fail in practice due to institutional bottlenecks.

Finally, Theme 5: limited stakeholder engagement interacts with both RBM and ToC assumptions. RBM assumes that inclusive processes improve accountability and the relevance of findings, while ToC assumes that stakeholder insights inform the plausibility of causal pathways. In the NDP, insufficient participation from communities and civil society leads to monitoring systems that do not fully reflect local realities, limiting the credibility and effectiveness of interventions. For example, programs aimed at reducing inequality may be technically well-designed but fail to address local barriers to access, undermining both the outputs and outcomes.

The Theory of Change (ToC) complements RBM by providing a qualitative framework to understand why results occur or fail. THE ToC focuses on the logical sequence of changes expected from interventions and the assumptions that underpin them. Using ToC, this study evaluates whether the assumptions behind the NDP hold: for instance, whether skills training indeed leads to employment, whether disaggregated data can guide equity-focused decisions, and whether evidence from M&E informs corrective policy measures. In cases where these assumptions fail, such as when monitoring is misaligned or evidence is underused, the expected changes do not materialize. NDP targets for poverty, unemployment, and inequality remain unmet.

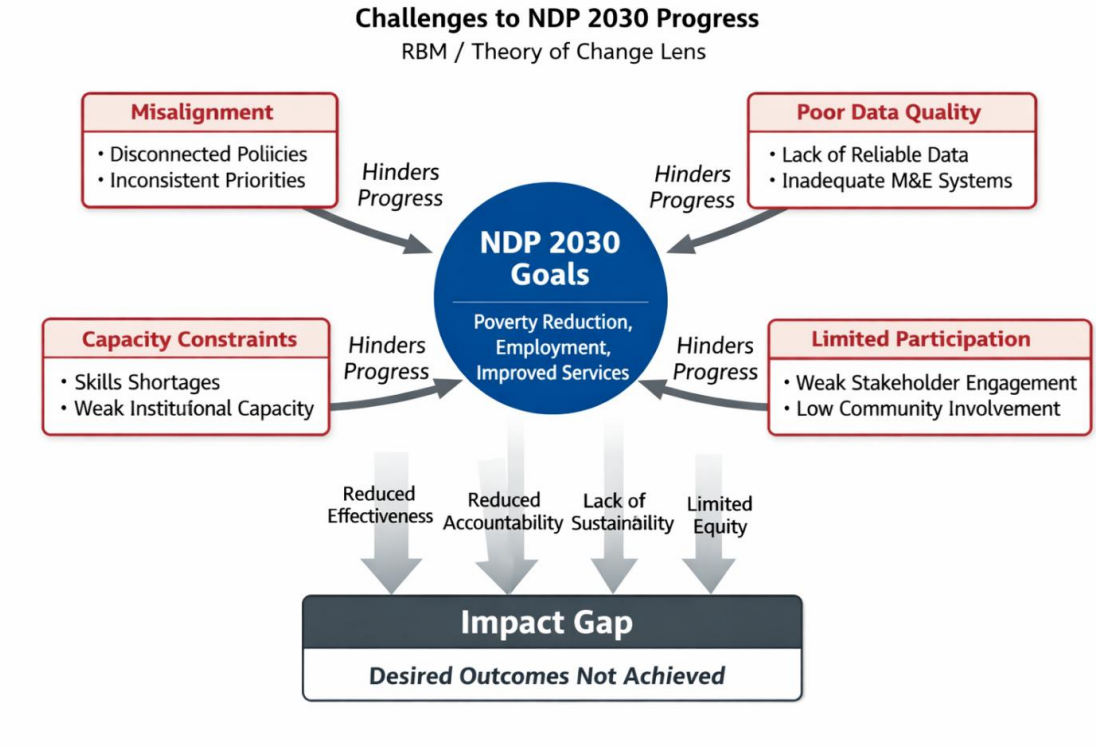


Figure 1. An RBM-theory of change framework illustrating the NDP 2030 gap

Figure 1 illustrates the key challenges constraining progress towards the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 goals through a Results-Based Management (RBM) and Theory of Change lens. It shows that misalignment of policies, capacity constraints, poor data quality, and limited stakeholder participation act as critical barriers that hinder progress towards poverty reduction, employment creation, and improved service delivery.

These challenges weaken the results chain by undermining effective planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. As a consequence, the diagram demonstrates how these constraints lead to reduced effectiveness, weak accountability, lack of sustainability, and limited equity, ultimately resulting in an impact gap where desired NDP outcomes are not fully achieved. The framework highlights the central role of effective monitoring and evaluation in identifying these bottlenecks and strengthening evidence-based decision-making to improve development outcomes.

2.2. Conceptual framework

2.2.1. Monitoring

According to the International Labour Organization (2015), monitoring is a continuous process of collecting and analysing information about a program, comparing actual results against planned outcomes to assess how effectively interventions are implemented. From an analytical perspective, monitoring is not only a tool for tracking outputs but also provides evidence for identifying structural and systemic weaknesses that may impede the achievement of policy objectives, such as poverty reduction, unemployment mitigation, and inequality alleviation under the NDP 2030. Thwala et al. (2020) conceptualize monitoring as ongoing and periodic observation of project implementation, systematically gathering information on work schedules, inputs, delivery, targeted outputs, and other variables to achieve policy effects. While this process captures operational performance, it often lacks integration with higher-level outcome assessments, which limits the capacity of M&E to explain why intended changes occur or fail. Legislative Sector South Africa (2013) highlights that monitoring provides information on the current status of policies and programs relative to targets and outcomes over time. However, an analytical gap persists in connecting monitoring findings to strategic decision-making for addressing cross-cutting socio-economic challenges.

2.2.2. Evaluation

The International Labour Organization (2015) defines evaluation as a systematic and objective assessment of all aspects of a program, including design, implementation, and results, to determine its overall significance. Anselem (2021) further clarifies that evaluation examines relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and impact in relation to specific objectives. From an analytical standpoint, evaluation moves beyond mere compliance tracking to provide insights into the effectiveness of interventions, enabling identification of deeper issues such as institutional capacity, policy misalignment, or contextual barriers affecting NDP implementation.

Thwala et al. (2020) argue that evaluation measures whether program inputs and services improve the quality of people's lives. Although evaluation theoretically captures outcomes, in practice, it is often underutilized to inform iterative program improvement, limiting its potential contribution to policy refinement. Incorporating an analytical lens emphasizes the need for structured frameworks that connect evaluation results with actionable strategies for achieving NDP 2030 targets.

2.2.3. Linking monitoring and evaluation

Anselem (2021) believes that monitoring is essential because consistent follow-up on programmes naturally supports the achievement of intended goals. This reinforces the argument that monitoring is not merely a reporting exercise but a continuous management function requiring institutional discipline**.** Thwala et al. (2020) emphasize that monitoring focuses on inputs and outputs, tracking whether activities are carried out correctly,

while evaluation concentrates on outcomes, comparing situations before and after implementation. Understanding this connection as a continuum rather than separate processes, enabling insights into causal relationships between program activities and national outcomes.

Mthethwa and Jili (2012) similarly state that M&E are powerful management tools that can help government and state institutions improve how tasks are performed to realise a country's vision and mission. Yet, despite these theoretical strengths, the effectiveness of M&E in South Africa remains uneven, suggesting that the core challenge lies not in the conceptual value of M&E but in its operationalization particularly the ability of institutions to use evidence for decision-making rather than for compliance.

The South African National AIDS Council (2017) affirms that effective M&E establishes accountability mechanisms among stakeholders, including civil society, private sector, and donors at multiple government levels. Masombuka and Thani (2023) highlight that linking monitoring and evaluation requires a credible system supported by relevant frameworks, such as the Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation System (GWMES). A critical gap is that despite these frameworks, evidence often remains underutilized in strategic planning and policy decision-making, limiting its capacity to inform integrated NDP implementation.

2.2.4. The principles of monitoring and evaluation inter alia include;

- Contribute to Improved governance
- Be rights-based
- Be development-oriented
- Be undertaken ethically and with integrity
- Be methodologically sound (Limpopo Department of Transport, 2015).

