

# CHAPTER NINE

## POSITIONING MONITORING AND EVALUATION AS A SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN GLOBAL HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN ZIMBABWE

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### INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the third millennium, partnerships for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) have emerged as a preferred strategy to support local health systems globally. However, recent studies such as Head (2022) and Bianchi, Nasi, and Rivenbark (2021) have raised questions about the type of partnerships, considering the (mis)trust between public and private sector players in countries such as Zimbabwe. The jostle for power and mistrust in these collaborations raised concerns suggesting that the private sector and the government are leveraging monitoring and evaluation in health programmes as a soft power strategy to advance market-driven interests. However, this claim has not been adequately interrogated. This chapter examines how partnerships for monitoring and evaluation are indeed embedded strategies to advance neoliberal global business in public health and the implications for local health policy and practice in Zimbabwe.

The chapter applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how specific M&E ideas and discourses represent embedded tools and strategies to leverage private sector neoliberal influence in public health M&E systems and its implications on policy and practice. The chapter explicitly identifies and discusses the participatory, technological, scientific, country-led, human rights, health emergencies, results-based discourses and use of M&E artefacts and consultants as embedded ideas and strategies at the disposal of Global Health Partners (GHPs) as they (re)position themselves to advance neoliberal ideas in collaborative partnerships for health. Drawing from documentary reviews of four national M&E policy documents and interviews with key M&E staff from the Ministry of Health, the National AIDS Council, and a local NGO, the chapter further argues that discourse control represents an influential yet under-discussed source of power in partnerships that influence and shape M&E policy and practices in Zimbabwe. The following section discusses the specific discourses that embed neoliberal influence in the Ministry's M&E policies and strategies resulting in internal neoliberal and pro-social inconsistencies.

## **DOMINANT ECONOMIC DISCOURSES IN MONITORING AND EVALUATION POLICIES**

Through interviews with Ministry of Health M&E staff and critical review of M&E policies and strategies, this chapter identifies dominant economic discourse embedded in the language the staff uses and in key sections of the policy documents. The chapter draws attention to specific economic buzzwords, pervasive in national M&E policy documents, that Global Health Partnerships (GHPs) emphasise as they provide technical and financial assistance in Zimbabwe. For example, drawing from CDA, the chapter reveals how partners such as the Global Fund strategically (re)position and deploy, reproduce and topicalise unspectacular discursive neoliberal and pro-economic terms such as M&E ‘investments’ in all key M&E policy documents and programmes. This chapter argues that M&E policies and strategic documents reflect, topicalise and reproduce terms that emphasise GHP’s pro-business orientation in policies that claim to be pro-social. The chapter argues that the specific pro-business language in these policy documents implicates neoliberal impulses (re)positioning pro-business approaches with potential (un)intended effects in Zimbabwe’s policy-making processes.

The chapter further identifies and questions the relevance of and preference for the New Public Governance (NPG) approach to health delivery (Osborne, 2006) in unstable governance systems in which mutual interests and trust are difficult to sustain. The approach emphasises neo-corporatist liberal service processes and outcomes thereby (re)positioning GHPs as neoliberal agents as they decentre government’s republican and constitutional power, sharing it with unelected partners in the civic and private sectors. These challenges are a result of the power and force of the embedded neoliberal ideas characterising M&E policies in Zimbabwe. Drawing lessons from critical discourse, scholars such as (Fairclough, 2013) and (Van Dijk, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2015), specific pro-economic terms that characterise M&E policies in Zimbabwe is evidence of how discourse control and use of specific terms in the policies represents power beyond linguistic characteristics. Thus, policy bureaucrats must view the inclusion of consistent and persistent economic terms as an extension of neoliberal ideology, hegemony, and control that pre-position business interests in public health M&E policies. Based on this characterisation, the chapter identifies the topicalisation and foregrounding of pro-economic terms and phrases as GHPs’ strategic (re)positioning to extend the neoliberal hegemony through collaborative health partnerships.

The chapter further highlights how the GHP deploys pro-business terms in unspectacular ways, creating an impression of neo-liberal commonsense as pro-economic terms become a common occurrence in health policies that profess to be pro-poor. This includes the common use of terms such as ‘health economics’, a new discourse that is driving the health agenda in Zimbabwe from the social determinants of health towards a business-oriented agenda. The chapter upholds its argument by citing the strategic placement of the key pro-economic terms in the foreword of key M&E policy documents in which the voices of key policy players such as the country’s President, or the Minister of Health assert their signatures. The inclusion of pro-economic terms in a policy foreword signed by the President or Minister of Health represents a strategic policy advocacy step by the GHPs who actively influence the policy language through funding of policy consultants who draft the policies and editorial input into these documents. The use of key economic terms and their strategic placement in the foreword of policy documents constitutes a (re)positioning strategy by GHPs through topicalisation of the key terms that drive the policy ideas and strategic direction. According to Huckin (2002); (Machin & Mayr, 2023), topicalisation positions key words or terms in a sentence element at the beginning to ensure the foregrounding of key messages. This chapter confirms that all key M&E policy documents or strategies reviewed reveal traits of topicalisation as pro-economic terms characterise the foreword of these documents. Thus, through a CDA lens, the chapter exposes neoliberal intentions hidden in these policy documents as a (re)positioning by GHPs to influence policy intentions and direction as they finance policy consultants and provide editorial comments to these policy documents.