Monitoring and Evaluation

A Guide for Small and Diaspora NGOs

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Introduction

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), like motherhood and apple pie, is seen as something inherently good. But we all worry deep down that we are not getting it right. We know M&E can help us account for donor money, monitor how well a project is being implemented and even show us what difference our project is making. So if M&E is so useful why then are many NGOs slow in developing good M&E systems? Partly perhaps because it is undeniably difficult to measure complex social change processes. But It may also be because we simply are not motivated enough to do it. No one has really demanded that we demonstrate what we are actually achieving with the money. But times are changing. Funders now demand that we measure impact and that we show what we are learning from our work.

This guide clarifies what we mean by monitoring and evaluation and provides some guidance for how to do it well. It identifies some useful tools that will help when performing any monitoring and evaluation activities. There are a myriad of M&E materials for those who wish to explore further the complexity and usefulness of M&E. This short guide highlights the key components that underpin any M&E activity and will help small and diaspora NGOs to make sense of the many approaches, tools and materials available.

1.   Why monitor and evaluate?

Generally NGOs are good at 'doing things'; we see a problem and develop a project to solve that problem.

What we struggle with is providing evidence that our intervention caused any change**.** We need to be careful that we do not assume we are doing well and not question whether and how we are influencing change. Before deciding what we need to do, we should ask ourselves: 'What is our prime purpose for doing M&E?'

> "Children are dying from diarrhoeal diseases. Our project will dig wells and provide clean water, so reducing the number of children dying from diarrhoeal diseases. Simple!"

1.1   Purposes of M&E

The following list highlights the most common reasons for undertaking M&E:

- Accountability (upwards to the donor)
- Accountability (downwards to the beneficiaries)
- Control and supervision of staff and volunteers
- Learning from our work
- Improving our performance
- Project or programme management
- Providing evidence for advocacy
- Public relations and fundraising
- Resource allocation
- Measuring impact

The prioritised purpose(s) of your M&E will guide which tools you choose to use. For example, accountability to the beneficiary could be measured through feedback forms or focus group discussions. To measure impact you may collect stories of change from those who have participated in your activities. In reality, most NGOs undertake monitoring and evaluation for many of the purposes listed above. How much emphasis is placed on each purpose will

depend on many factors, such as the influence of different stakeholders, what the donor requires, the interests of individuals involved and what the NGO is trying to achieve.

1.2   Challenges of M&E

Many NGOs – both small and large – can find M&E a difficult and daunting task. Some reasons for this include:

- It is hard to 'do' and 'think' at the same time and our organisations set a premium on 'doing' rather than 'thinking'. We often continue to run without slowing down to check if we have made a difference and what that difference is.
- NGO personnel often feel too busy to stop and think. There may also be strong vested interests and comfort levels in maintaining the *status quo*.
- Development is a complex process and many organisations manage complex programmes that are difficult to measure.
- Many donors are reluctant to pay for designing and implementing M&E processes.
- M&E requires predicting the change we want to see – something impossible to do perfectly, especially in turbulent global environments. People have different ideas about what will happen and what will make a difference.

Challenges faced by Peer Learning participants

"Adapting M&E systems to fit larger projects whilst maintaining rigorous attention to detail, understanding local context and partner methodologies – balancing these with donor requirements and demands"

"Developing M&E systems that are applicable to small NGOs and meet donor requirement"

"Working with different partners who have different systems and understanding of M&E"

"Collecting accurate baseline data from rural illiterate communities who are difficult to reach"

"Building M&E capacity amongst our partners"

"How can we ensure our M&E systems in all our different working areas are effective?"

"We need to ensure M&E activities are completed in an accurate and systematic manner"

Having said this, it is possible to design and implement an M&E system that can meet the needs of your organisation, your donor/s and your beneficiaries. We will look at this more in section 4.