While these principles provide normative guidance, gaps persist in operationalizing them consistently across departments and linking them directly to measurable NDP 2030 outcomes. A structured framework that explicitly ties these principles to performance challenges could strengthen both the analytical value and practical utility of M&E in supporting national development priorities.

2.3. Framework of South African Monitoring and Evaluation and institutional arrangements

Monitoring involves gathering, analyzing, and reporting data on inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, impacts, and external factors to support effective management (The Republic of South Africa, the Presidency, 2007). Evaluation, in contrast, is a time-bound and periodic process that provides credible and actionable information to answer specific questions and guide decision-making by staff, managers, and policymakers. The analytical contribution here lies in framing monitoring as a continuous diagnostic tool and evaluation as a structured assessment mechanism, which together allow a deeper understanding of the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of NDP-related interventions.

The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) derives its mandate from section 85(2)(b-c) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, empowering the President and Cabinet to develop and implement national policy while coordinating the functions of state departments and agencies (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020a). Abrahams (2015) notes that DPME has established national and provincial forums for heads of M&E to share information and coordinate initiatives. Analytically, this institutional arrangement is intended to foster coherence across government; however, gaps remain in translating shared information into systematic policy improvements, reflecting a key limitation in the operationalization of NDP targets.

2.3.1. Monitoring and evaluation framework

The DPME was formally established in 2009 to coordinate government planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes to address poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Matyana and Thusi, 2023). The department operationalizes a systemic approach to policy performance monitoring and evaluation across government through the Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation Policy Framework. Critical analysis indicates that while this framework offers a robust structural foundation, practical challenges persist in ensuring the timely, integrated, and actionable use of evaluation findings across sectors.

The Public Service Commission (2014) reports that it began operationalizing its M&E mandate in 1996, guided by the nine values and principles of public administration embedded in the Constitution. The Presidency (2007) describes the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework as a narrative document outlining the department's approach to developing and managing a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system. This system aims to produce credible and continuous information to enhance service delivery and governance. The Department of Science and Innovation (2020) notes that while the framework is robust and nationwide, it must remain flexible to adapt to future policy changes. Analytical contribution: The flexibility of the framework highlights the potential for Iterative learning; however, the literature indicates that adaptive use of M&E data is often limited, reflecting a persistent gap between system design and practical implementation.

Legislative Sector South Africa (2013) affirms that the development of M&E systems in the South African context has strengthened integration across strategic planning, budgeting, program performance data, statistical quality assurance, and evaluation results. Critical analysis reveals that although structural integration exists on paper, inconsistencies in data quality, evidence utilization, and cross-sector coordination continue to impede the translation of insights into policy decisions. Established in 2010, DPME has grown rapidly as the body responsible for continuous improvement in service delivery and outcomes through planning, monitoring, and evaluation functions of government (The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020b). From an analytical standpoint, the rapid institutional growth of DPME provides an opportunity to consolidate fragmented M&E practices into a structured system, yet evidence suggests that fragmentation and underutilization of data remain persistent challenges in achieving NDP 2030 priorities.

2.3.2. Key South African monitoring and evaluation frameworks

South Africa has developed multiple frameworks to guide the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of government performance, reflecting efforts to strengthen accountability, transparency, and evidence-based policymaking. The National Treasury Framework for Managing Programme Performance Information, 2007 defines critical concepts for managing performance information. Analytically, this framework provides a foundation for systematic performance assessment, yet a key gap is the limited guidance on linking collected data directly to strategic policy adjustments, particularly in complex cross-sectoral interventions aimed at reducing poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

The Policy Framework for Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation, 2007 provides a comprehensive system for monitoring and evaluating all branches of government. According to The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa (2008), the Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation (GWM&E) initiative represents a significant milestone in public service reform since 1994. The GWM&E system, approved by Cabinet in 2005, identifies three critical "data terrains" supporting M&E: program performance information; social, economic, and demographic statistics; and evaluation. Critical analysis indicates that while these data terrains establish a structured foundation for evidence collection, practical challenges persist in integrating these datasets into coherent, decision-relevant insights. Masombuka and Thani (2023) emphasize that planning processes should

create milestones to gauge progress, serving as a crucial interface between planning, monitoring, and evaluation. This highlights the importance of using M&E not just for reporting but as a tool for proactive course correction and strategic learning, an area where current implementation remains inconsistent.

Table 1. Key Monitoring and evaluation frameworks for NDP 2030: Lead institutions and purposes

M&E FRAMEWORK	PURPOSE	LEAD INSTITUTION	RELEVANCE TO NDP
Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation System (GWMES)	Provides an integrated and coherent system for monitoring and evaluating government performance and service delivery	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME)	Serves as the overarching framework for tracking progress towards NDP 2030 goals
National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 Monitoring Framework	Monitors progress towards achieving the long-term vision, objectives, and targets of the	NDP Presidency (DPME)	Core mechanism for assessing implementation and impact of NDP 2030
National Evaluation Policy Framework (NEPF)	Institutionalises evaluation practice and promotes evidence-based policymaking	Presidency (DPME)	Generates evaluative evidence on the effectiveness of NDP interventions
Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT)	Assesses management practices and institutional capacity in government departments	Presidency (DPME)	Supports NDP objective of building a capable and developmental state

Table 1 summarizes the key M&E frameworks guiding the implementation of South Africa's NDP 2030, highlighting the lead institution responsible for each framework and its primary purpose. It shows how different frameworks contribute to tracking progress, ensuring accountability, and informing policy decisions. By clearly linking frameworks to institutional roles and objectives, the table provides an at-a-glance understanding of the M&E landscape, demonstrating how monitoring and evaluation efforts are structured to support the achievement of national development outcomes.

The Strategic Intent for Parliament: Policy Imperatives 2009-2014 (October 2009) identifies key issues influencing parliamentary oversight and policy direction. Analytical contribution here lies in linking legislative oversight with performance monitoring, yet there remains limited evidence of systematic utilisation of these insights to influence national policy priorities in real time.

The National Evaluation Policy Framework (NEPF, 2011) promotes quality evaluations for learning, improving program effectiveness, and enhancing accountability (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2012-2016). The NEPF envisions a National Evaluation Plan (NEP) updated annually, covering interventions considered national priorities. Critically, while the NEPF provides a structured approach for evaluation, it does not fully address how evaluation findings are operationalized across different departments to achieve integrated NDP outcomes. The gap lies in translating evaluation outputs into actionable policy reforms and linking them directly to measurable socio-economic targets.

To ensure the quality of official statistics, the South African Quality Assessment Framework (SASQAF) evaluates data collected by other state organs (Statistics South Africa, 2008). This framework works alongside the National Treasury's Framework for Managing Programme Performance Information. Analytical insight: SASQAF strengthens data credibility, yet the effectiveness of M&E is constrained when high-quality statistics are not systematically interpreted or used in policy decision-making.

The Limpopo Department of Transport (2015) highlights Treasury Regulations 5.3.1, obligating Accounting Officers to establish quarterly reporting procedures for effective performance monitoring, evaluation, and corrective action. This regulatory requirement reflects an analytical contribution, as it embeds accountability mechanisms, but gaps remain in ensuring that the corrective actions directly influence long-term strategic outcomes linked to the NDP 2030.

The Sector Oversight Model adopted in 2011 outlines legislative oversight procedures, while the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT, 2011) focuses on management performance, complementing Treasury's Financial Management Capability and Maturity Model. The Draft Capacity Development Strategy for Public Financial Management (2013) prioritises capacity building to overcome systemic challenges and transform public financial management. Collectively, these instruments illustrate a layered institutional M&E architecture designed to enhance government performance. Critical analysis suggests that, despite this structure, the practical integration of tools and frameworks is often fragmented, and the connection between management performance assessments and actual service delivery outcomes remains weak.

Institutions such as the DPME, National Treasury (NT), and Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) support government efforts to evaluate performance, identify accountability factors, and accelerate service delivery across all government levels. While these institutions establish a credible M&E infrastructure, persistent challenges include limited interdepartmental coordination, uneven data utilisation, and insufficient mechanisms for translating evaluation findings into actionable policy interventions. Addressing these gaps is critical to improving the effectiveness of NDP 2030 implementation.