2.   Clarifying terminology

M&E is littered with confusion, jargon and different terminologies. Five key terms that seem to cause the most confusion to people coming new to M&E include:

2.1   Monitoring

Monitoring can be defined as a continuous, methodical process of data collection and information gathering, throughout the life of a project. The information collected can be
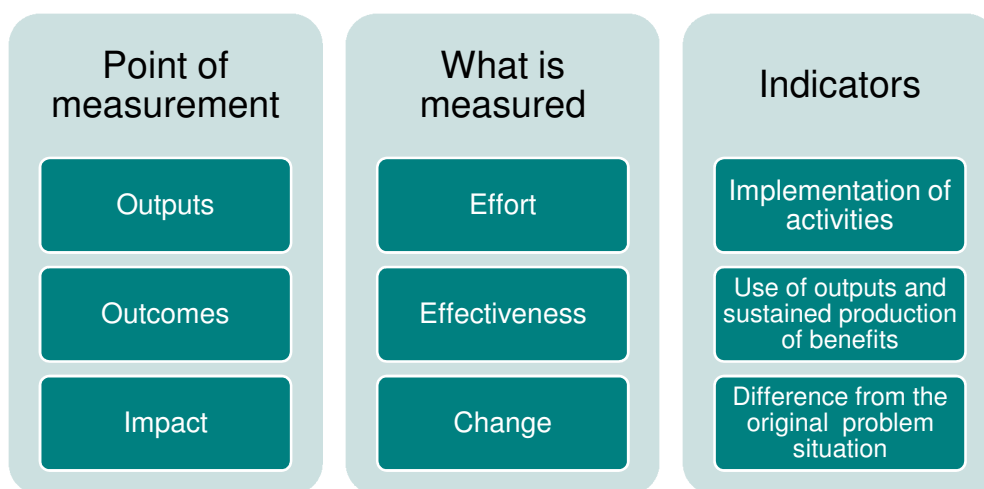
used for regular evaluation of progress, so that adjustment can be made while the work is going on. Monitoring is also used to mean the systematic tracking of a particular condition to identify trends, for example changes in the environment or the status of women in society.

2.2   Evaluation

Evaluation is a learning and management tool; assessing what has taken place in order to improve future work. Measuring, analysing and interpreting change helps us to: determine how far objectives have been achieved and whether the initial assumptions about what would happen were right; and, to make judgments about effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the work.

2.3   Impact, outcomes and outputs

The following table shows the differences between impact, outcomes and outputs in terms of what is measured by each and what the indicator for achievement is:

Point of measurement	What is measured	Indicators
Outputs	Effort	Implementation of activities
Outcomes	Effectiveness	Use of outputs and sustained production of benefits
Impact	Change	Difference from the original problem situation

Jerry Adams 2011 adapted from Fowler 1997

3.   Questions to ask ourselves

When we talk about M&E tools we tend to consider the technical tools developed by 'experts'. These include things like outcome mapping, Most Significant Change and Log-Frames. However there are more fundamental tools we need to use that are not developed by experts, but are more about how we think. Max Perberdy, an INTRAC associate, calls them "mental tools" - the fundamental questions that we should ask ourselves and each other every time we plan any M&E intervention.

3.1   Three key questions

Before you start planning any monitoring and evaluation activity it can be helpful to consider three simple questions:

WHO are we doing this for?

Is it for the organisation or the team implementing the project or programme? Is it for the senior bosses of the organisation? Is it for those who have provided the money – the

donors? Or is it for those intended to benefit from the project – the beneficiaries? These are the potential *stakeholders* of the work. A stakeholder is an individual, group or organisation who, to some extent, has the power to influence decision-making.

WHAT is going to be monitored or evaluated?

Different stakeholders will have different interests and priorities in terms of their needs from an M&E activity. In assessing project success it is the criteria of stakeholders that define what success looks like. At one end of the stakeholder spectrum a government funder may define success in terms of the MDG's. At the other end, a rural woman may define success in terms of whether the project had made her life physically easier.

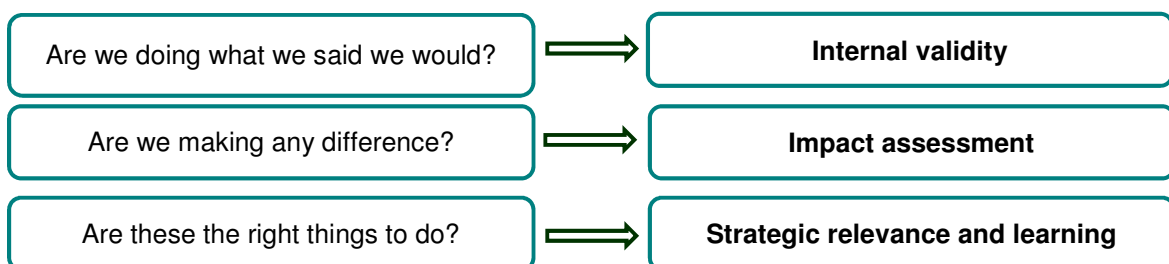**HOW** is the monitoring and evaluation activity to be done?

What resources are available: time, money and people? A process that has to be completed within days and with no extra resources will require a different methodology to a process that has a timeframe of many months, a large budget and a team of evaluators.

It is only when we can answer these three questions that we can start to think about the design of a monitoring and evaluation process.

3.2   Three Universal Evaluation Questions

Once you have decided to develop a monitoring system or perform an evaluation there are three universal evaluation questions that need to be answered for specific stakeholders.
- The first: '**are we doing what we said we would do'** needs to be answered for the day to day managers of the intervention to show they are completing the work agreed (validation).
- The second: '**are we making a difference'** needs to be answered for all stakeholders but is particularly relevant for donors to ensure the money has been spent effectively (impact).
- Finally the third question: '**are these the right things to do'** provides the information senior managers need to ensure the organisation remains relevant and is strategically doing the right thing.

Are we doing what we said we would?	⟹	**Internal validity**
Are we making any difference?	⟹	**Impact assessment**
Are these the right things to do?	⟹	**Strategic relevance and learning**

4.   Key elements of a monitoring and evaluation system[1]

There is a great deal of information available on monitoring and evaluation however there is very little guidance or support for those wishing to develop an M&E system. A notable exception is 'Developing M&E Systems for complex organisations: A Methodology' by

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[1] Developing M&E Systems for Complex Organisations: A Methodology Nigel Simister, October 2009 INTRAC M&E paper 3

Nigel Simister. Nigel's paper was based on many examples of M&E systems that INTRAC consultants and associates have worked on over the years. INTRAC understands M&E systems to be 'a series of policies, practices and processes that enable the systematic and effective collection, analysis and use of monitoring and evaluation information'. The following points detail the key elements that should underpin any M&E.

4.1   Planning Systems

The way an organisation approaches planning, including what tools they use, what methodologies and what templates, will depend on many different factors including who the donors are, what experience the staff have, how large the organisation is and how complex the projects and programmes are.

Logical Framework Analysis

The most common planning tool in the NGO world is the **Logical Framework Analysis**[2]. Its nature and structure allows it to be used over a range of levels, from small independent projects to wide-ranging, integrated development programmes involving many disparate elements. Each logical framework is based on a simple 4x4 matrix and describes the detail of what has to be done if a project is to achieve its goal, through a hierarchy of objectives. For example:

	Indicators (Objectively Verifiable Indicators) '*WHAT*' *the project will measure to indicate that the goal, purpose and outputs have been achieved*	Verification (Means of Verification) '*HOW*' *the indicators will be measured i.e. sources of verification.*	Risks and Assumptions *The external things that may prevent achievement of the project.*
Goal *The longer-term impact that this project with other actors will achieve after completion.*			
Purpose *The overall objective i.e. the benefit that the project will deliver… in order to…*			
Outputs/Results *The tangible things that the project will deliver.*			
Activities *The interventions in terms of the 'doing things' and the inputs of resources.*			

Where the project is a part of a series of projects, or a programme, the logical framework of each project contributes to the goal of the overall programme. It also ensures that those who have prepared the logical framework for each specific project have thought in detail and produced a plan, in a format which is generally understood, as to how they aim to achieve that project's goal.