2.4. Importance of monitoring and evaluation in the public service

Masombuka and Thani (2023) attest that there has been growing interest and extensive information on monitoring and evaluation across various fields, particularly after 1994, as part of efforts to improve governance, accountability, and the state's capacity to deliver quality public services. Analytically, while this proliferation reflects increased attention to M&E, there remains a gap in systematically connecting M&E outputs to actionable policy reforms that directly influence the achievement of NDP 2030 targets. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) promotes democratic ideals such as equity, civic engagement, operational proficiency, developmental focus, responsibility, and openness, mandating adherence by public sector entities.

Conceptually, a national M&E system is defined as the combination of frameworks guiding M&E practices and the institutional capacity to generate and use information to inform development planning, policymaking, and decision-making (Chirau et al., 2020). This framework is crucial for assessing NDP 2030 objectives, as it allows not only measurement of progress but also adaptive refinement of strategies to ensure effectiveness. However, evidence indicates that while frameworks exist, their practical application to support integrated decision-making remains limited.

The Public Service Commission (PSC) has a mandate to monitor and evaluate public administration against the nine values outlined in section 195 of the Constitution (PSC News, 2014). This broad mandate allows assessment of ethical practices, effectiveness, equity, accountability, and representativeness. Critical analysis suggests that while the PSC provides oversight, the translation of these evaluations into actionable improvements across departments is inconsistent, reflecting a persistent gap in operationalizing governance ideals. Legislative Sector South Africa (2013) emphasizes that M&E enables learning among managers and officials by sharing expertise, yet in practice, the systematic application of lessons learned to influence strategic outcomes is underdeveloped.

Evaluation is widely regarded as valuable in public management because it emphasises performance assessment and the efficient use of public finances to ensure greater value for money, efficiency, and effectiveness (Kanyamuna, Kotzé & Phiri, 2019). However, while this normative expectation is well documented, there remains limited examination of how evaluation findings are actually translated into management decisions within South African departments, signalling a gap between theory and practice. Mahlala (2024) argues that the M&E policy aligns with constitutional values of good governance and positions M&E as a tool for performance improvement in the public service. Additionally, Mahlala (2024) suggests that M&E fosters accountability, enhances programme quality, and strengthens the measurement of programme performance. These contributions demonstrate the widely accepted benefits of M&E, yet they also raise an analytical question: if M&E offers such clear governance advantages, why does evidence show persistent implementation weaknesses in NDP-related programmes?

It is therefore vital to monitor and evaluate whether government objectives have been implemented effectively, efficiently, and economically. The Public Service Commission News (2014) asserts that the way public servants are recruited into the Public Service, and how their careers develop, is particularly important for achieving these objectives. This point highlights a critical institutional reality often overlooked in M&E literature: without the right human capacity and professional ethos, M&E systems may exist in form but fail in function. To address these systemic challenges, the South African government, through the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), developed and implemented an enhanced outcomes-based monitoring and evaluation framework intended to demonstrate tangible results across all government departments (Legislative Sector South Africa, 2013). This policy shift reflects an attempt to move beyond procedural compliance towards measurable performance, although scholars still debate whether the framework has achieved consistent implementation across sectors.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in South Africa has yielded mixed results in terms of behavioural change within the public sector. Studies show that M&E has become increasingly institutionalized, with a growing profession, formalized systems, and stronger awareness of evidence use across government (Abrahams, 2015). The establishment of the National Evaluation System (NES) under the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) further shifted behaviour by introducing structured evaluation processes that generated credible findings which, in several cases, informed adjustments to programme design and implementation (Goldman et al., 2015).

Tools such as the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) created more consistent administrative compliance by requiring departments to meet minimum standards in planning, governance, and reporting, thereby encouraging predictable managerial routines (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2012; DPME, 2016). However, evaluation findings do not always translate into behavioural change: for example, the Implementation Evaluation of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) produced clear recommendations, yet follow-up implementation remained uneven across provinces, demonstrating the persistent gap between generating evidence and acting on it (DPME, 2016).

Moreover, audits continue to show that despite widespread monitoring and structured reporting, shortcomings in performance management, financial controls, and infrastructure management remain pervasive, indicating that M&E has not fundamentally corrected weak implementation or accountability failures (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). Overall, while M&E has shifted behaviour towards formal compliance and sporadic evidence use, it has largely failed to drive bigger behavioural changes in implementation practices, consequence management, and service delivery outcomes, limiting its transformative effect on public sector performance.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has been positioned as a central instrument for improving state performance under the National Development Plan 2030, which emphasises evidence-driven decision-making as a

requirement for a capable developmental state. Research shows that the introduction of South Africa's government-wide M&E system initially strengthened routine reporting practices and encouraged departments to align their plans with national priorities, helping to institutionalise performance culture (Engela & Ajam, 2010). However, despite this progress, most behaviour change remains compliance-oriented rather than learning-oriented, with many departments producing reports that satisfy procedural requirements but are not meaningfully used to improve service delivery (Phillips, 2018).

This gap is also reflected in recurring audit findings, where the Auditor-General South Africa shows continued weaknesses in performance information, reliability, and internal controls indicating that M&E outputs are often not translated into corrective behavioural action (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). At local government level, studies confirm similar patterns: M&E systems exist on paper, yet evidence produced is rarely used for decision-making due to capacity constraints, weak accountability incentives, and leadership challenges (Hoosain and Mthethwa, 2020). These shortcomings mean that while M&E frameworks align well with the NDP's vision, their practical impact on behaviour in the public sector remains uneven, limiting their ability to drive the performance improvements the Plan envisages.

2.5. Overview of the National Development Plan, 2030, and indicators and targets

The Presidency (2023) affirms that the main objectives of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 are to reduce unemployment and inequality, and eliminate poverty. These long-term goals demonstrate the NDP's ambition to transform South Africa's socioeconomic landscape; however, scholars increasingly argue that the scale of the challenges facing the country requires not only planning but effective and sustained implementation. To achieve its goals, the NDP requires inclusive economic growth, improved human capabilities, social protection, a capable developmental state, and strong leadership. In South Africa, for instance, the NDP 2030 emphasizes the role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in meeting strategic and developmental objectives, poverty reduction, budget decision-making, and project implementation (National Development Plan, 2012). This emphasis suggests that the NDP conceptualizes M&E not merely as a reporting function but as a strategic driver of state performance, although real-world evidence shows that this potential remains underutilized.

A review conducted by the National Planning Commission shows that although some progress has been made, mainly in social transformation since adoption in 2012 overall progress has been slow. This slow pace raises questions about institutional capacity, policy coherence, and the ability of departments to translate NDP objectives into measurable results. The Presidency (2020) confirms that seven years after adoption, progress toward the NDP's main goals remained below expectations. The country is not on track to meet the 2030 goals of halving poverty, reducing unemployment, and decreasing inequality (Department of Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020a). This persistent underperformance highlights a critical implementation gap that this study seeks to explore, particularly the role of M&E systems in supporting or hindering progress toward these national priorities. This study specifically focuses on unemployment, poverty, and inequality.

2.5.1. Unemployment, poverty and inequality

The NDP 2030 was introduced to reduce the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality, while promoting economic growth and improving service delivery. According to literature, unemployment disproportionately affects young people. The Presidency (2020) states that youth aged 15-24 and 25-34 face unemployment rates of 60.7% and 39.8%, respectively, emphasizing the need for greater female and youth labour force participation. These figures demonstrate that youth unemployment is not only high but structurally entrenched, suggesting that existing labour market interventions are insufficiently aligned with the NDP's transformative ambitions.

Aligned with the NDP's vision, the government aims to reduce unemployment to 6% by 2030. Wakefield et al. (2020) state that unemployment remains high due to limited employment opportunities from government and private sector stakeholders. This analysis shows that labour absorption remains weak, which calls into question whether the economic environment envisioned in the NDP has been realised or supported by enabling policies. Consequently, the government continues to struggle to reach the 6% target, with unemployment standing at 32% in 2024. Statistics South Africa reports an unemployment rate of 32.9% in the first quarter of 2023 among the highest globally (Matyana and Thusi, 2023). The contrast between planned targets and actual outcomes illustrates the tension between policy intent and implementation reality, reinforcing the relevance of examining the M&E systems underpinning the NDP.

This struggle has also been linked to the COVID-19 outbreak, which worsened existing vulnerabilities. Hlayisi (2022) notes that unemployment had already reached a historical high of 29.1% before the pandemic and increased further to 35.3% during COVID-19. These disruptions highlight how external shocks can derail long-term development plans, emphasizing the need for adaptive and evidence-driven policy mechanisms an area where M&E becomes particularly important. Blom et al. (2023) assert that rising unemployment, combined with deepening inequality, reflects broader structural issues in poverty and economic growth. The Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (2020b) similarly acknowledges that poverty, unemployment, and inequality remain deeply rooted and were likely to worsen post-pandemic. This confirms that despite detailed targets, the NDP struggles to function as a shock-resilient strategy, revealing gaps in scenario planning and institutional responsiveness.

2.5.2. Poverty

Matyana and Thusi (2023) argue that poverty was more prevalent during apartheid due to deliberate exclusion of Black South Africans from economic participation; while conditions have improved in the democratic era, progress has been uneven. The National Planning Commission (n.d.) explains that the NDP aims to provide income support to the unemployed through labour-market initiatives such as public works, skills training, and incentives. Yet, persistent poverty levels indicate that these interventions have not been delivered at the scale or integration required to shift poverty trajectories meaningfully. The Commission further argues that increasing employment levels and raising worker earnings through productivity growth are essential for reducing poverty and inequality. This aligns with development theory but remains constrained by South Africa's structural economic challenges, including low investment and skills mismatches.

Blom et al. (2023) argue that poverty and unemployment reinforce each other: poverty limits access to education and training, while unemployment deepens poverty. According to the NDP, by 2030, the proportion of people living below the lower-bound poverty line should have been reduced from 39% to zero, and inequality measured by the Gini coefficient should have declined from 0.69 to 0.60 (The Presidency, 2020, 2025). These ambitious targets reflect the transformative vision of the NDP, yet the trajectory of progress suggests that many goals risk becoming aspirational rather than achievable. The challenge of unemployment also contributes to widening inequality between the rich and poor, particularly among Black youth. This pattern underscores the need for targeted and evidence-based interventions, a gap that M&E systems are expected but not always able to fill.

The Presidency (2023) notes some improvement, with employment rising to 16.7 million people in 2023 from 15.2 million in 2022, an annual growth rate of 6.2%. However, the lower-bound poverty line increased from R810 in 2019 to R1,058 in 2023, while the upper-bound line rose from R1,227 to R1,558 over the same period. This suggests that although employment has grown, the cost of living has escalated faster, eroding gains and deepening vulnerability. The Presidency (2020) emphasizes that opportunities must be supported by investments in human capabilities, including education, skills development, healthcare, and social protection.

The Presidency (2023) further argues that progress requires catalytic interventions that promote sustained growth and empower citizens through skills and economic inclusion. This reinforces the argument that structural transformation depends on human capital investments, a key area where effective M&E can guide resource allocation and track progress. Therefore, ensuring that education, training, and skills development are strengthened remains critical for creating jobs and reducing unemployment in line with NDP 2030 commitments.

2.6. Challenges facing monitoring and evaluation in the National Development Plan, 2030

The Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (2020b) emphasizes that without properly guided, aligned, and integrated M&E systems across all levels of government and societal sectors, progress in implementing the NDP will remain slow. This highlights a systemic gap: while policies and frameworks exist, insufficient integration and coordination hinder their effectiveness in tracking NDP outcomes.

Research by Mthethwa and Jili (2016) identifies skills shortages and inadequate financial resources as key barriers to effective M&E, limiting the capacity to conduct comprehensive evaluations. Kgaphola and Jacob (2020) similarly note that developing and utilizing robust M&E frameworks spanning diagnostic, baseline, design, and ongoing outcome evaluations often suffer due to resource constraints. Critical analysis suggests that without addressing these structural limitations, even well-designed M&E frameworks fail to produce actionable insights for policy adaptation.

Chirau et al. (2022) further underscore the persistent lack of technical skills in the public sector to conduct high-quality evaluations. Legislative Sector South Africa (2013) describes M&E functions as sometimes reflecting "malicious compliance," where practitioners are appointed on an ad-hoc basis, resulting in limited commitment to comprehensive evaluation. This points to a critical gap in institutionalizing M&E as a continuous, strategic function rather than a compliance-driven activity. Moreover, challenges such as declining public trust, weak accountability, and poorly coordinated administrative interfaces hinder the capacity of the state to function as a capable developmental actor (DPME, 2019). Masombuka and Thani (2023) also identify patronage and corruption networks as chronic constraints undermining the development of a capable state.

Funding and capacity remain pressing concerns. The Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (2020a) observes that insufficient funding forces prioritization of capacity building over comprehensive evaluations. Masombuka and Thani (2023) highlight additional constraints, including inconsistent data quality and limited standardization across monitoring and evaluation functions. Fragmented and incompatible data systems impede cross-sectorial performance tracking (DPME, 2014), and Chirau et al. (2022) note that data often lacks timeliness, verification, and reliability. Analytically, these issues illustrate a structural weakness in M&E outputs frequently fail to provide actionable insights for decision-makers, undermining evidence-based governance.

Other systemic challenges include inadequate information management, a lack of coordination culture, focus on activities rather than outcomes, and restrictive legal frameworks (The Presidency, 2012). Capacity deficits and corruption remain persistent threats. Fiscal constraints further limit hiring and capacity-building initiatives, affecting both human capital and operational functionality (Goldman et al., 2019; DPME, 2017). Insufficiently skilled M&E personnel, poorly defined job descriptions, and inconsistent participation by program managers weaken the quality and impact of evaluations (DPME, 2017; Engela & Ajma, 2010). Ambiguous indicators further reduce the ability to monitor real change over time (DPME, 2014).

Finally, timely intervention is critical to prevent loss of public resources due to underperforming programs (The Presidency, 2023). Yet, public engagement in M&E remains limited, reducing transparency, accountability,

and the responsiveness of government programs (Republic of South Africa, 2011). From an analytical perspective, these challenges indicate that while South Africa has a relatively robust M&E framework, its operationalization is hampered by capacity, coordination, and data challenges, suggesting an urgent need for a restructured approach to integrate M&E with strategic NDP objectives.

2.7. Comparative insights: lessons from Kenya and Rwanda

To deepen understanding of how monitoring and evaluation (M&E) influence national development planning, this study draws on comparative experiences from Rwanda and Kenya. Both countries, like South Africa, have adopted long-term development frameworks aimed at socio-economic transformation, and their use of M&E provides valuable lessons. Analytically, these comparisons highlight structural and institutional factors that can strengthen the alignment of M&E with national priorities.

Similar to South African NDP, 20230, Rwanda Vision 2050 sets out the government's aim to shift Rwanda to an upper, middle-income country by 2035, and high-income by 2050, with agriculture and productivity increases playing a prominent role (Perez-Guzman et al., 2022). Rwanda's Vision 2050 demonstrates a strong culture of performance and results-based management. The National Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Guidelines serve as important tools to strengthen the country's results-based M&E system. This system tracks progress and facilitates decision-making by providing credible and timely information, enabling the integration of lessons learned into planning processes for effective implementation of national goals (Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning, 2021).

The Rwandan government has institutionalized M&E through the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, with clearly defined indicators, regular reviews, and performance contracts (Imihigo) at all levels of government. The Imihigo mechanism, designed "to accelerate the achievements of government development programs and priorities" (Imihigo Evaluation FY 2013/2014, 2014), is evaluated at local, ministry, and embassy levels. This approach has been credited with enhancing public sector accountability, improving service delivery outcomes, and institutionalizing a culture of performance (Government of Rwanda, 2020; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021). The analytical contribution here is the demonstration that linking individual and institutional performance to clearly defined metrics enhances both accountability and policy effectiveness.