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[2] From the Bond Training Manual 'Logical Framework Analysis'

As planning using logical framework analysis becomes more universally accepted particularly by donor agencies, they often demand that bids for the funding of development projects and programmes include detailed plans submitted in this format. If done well, in an iterative and participative way, logical framework analysis can be a useful tool in aiding the subsequent management of the project. It is worth looking at 'The Use and Abuse of the LFA' (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005 for more about the pros and cons of LFA).

Results Based Programme Planning

Another planning system that is often recommended by donors is **results based programme planning**. By using this tool the plans ensure that the intervention achieves the expected results. The DAC working Party on Aid Evaluation highlight a useful list of purposes of results based planning:

> *"The basic purposes of results based management systems are to generate and use performance information for accountability reporting to external stakeholder audiences and for internal management learning and decision-making. Most agencies results based management systems include the following processes or phases:*
>
> - *Formulating objectives: Identifying in clear, measurable terms the results being sought and developing a conceptual framework for how the results will be achieved.*
> - *Identifying indicators: For each objective, specifying exactly what is to be measured along a scale or dimension.*
> - *Setting targets: For each indicator, specifying the expected or planned levels of result to be achieved by specific dates.*
> - *Monitoring results: Developing performance monitoring systems to regularly collect data on actual results achieved.*
> - *Reviewing and reporting results: Comparing actual results vis-à-vis the targets (or other criteria for making judgements about performance).*
> - *Integrating evaluations: Conducting evaluations to provide complementary information on performance not readily available from monitoring systems.*
> - *Using performance information: Using information from performance monitoring and evaluation sources for internal management learning and decision-making and for external reporting to stakeholders on results achieved."* [3]

4.2   Setting objectives

Every organisation has a culture of how objectives are set, what they look like, and how they are linked together between different levels, what should be included in them. No one way is either right or wrong. It is a matter of preference often guided by external donors or in the larger organisation, the M&E department. What is important is that everyone in the organisation understands what the culture is and the preferred way of setting an objective.

What is an objective?

An objective describes what a project or programme wants to achieve. There are many words that you will come across that relate to objectives: goal, aim, purpose, objective,

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[3] Results Based Management in the Development Co-operation Agencies: A Review of Experiences – DAC working Party on Aid Evaluation Nov 2001

overall objectives, specific objectives. Whatever terminology you use an objective should be more than an activity or output; it is what your organisation is trying to achieve not what it is trying to do. Organisations generally develop objectives that are relevant to what they want to measure. The best way to develop an objective is to work with relevant stakeholders asking them 'what are their criteria of success?' This will enable you to develop an objective that the stakeholders understand and are happy to be measured against. In order for an objective to be easy to measure it should be SMART:

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Relevant

Time bound
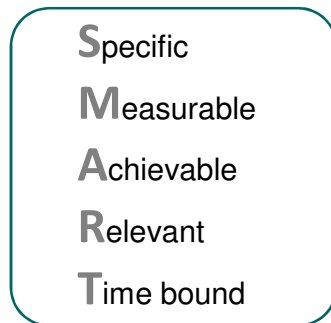
The levels that an organisation works at will influence the levels of objectives required within the M&E system. For example an organisation can have strategic objectives that guide everything the organisation does, country programmes have country level objectives and each programme within the country will also have a set of objectives. Partner organisations that deliver on the projects may also have a set of objectives. How these link with each other will depend on how complex the organisation would like the M&E system to be. Many organisations now expect partner/project objectives to contribute to programme objectives which in turn contribute to country objectives which then are expected to contribute to strategic objectives.

4.3   Indicators: the selection, collection and use of indicators

Indicators are defined in many different ways by civil society organisations (CSOs). Perhaps the simplest definition is a *"piece of information that provides evidence of a change"*. However, it is important not to confuse <u>evidence</u> with <u>change</u>. An indicator should always be aligned with an output, outcome or impact statement that defines what sort of change is being sought. Indicators should not simply appear in isolation.