Kenya's Vision 2030 similarly integrates M&E as a central component of its long-term development plan, aimed at transforming Kenya into an upper-middle-income country with a high quality of life for all citizens by 2030 (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2007). The National Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (NIMES), managed by the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate in the State Department for Planning, monitors progress and guides policymaking. Although Kenya faces challenges such as data inconsistencies and institutional fragmentation, the integration of M&E into budgeting and policy processes represents a significant advance in evidence-based governance (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2019; World Bank, 2020). It is well established that Kenya's coastal region faces challenges related to limited funding, high staff turnover, and insufficient technical expertise, which can hinder the implementation of effective M&E strategies (Kamau and Mirugi-Mukundi, 2019). These challenges can also be compounded to those currently being experienced in South African M&E.

Analytically, Kenya's experience underscores the importance of embedding M&E into both strategic planning and resource allocation processes, enabling responsive adjustments to national programs.

In contrast, South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) has encountered persistent challenges in coordinating M&E systems across different levels of government. Weak utilization of evaluation results limited

institutional capacity, and fragmented coordination mechanisms have constrained its potential to achieve NDP objectives (DPME, 2020b; Zuma et al., 2023). Critically, the South African case illustrates that having comprehensive M&E policies and frameworks is insufficient without a coherent institutional culture, leadership commitment, and clear accountability structures. The experiences of Rwanda and Kenya indicate that political leadership, structured institutional arrangements, and a strong performance culture are essential for effective M&E and, by extension, successful national development plan implementation. These comparative insights suggest that South Africa could benefit from adopting regional best practices, particularly in linking performance management to strategic objectives, institutionalizing accountability mechanisms, and ensuring consistent utilization of evaluation findings to inform policy decisions.

Comparative analysis of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices in Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa highlights several critical challenges within the South African context, particularly in relation to the National Development Plan (NDP) targets on poverty, unemployment, and inequality. First, there is a clear misalignment between M&E practices and the NDP's priority outcomes, as South Africa's evaluation indicators often operate parallel to national planning frameworks, reducing their relevance for tracking progress on poverty, unemployment, and inequality; a similar challenge is noted in Kenya, whereas Rwanda demonstrates strong alignment through its Vision 2050 and NST1 frameworks. Second, the poor disaggregation of data in South Africa undermines efforts to address inequality, with evaluation reports relying primarily on aggregate statistics that mask disparities across districts, gender, and socio-economic groups, a problem also observed in Kenya, contrasting with Rwanda's granular, district-level data systems.

The limited use of M&E in shaping decisions is evident, as findings from evaluations are often underutilised due to low political buy-in, weak incentives, and compliance-oriented practices, whereas Rwanda's design features, such as leadership retreats and performance contracts (Imihigo), enforce evidence-driven decision-making. Fourth, capacity limitations and institutional weaknesses persist, with inconsistent evaluation skills, fragmented M&E units, and insufficient technical resources reducing the effectiveness of the system, again contrasting with Rwanda's centralised professionalisation and training mechanisms. Project Monitoring & Evaluation in Rwanda is not strong owing to poor planning, inadequate tools and methods, poor budgeting, lack of funding, and close due to mismanagement (Mukamwiza and De Dieu Hakizimana, 2021).

Finally, limited stakeholder engagement constrains participatory learning, as civil society, front-line service users, and communities are only marginally involved in planning and evaluation processes, highlighting a structural weakness compared to Rwanda's participatory local governance approaches. Collectively, these lessons indicate that South Africa's M&E system struggles to translate its design into meaningful behavioural change and policy impact, particularly in advancing the NDP's targets, due to misalignment, inadequate data practices, underutilisation of evidence, institutional constraints, and limited engagement with key stakeholders.

Thematic analysis in this study emerged through a systematic review of M&E lesson-practice documents from South Africa, Kenya, and Rwanda, focusing on their relevance to achieving the NDP's targets on poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The documents were carefully read and coded to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and gaps in the design and implementation of M&E systems. Through this process, five central themes emerged. First, misalignment between M&E practices and the NDP's PUI targets was evident, as South Africa's evaluation indicators often operate separately from national planning frameworks, limiting their relevance in tracking poverty, unemployment, and inequality also a challenge observed in Kenya, while Rwanda's indicators are closely aligned with national development goals.

Second, poor disaggregation of data emerged as a recurring issue, with South African M&E relying on aggregate statistics that obscure disparities across districts, genders, and socio-economic groups, contrasting

with Rwanda's granular, district-level data system. It has been reported that there is inequality across different regions, races, and ethnic groups in Kenya (Society of International Development, 2010). Owing to both the lack of data and political resistance, inequality is not a well-studied subject in the country, consequently affecting *Vision 2030*.

Third, the limited use of M&E in shaping decisions was identified, as evaluation findings are often underutilised due to weak political buy-in and compliance-oriented practices, whereas Rwanda demonstrates evidence-driven decision-making through leadership retreats and performance contracts.

Fourth, capacity limitations and institutional weaknesses were evident in fragmented M&E units, inconsistent technical skills, and insufficient resources, reducing the effectiveness of M&E systems, while Rwanda's professionalisation and centralised capacity-building mechanisms provide a contrast. Finally, limited stakeholder engagement emerged as a theme, highlighting minimal involvement of civil society, front-line service users, and communities in M&E processes, which constrains participatory learning and policy responsiveness.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, desktop research design, using a conceptual and documentary review approach. The design allows for critical analysis of existing policy documents, reports, and academic literature to examine how M&E influences the implementation of NDP 2030 goals, particularly poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Desktop research is suitable because the study relies on secondary data, enabling a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge without primary fieldwork, while identifying gaps and patterns in M&E practices.

This study adopts a deductive research approach, guided by the Results-Based Management (RBM) and Theory of Change (ToC) frameworks, to examine the role of monitoring and evaluation in the implementation of South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030. A desktop research design was employed, relying on secondary data sourced from government policy documents, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, evaluation reports, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature. The deductive approach enabled the study to assess the extent to which existing monitoring and evaluation systems align with RBM and ToC assumptions regarding effective policy implementation, accountability, and outcomes. Through systematic document analysis, the study identified key implementation challenges namely misalignment, data quality constraints, capacity limitations, and limited stakeholder participation and examined how these factors influence progress towards achieving the objectives of the NDP 2030.

3.2. Data collection method

Data were collected systematically from secondary sources, including: Peer-reviewed journals accessed through databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and Science Direct. Government and institutional reports from the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), National Planning Commission (NPC), Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), and international organizations (OECD, UNDP). Policy frameworks and guidelines relevant to M&E, such as the Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation System (GWMES) and the National Evaluation Policy Framework (NEPF). Relevant literature, government reports, policy documents, and evaluation frameworks were systematically reviewed. Sources included publications

from the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation, Statistics South Africa, peer-reviewed journals, and reports by reputable international organizations such as OECD and the World Bank.

3.3. Inclusion criteria

Documents published between 2005 and 2025, focusing on South Africa's NDP or M&E frameworks, comparative studies from Kenya and Rwanda, policy and legislative documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and reputable institutional publications. Exclusion criteria: Publications outside the time frame, opinion pieces without evidence, non-English sources, and documents unrelated to national development, M&E, or public administration. This approach ensured that the study focused on relevant, credible, and authoritative sources, strengthening the validity and reliability of the review. The core search terms include: monitoring and evaluation in South Africa, monitoring and evaluation in the national development plan, monitoring, evaluation, performance-based management, and national development plan. A total of 76 documents were retained.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to code and interpret recurring patterns, focusing on themes like stakeholder participation and institutional capacity. The collected documents were analysed using thematic content analysis. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, such as patterns in the data that are useful in explaining a certain behaviour, and use these themes to address the research or explain something about a social issue. (Rosairo, 2023). The following steps were followed:

- **Familiarization:** All documents were read to identify relevant content on M&E frameworks, NDP 2030 targets, challenges, and lessons from comparative contexts.
- **Coding:** Key concepts and findings were coded, including themes like "capacity challenges," "data quality," "institutional arrangements," "policy alignment," and "stakeholder engagement."
- **Grouping into themes:** Codes were clustered into broader analytical categories, including institutional frameworks, the importance of M&E, challenges, NDP targets, and comparative insights from Kenya and Rwanda.
- **Synthesis:** Themes were critically assessed to highlight gaps, successes, and opportunities, forming the basis for the literature review and guiding conclusions about improving M&E alignment with NDP objectives.

This structured approach ensured the study moved from raw data to evidence-based insights, allowing for critical analysis and identifying gaps in current M&E systems. Credibility was ensured by cross-verifying information across multiple reputable sources. Ethical considerations were upheld by acknowledging all sources and avoiding plagiarism, in line with academic integrity standards.

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents findings drawn from secondary sources, including DPME publications, government policies, evaluation reports, journals, and the internet, to explore the role of monitoring and evaluation in implementing South Africa's National Development Plan, 2030, with specific reference to poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

4.1. Misalignment between monitoring and evaluation practices and the NDP poverty, unemployment, and inequality targets (PUI)

Evidence from the reviewed documents shows a consistent disconnect between M&E practices and the transformative intent of the NDP, particularly the goals of reducing poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Although South Africa has formal M&E frameworks, in practice these systems remain heavily compliance-driven, focusing on activities and outputs rather than outcomes linked to PUI. Mabizela and Zwane (2023) highlight that most departments' measure administrative deliverables such as the number of beneficiaries trained or the number of reports submitted which do not meaningfully reflect whether interventions reduce PUI. Similarly, Mahlala (2024) notes that even when data is collected, it rarely interrogates whether interventions address structural drivers of unemployment and inequality.

The misalignment is further reinforced by a weak indicator design. Many indicators reviewed do not specify measurable socioeconomic outcomes, making it difficult to track whether programmes contribute to NDP targets. This issue becomes more pronounced in areas where inequality remains entrenched, because indicators fail to capture distributional outcomes. Here, the finding directly interacts with Theme 2 (poor disaggregation of data): Without adequately disaggregated data, inequality cannot be meaningfully monitored, and departments default to general indicators that obscure the differentiated impact on various population groups.

Furthermore, the misalignment is intensified by Theme 3 (limited use of M&E evidence). When evaluation findings are not used to adjust strategies or budgets, the system cannot correct its course even when evidence shows that programmes are underperforming. This creates a cycle where outputs are produced simply to meet reporting requirements, while NDP outcome targets remain distant.

The reviewed literature also points to institutional and capacity weaknesses (Theme 5) as a major contributor to misalignment. Departments often lack skilled analysts capable of designing outcome-level indicators or interpreting evaluation results, leading to superficial monitoring. Some documents revealed that M&E units' function mostly as reporting offices rather than strategic evidence units. This undermines the alignment between planning, budgeting, and implementation.

The misalignment is shaped by limited stakeholder engagement. When communities, civil society, and implementers are excluded from indicator design or evaluation processes, the resulting measures do not reflect local realities. This strengthens the gap between national plans and on-the-ground experiences of poverty and inequality. Participatory shortcomings identified in earlier studies show that communities lived experiences rarely influence programme monitoring, reducing the system's ability to assess whether interventions genuinely address PUI

4.2. Poor disaggregation of data for inequality reduction

Empirical evidence from the reviewed documents indicates a pervasive problem of insufficiently disaggregated data, which critically weakens the capacity of M&E systems to assess and address inequality. National and departmental reporting frequently provides aggregate indicators (e.g., percentage of employment growth, overall poverty headcount) without systematic breakdowns by race, gender, disability, age, locality (urban/rural), or income quintile. Studies and government reviews (Stats SA, 2020; DPME reports 2018-2021) repeatedly note gaps in administrative data registers and inconsistent application of disaggregation dimensions across sectors. Mabizela and Zwane (2023) report that these deficits make it impossible to detect distributional changes or to identify whether interventions disproportionately benefit or exclude groups.

Critically, poor disaggregation is not merely a technical shortcoming but a structural constraint with analytical consequences. Without granular data, evaluations cannot assess differential impacts or equity-related

outcomes; instead, they produce high-level findings that mask intra-population variation. Several empirical studies cited in the review show instances where national-level improvements concealed worsening or stagnant conditions in specific provinces or among vulnerable groups, evidence that aggregate metrics can be misleading (DPME, 2019; Mahlala, 2024). When data cannot reveal who is being reached, outcome indicators cannot be meaningfully tied to the NDP's distributional goals, encouraging departments to default to generic outputs rather than targeted outcomes.

Decision-makers are less likely to act on evaluation findings perceived as incomplete or non-specific. Empirical work shows that policymakers discount evidence when it lacks subgroup analysis, reducing the likelihood that evaluations will inform policy adjustment. Disaggregation requires technical capacity, data architecture, statistical skills, and interoperable administrative systems. The literature documents that provinces and municipalities, often lack these capacities, contributing to inconsistent disaggregation practices across government. The absence of community-level inputs in indicator design and data collection exacerbates disaggregation problems. Where stakeholders are excluded, data collection instruments may omit locally relevant variables, further reducing the ability to capture inequities.

Empirical sources in the review also highlight practical manifestations of poor disaggregation: missing demographic fields in administrative registers, inconsistent coding of geography across datasets, delayed or infrequent household survey rounds that limit temporal disaggregation, and divergent indicator definitions between national and sectoral monitoring systems (Stats SA 2020; DPME technical notes). These manifestations produce an evidence base that is ill-suited to identify who gains and who is left behind, undermining any credible claim about progress toward the NDP's inequality targets.

In sum, the literature converges on the finding that inadequate disaggregation is a foundational impediment to equity-focused M&E. It not only limits analytic precision but also propagates misalignment, weak evidence uptake, capacity strain, and exclusion of stakeholder perspectives, creating a reinforcing cycle that obscures true progress on inequality.

4.3. Limited use of M&E evidence in shaping policy decisions

One of the key roles of M&E evidence is to provide data for adaptive policy implementation. However, in many reviewed cases, evidence generated through M&E is not effectively used to influence decision-making in poverty alleviation and job creation strategies. Engela and Ajma (2010) concur that there is a weak feedback loop between M&E findings and strategic decision-making within departments. For instance, despite evaluations of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and Community Works Programmes (CWP), recommendations are often not implemented, limiting the impact of these programs on sustainable employment creation. This suggests that while M&E is conducted, it is not adequately integrated into the policy refinement process.

Lack or limited use of M&E evidence is shaping policy, undermines the very said importance of monitoring and evaluation as suggested by the OECD (2025) that when combined with other performance and budget management solutions such as monitoring, performance budgeting, and spending reviews, evaluation can contribute to the development of a virtuous cycle of evidence-based policymaking, informed budgetary decision making, and fiscally responsible governance. This results in ineffective use of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, consequently leading to failure of programs and NDP goals.

The reviewed literature indicates that even when monitoring reports and evaluation findings exist, their use in informing policy and programme adjustments is limited. Document analysis by Mabizela and Zwane (2023) and Mahlala (2024) reveals that departmental evaluations are often produced to satisfy reporting requirements rather than to influence decision-making. DPME (2018, 2021) evaluations reports also confirm

that recommendations from M&E exercises are seldom incorporated into budget allocations, strategic planning, or programme redesign. As a result, M&E outputs frequently serve as a compliance exercise rather than a mechanism for evidence-based governance.

Misaligned indicators reduce the relevance of M&E outputs for decision-makers. If indicators do not reflect outcome-level progress on poverty, unemployment, or inequality, policymakers perceive reports as uninformative, further reducing evidence use. In line with theme 2, when data lacks disaggregation by demographic or geographic groups, findings are often considered incomplete or non-actionable, diminishing their influence on policy.

Departments lacking analytical and technical capacity are unable to interpret findings effectively or translate evaluation insights into actionable decisions. Evidence from Mabizela and Zwane (2023) study highlights that some provincial M&E units focus on reporting processes rather than on producing policy-relevant analyses. In addition, the exclusion of communities and civil society actors in M&E processes reduces the credibility of findings. Policymakers may question the relevance of data that does not incorporate local perspectives, further limiting its uptake.