Indicators can be selected in several ways. Ultimately the decision on indicators should lie with the organisation and the beneficiaries. The following list includes different ways of selecting indicators:

- Consulting with a range of stakeholders including facilitating community participation. These come from the bottom up and are context specific however they also belong to the stakeholders who are expected to deliver on the project/programme.
- Some organisations have a list of common indicators that projects can select from.
- Some donors require specific indicators to be used by organisations they fund.
- Other organisations have a set of standard indicators that must be used for specific programmes or thematic areas (particularly if they wish to aggregate information)
- Finally there are specific guidelines for developing indicators such as the SPHERE indicators for programmes that work in emergency situations.

Key questions to ask yourself when defining indicators:

1. Will you be able to collect information on your indicator? If so, where will you get the information from?
2. Is it likely to be accurate (credible)?
3. How much will it cost to get the information in terms of:
    - Staff time?
    - Beneficiary time?
    - Money?
4. How often will you have to collect it?
5. Does it require baseline information? If so, can you get this information?
6. Do your staff have the capacity (or desire) to collect the information honestly and accurately?
7. How far can you attribute the indicator to your efforts?
8. Will the indicator tell you anything you did not know before?
9. Will it help you make decisions to improve future performance?
10. Will it help you to be accountable to different stakeholders?
11. How else will it help you (if at all)?
12. Will it allow you to share information with others to help their own projects and programmes?
13. Might the indicator lead you to further investigation or enquiry?

Indicators may be quantitative or qualitative. Here is a list of the common differences:

Quantitative	Qualitative
Expressed as numbers	Expressed as words
Provide information on width and scope	Provide in-depth information
Analysed through statistical data methods	Analysed through summarising reduction and scoring
Often need to be interpreted through qualitative inquiry	Often applies to a small number of people or situations
Indicators usually selected before selecting tools	Sometimes tools are selected before indicators

Remember: It is not the way the indicator is worded that makes in qualitative or quantitative but the way it is reported – if you report a number it is quantitative if you report in words it is qualitative.

4.4   Baseline information

The purpose of a programme baseline is to provide an accurate profile of the status of the programme's target populations at the beginning of the programme cycle. Specifically a baseline is carried out after the design phase and prior to the implementation of a project or programme. This will allow an organisation and partners, through suitable monitoring

activities, to monitor programme performance. The baseline will enable the indicators in the log frame to be refined and the targets to be set for the indicators (as the baseline values will be known). Ultimately, this will allow programme impact to be evaluated by collecting data on the same indicators and comparing them to the baseline values. Results from the baseline may also allow interventions to be refined that are appropriate to the needs of the target groups and also a refinement of the target groups themselves.

Baseline information is an important reference point for conducting the final evaluation. The term 'baseline' refers to the collection of background information on the physical, social and economic settings in the proposed population targeted by the project. You will need to collect data from secondary sources where it exists, or the acquisition of new information through field sampling. The task of collecting baseline data starts right from the period of project inception; however, the majority of this task may be undertaken during the initial period once the target households have been selected.

Collection of baseline data should be designed to satisfy information requirements and should be relevant to the objectives you are trying to achieve. Only baseline data needed to assist prediction of the impacts contained in the project/programme objectives should be collected. Most importantly you need to collect data that will indicate the change in beneficiary's lives – not what beneficiaries have done or services they have received.

4.5 Tools for information collection

There are many different mechanisms that are used for collecting, recording, generating or analysing information. Tools in monitoring and evaluation will facilitate the collection of data required for the M&E system.

Most tools required for M&E are based around the following key data collection methods:

- Templates for recording quantitative data (numbers etc.)
- Surveys
- Observation
- Interviews
- Case studies

Use of the tools will be defined by the broader methodology selected for making specific measurements. For instance, a methodology might specify that x% of the beneficiaries will be selected in a particular way and interviewed to get their views on the benefits of a particular project. The tool would be a questionnaire to be used in the interview.