4.4. Limitations of capacity and institutional weakness underpin the role of M&E

Another theme that emerged is the institutional weakness in M&E capacity, mostly at the provincial and municipal levels. The DPME (2017) argues that there is a risk that candidates selected are not sufficiently skilled to complete evaluation work. Consequently, evaluation processes are likely to remain ineffective unless evaluators possess the requisite competencies. Addressing these challenges requires the implementation of targeted monitoring and evaluation training programs complemented by practical experience opportunities. High staff turnover in M&E units leads to loss of institutional knowledge and inconsistent evaluation practices (DPME, 2018). Fragmented institutional mandates across government spheres cause duplication or gaps in reporting, undermining coordination. Technical challenges, such as incompatible IT systems and limited data management infrastructure, reduce the reliability and timeliness of M&E outputs (Mabizela & Zwane, 2023).

Many departments lack dedicated units of trained/skilled personnel in RBM methodologies, which hinders the collection and analysis of reliable data. As a result, this institutional gap prevents the National Planning Commission, Department, Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation from obtaining accurate, timely insights on progress toward NDP, 2030 goals. These weaknesses reduce the role of M&E to a compliance mechanism, rather than a developmental tool driving results-based planning and budgeting. Both human and technical capacity limitations affect the quality of M&E. Masombuka and Thani (2023) believe that adequate investment in skills and resources remains imperative in sustaining any system for improvement, and, noting the technical nature of monitoring and evaluation, it becomes inevitable for continuous development of processes that translate into an accountable yet effective, efficient, and improved means of working.

Weak capacity impedes departments' ability to design outcome-oriented indicators, contributing to misalignment between M&E practices and NDP goals. Without skilled analysts, the results chain is poorly articulated, and output-focused indicators dominate.

In line with Theme 2, producing disaggregated, high-quality data requires technical expertise and information system capacity. Resource limitations mean that critical variables for monitoring inequality often remain uncollected or inconsistently recorded. Departments lacking analytical skills are less able to interpret and apply evaluation findings. As a result, M&E outputs are either ignored or underutilised in strategic planning and policy-making. Consistent with capacity deficits constraining the ability of M&E units to meaningfully involve stakeholders in evaluation design, data collection, or feedback mechanisms, reinforcing the top-down approach to monitoring.

4.5. Limited stakeholder engagement

The involvement of stakeholders in M&E remains underutilized, leading to minimal community input in the monitoring and evaluation of NDP goals. This limits the ability to validate results at the beneficiary level. Such under involvement not only undermines the effective implementation of NDP objectives but also challenges the principles of democratic states like South Africa, which emphasizes participatory governance, although individuals are often. This is supported by the findings of the Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (2017), which argues that in departments where evaluation is less institutionalized, M&E units report facing challenges due to inconsistent participation in the evaluation process.

The literature consistently identifies limited stakeholder engagement as a significant constraint on the effectiveness of South Africa's M&E system. Despite the recognition that participatory monitoring and evaluation enhance accountability, transparency, and relevance, most evaluation processes remain top-down and technocratic, with minimal involvement of local communities, civil society organisations, or frontline implementers (Cloete, 2016; DPME, 2019). Mabizela and Zwane (2023) highlight that this exclusion reduces the legitimacy of evaluation findings and contributes to M&E systems that are disconnected from the lived realities of those most affected by poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The consequences of limited stakeholder engagement are amplified by interactions with other themes. When stakeholders are excluded from indicator development, outcome measures often fail to capture community-relevant aspects of poverty and inequality, reinforcing misalignment with NDP goals.

Limited engagement reduces opportunities to capture locally relevant variables that enable effective disaggregation, exacerbating gaps in data quality and granularity. In this case, Martin (2024) observes that technical M&E skills were crucial for data quality and adaptability in responding to emerging project needs.

Evidence derived from non-participatory processes may be perceived as incomplete or unrepresentative, decreasing the likelihood that policymakers will use it in decision-making. In addition, Weak capacity in M&E units restricts their ability to facilitate participatory processes, conduct consultations, or incorporate stakeholder feedback into evaluation instruments.

Community-level perspectives are rarely included in the design of indicators or evaluation frameworks, leading to evaluations that overlook local experiences and context-specific constraints (DPME, 2019). Civil society participation is mostly consultative rather than substantive, meaning input is rarely integrated into analysis or programme adjustments (Cloete, 2016). Evaluations often rely on quantitative administrative data alone, with minimal qualitative feedback from stakeholders, reducing the richness and applicability of findings (Mahlala, 2024).

In sum, limited stakeholder engagement weakens the overall M&E system by reducing the relevance, credibility, and usability of evidence. It interacts with misalignment, poor data disaggregation, evidence non-use, and capacity weaknesses to create a systemic barrier that undermines the ability of M&E to support NDP objectives in poverty, unemployment, and inequality reduction.

4.6. Positive examples of M&E driving NDP implementation

Despite the challenges, there are areas where M&E has made positive contributions to the implementation of unemployment efforts, poverty alleviation, and inequality reduction. For example, the social grants system for unemployment, monitored rigorously by the South African Social Security Agency and the Department of Social Development, has helped reduce poverty, especially among children and the elderly. Similarly, Statistics South Africa's monitoring of labor market trends has informed national planning, although the data used remains

limited in actual program redesign. These examples show that when M&E is institutional and linked to accountability, it can improve progress toward NDP 2030 targets.

In South Africa, the local government and human settlements sectors have demonstrated comparatively stronger institutionalisation of monitoring and evaluation (M&E), particularly where municipalities have integrated M&E within performance-management systems. For example, Mabizela and Zwane (2023) found that institutionalised M&E contributes to improved municipal performance and service delivery, highlighting the importance of M&E for effective local governance. Similarly, in the housing/human settlements sector, Mvuyana (2023) demonstrated that the adoption of structured frameworks, such as the Theory of Change (ToC), as a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tool in municipalities, for instance, in the eThekwini Municipality, supports the integrated delivery of sustainable settlements and links outputs to long-term outcomes. However, even in these "stronger" sectors, evidence points to persistent weaknesses, including capacity constraints, uneven implementation, poor data management, and limited follow-through on findings (Mello, 2018).

5. Discussions of findings

The findings from the reviewed literature reveal a systemic misalignment between monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices and the transformative goals of South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, particularly regarding poverty, unemployment, and inequality (PUI). While formal M&E frameworks exist across government departments, the evidence suggests these systems are largely compliance-driven, emphasizing outputs and administrative deliverables rather than the substantive outcomes needed to reduce PUI. This observation resonates with the principles of Results-Based Management (RBM), which emphasizes outcome-focused performance monitoring and the strategic use of evaluation to inform policy (United Nations Development Group, 2011).

The present findings correspond with the existing literature of the studies by Mabizela and Zwane (2023) and Mahlala (2024), which demonstrate that departments often measure superficial indicators such as the number of beneficiaries trained or reports submitted, which fail to reflect the deeper structural challenges underpinning unemployment and inequality. This misalignment underscores a critical theoretical insight: monitoring systems that prioritize procedural compliance over substantive outcomes risk becoming ineffective governance instruments, thereby limiting the developmental potential envisaged by the NDP.

Closely linked to this misalignment is the persistent problem of poor data disaggregation. The reviewed literature highlights that national and departmental reporting frequently relies on aggregate indicators that obscure intra-population variation, including differences across race, gender, age, disability, income, and geographic location (Stats SA, 2020; DPME 2018-2021). The inability to capture granular data undermines the capacity of M&E systems to detect inequities or assess whether interventions disproportionately benefit or exclude specific groups. This limitation interacts with the misalignment of indicators because generic measures fail to provide actionable insights into whether programs are advancing distributional objectives.

The theoretical implication here is that without sufficient disaggregation, RBM frameworks cannot fully operationalize the "results" component, leaving equity-related outcomes unmonitored and policy interventions inadequately informed. Practically, this highlights a critical gap for policymakers: evaluation findings lacking subgroup analysis are less likely to influence resource allocation, program redesign, or targeted interventions, reinforcing a cycle where generic outputs dominate over meaningful outcomes.

The limited use of M&E evidence further compounds these challenges. While evaluation exercises are conducted, the literature consistently shows that findings are rarely integrated into policy decisions or budgetary adjustments (Engela & Ajma, 2010; Mabizela & Zwane, 2023; Mahlala, 2024). This lack of evidence uptake

reflects both structural and technical weaknesses in M&E systems and resonates with the OECD (2025) assertion that evidence-based governance requires not only data collection but also strategic application in decision-making. Departments often produce evaluation reports to satisfy compliance requirements, yet the recommendations are seldom operationalized.

This practical insight contributes to knowledge by demonstrating that even technically sound M&E frameworks can fail if they are not embedded within an adaptive policy environment, highlighting the interplay between evidence production, capacity, and institutional culture. Document analysis reports that the monitoring and evaluation reports do not lead to the expected results, thus yielding no outcomes to NDP goals. The ToC assumes that monitoring will track interventions in a way that directly informs progress towards PIU reduction. However, evidence from departmental reports shows that indicators focus primarily on outputs rather than outcomes, breaking the intended causal link in the ToC.

Policy-wise, it emphasizes the necessity for mechanisms that facilitate the translation of M&E findings into actionable program adjustments, reinforcing the role of evaluation in strategic governance rather than mere reporting.

Capacity and institutional weaknesses are central to understanding these dynamics. The reviewed literature indicates that many provincial and municipal M&E units lack skilled personnel capable of designing outcome-oriented indicators or interpreting complex evaluation results (DPME, 2017, 2018; Mabizela and Zwane, 2023). High staff turnover, fragmented institutional mandates, and limited technical infrastructure further undermine the effectiveness of evaluation practices. The theoretical implication aligns with RBM and Participatory Development Theory, which stress that both technical competency and stakeholder engagement are essential for results-driven and context-sensitive governance. In practice, capacity constraints mean that evaluation processes often remain superficial, contributing to misalignment, poor evidence use, and weak stakeholder involvement. Policy-wise, this suggests that investments in human capital, training, and institutional strengthening are prerequisites for M&E to function as a tool for informed decision-making and for advancing NDP objectives.

Stakeholder engagement emerges as a critical cross-cutting factor influencing all other themes. The evidence indicates that communities, civil society, and frontline implementers are largely excluded from the design, monitoring, and evaluation processes, limiting the ability to capture locally relevant realities and verify outcomes at the beneficiary level (Cloete, 2016; DPME, 2019; Mabizela & Zwane, 2023). Limited participation not only reduces the credibility and relevance of M&E outputs but also interacts with poor disaggregation and weak evidence use, reinforcing a top-down, technocratic approach to monitoring. The theoretical contribution here lies in illustrating the practical application of participatory governance principles: when local voices are excluded, evaluation frameworks fail to reflect lived experiences, thereby constraining the developmental impact of interventions. Practically, integrating stakeholder perspectives into data collection and indicator design could enhance the granularity, legitimacy, and usability of evidence, ensuring that NDP interventions are more responsive to community-specific poverty and inequality dynamics.

The discussion of findings also acknowledges the limitations of desktop research. While documentary analysis provides valuable insights into systemic trends, it relies on secondary data, which may not capture nuanced local realities or informal institutional practices. This limitation suggests caution in generalizing findings to all provinces or programmatic contexts. Nevertheless, desktop research contributes theoretically by synthesizing cross-sectoral evidence, highlighting recurring structural challenges, and identifying critical linkages between misalignment, poor disaggregation, limited evidence use, capacity constraints, and stakeholder engagement.

Building on these findings, several future research directions emerge. Empirical studies using primary data could investigate the lived experiences of program beneficiaries, providing granular evidence to complement

desktop analysis. Research could also explore innovative M&E frameworks that integrate real-time disaggregated data, participatory approaches, and adaptive feedback mechanisms. Moreover, comparative studies between departments with strong versus weak M&E uptake could elucidate best practices for translating evaluation into policy action.

In conclusion, the interaction between misalignment, poor disaggregation, limited evidence use, weak capacity, and insufficient stakeholder engagement illustrates a systemic barrier that undermines the effectiveness of M&E in supporting the NDP's poverty, unemployment, and inequality goals. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the applicability of RBM and Participatory Development Theory in explaining the conditions for effective evaluation. Practically, they highlight the need for technical capacity building, participatory mechanisms, and evidence-informed policy processes. Policy implications include redesigning indicators to reflect outcome-level progress, strengthening institutional competencies, and embedding participatory practices in evaluation frameworks. Together, these insights advance both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for enhancing South Africa's M&E systems to better achieve NDP 2030 targets

6. Recommendations: Policy and practice implications

- **Aligning M&E framework with NDP priorities:** Government departments should ensure that M&E indicators are directly linked to the NDP triple challenges of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. This requires revising departmental performance plans to focus on measurable developmental outcomes rather than outputs. The DPME can develop sector-specific indicator guidelines to ensure consistency across all levels of government.
- **Improving data disaggregation for inequality reduction:** Data systems must be upgraded to capture detailed demographic, geographic, and socio-economic information. Statistics South Africa, in collaboration with provincial and municipal authorities, should standardize data collection tools to ensure that information is disaggregated by likely variables such as gender, age, disability, and location. Consequently, this will enable more targeted and inclusive policy interventions. The department should revive and revise indicators to ensure a direct link to NDP targets, in line with RBM best practices. Mabizela and Zwne (2023) argue that if implemented effectively, M&E can serve as an early warning indicator, informing managers and practitioners about the progress of programs and interventions, and detecting faults and discrepancies that might occur.
- **Strengthening the use of evidence in policy-making:** This requires formal mechanisms that compel departments to incorporate evaluation findings into program design and budget allocations. This can be achieved through Cabinet directives mandating the public release of evaluation reports and requiring annual progress updates on the implementation of recommendations.
- **Building M&E capacity:** Dedicated training in RBM and ToC should be prioritized for M&E personnel at all levels of government. A shortage of qualified and trained staff can significantly impair the quality and effectiveness of the evaluation process, resulting in unreliable data and misinterpretation. However, the Government of South Africa has launched an online Monitoring and Evaluation course, and even universities such as Witwitrand offer a diploma in the field. Yekani et al. (2024) argue that successful implementation of M&E strategies depends on integrating skill development into broader institutional strategies. Identifying skill gaps and implementing targeted capacity-building measures are essential steps to enhance M&E effectiveness in municipalities.
- **Enhancing stakeholder participation:** Inclusive M&E practices require active participation of local communities, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector. This can be facilitated through participatory evaluation models and public feedback forums. Engagement at a higher level

will ensure that M&E is not only technically sound but also socially responsive. Community-based monitoring mechanisms should be institutionalized to ensure citizens' feedback is integrated into M&E.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights critical challenges that impede the effective implementation of monitoring and evaluation within South Africa's National Development Plan framework. The NDP serves as a vital strategic blueprint aimed at tackling South Africa's confronting challenges of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, making effective M&E crucial for tracking progress and informing policy interventions. The findings of this study underscore that South Africa's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems face systemic challenges that undermine their ability to support the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 goals of reducing poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Despite the existence of formal frameworks, M&E practices remain largely compliance-driven, focusing on outputs rather than meaningful outcomes. Poor data disaggregation, limited use of evaluation evidence, weak institutional capacity, and minimal stakeholder engagement collectively constrain the effectiveness of M&E, creating a cycle in which interventions fail to address structural inequalities or inform adaptive policy-making.

The study contributes both theoretically and practically by demonstrating the relevance of Results-Based Management and Participatory Development Theory in explaining the conditions necessary for effective evaluation. It highlights that outcome-focused indicators, participatory processes, and evidence-informed decision-making are critical for aligning M&E with transformative national objectives. From a policy perspective, the findings emphasize the need for stronger institutional capacity, targeted training, participatory engagement, and integrated feedback mechanisms to ensure that evaluations meaningfully influence program design, budgeting, and implementation.

While desktop research provides valuable insights into systemic trends and recurring challenges, the reliance on secondary data limits the ability to capture local-level nuances and lived experiences. Future research should incorporate primary data and participatory approaches to deepen understanding of how M&E can effectively address equity and inclusion at the community level.

Ultimately, strengthening M&E systems is pivotal for achieving the NDP's transformative goals. By addressing misalignment, improving data quality and disaggregation, fostering evidence use, building institutional capacity, and engaging stakeholders meaningfully, South Africa can enhance its ability to implement policies that effectively reduce poverty, unemployment, and inequality, thereby advancing inclusive and sustainable development.

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