Tools for measuring social change

Some of these tools are designed to be used by a field-worker, observing or in discussion with particular stakeholders, (observation techniques, interviews). Others are designed to be used in a participatory way with groups of beneficiaries. These can be part of a process which aims to involve beneficiaries and stakeholders in discussions about changes, in order to involve them in the analysis of how the project/ programme is progressing and perhaps involve them in thinking about further planning. Case studies, like individual testimonials, can be used as supplementary information which gives more depth to understanding particular processes and impacts.

Selection of Tools

Tools need to be selected on the basis of their **appropriateness** in assessing progress towards the project/programme objectives/indicators. Most tools require skill in order to use them properly and effectively. Tools should be used which, together, produce data and information which is useful, reliable, valid and of sufficient rigour.

A helpful concept to apply in ensuring rigour in data collection, when using qualitative methods and participatory tools, is 'triangulation'. Triangulation can be applied by using a mixture of methods, tools, and perspectives, in order to verify results. Triangulation is a means of addressing the issues of reliability and validity, because any **bias** in using one method can be offset by using another. This does not mean that different methods are randomly selected and put together, but rather they are chosen so that they complement each other and, together, contribute to the overall validity of the findings.

Informal interviews – These aim to elicit information through conversations between interviewers and respondents. They explore, broadly, the views, experiences and values of the respondent by giving the interviewer freedom to pursue issues as they arise.

Semi-structured interviews – These make use of an interview guide with a list of questions to ensure that the main topics are covered. They use open ended questions in a flexible sequence which allows for interviewer discretion, and they leave room for additional questions to be asked to pursue particular topics of interest**.**

Focus groups – These use a small group of people who will discuss openly among themselves and with the interviewer, usually following up on topics identified by an earlier exercise. They can provide a good means of analysing how people interact and discuss issues as they rely on interactions between the members of the group and not simply interaction between the researcher's questions and the participant's responses**.**

Community interviews – These are open for all members of a community or village and must be very carefully planned if they are to be successful. A structured interview guide should be used to avoid conversations drifting. It is important that a balance of people speak and not just prominent individuals.

Participant observation – this involves observing the normal daily lives of beneficiaries, through living within the community or community members recording observations**.**

Mapping - A community map is a schematic drawing, used to identify the location and types of resources used by a community, from the perspective of its inhabitants**.**

Time Line – An illustration of key events in the life of an individual, household, community or organisation over a specified period of time in the past.

Venn diagram – A Venn Diagram is a set of different size circles each representing an institution drawn to show the relationships between stakeholders.

Flow Chart – A visual tool for tracking the flow of resources, benefits or negative effects, in order to explore impacts of a project or a change.

Testimonials – A recorded narrative - delivered in the first person - of an individual's attitude to and experience of a particular situation or project**.**

4.6   Participation

Who participates in different M&E processes, how and why? Who participates in the different processes is particularly important with the involvement of partners and service

users. It is of no use having a complex M&E system if your partners are unable to collect data that provides the information you need. It is also important to ensure the senior management are engaged in the process as they are the final decision makers and can make changes in organisational strategic objectives at any time. This can have an adverse effect on an M&E system that has been developed to measure not only the projects and programmes but contribution to the organisational objectives too.

4.7 A dissemination plan

It is important to consider to whom the evaluation and research results should be disseminated. A dissemination plan is a useful tool that should consider which audiences the findings would be beneficial to. There is no blue print for deciding who should receive evaluation results, the most important things to remember is that other forms of information gathering can contribute to the following:

- Indicate where corrective action is needed
- How to improve monitoring processes
- Indicate where technical assistance or training is needed
- Improve organisational processes
- Improve management processes
- Assist with decision making
- Assist with policy making

When reading any additional documentation it is useful to consider if the information could help the organisation improve the areas listed above.

4.8 The use and analysis of data

The analysis of the data collected is a process of examining and cleaning the data, extracting useful information and suggesting conclusions. The findings can then support project, programme and organisational decision making. There are a huge number of different approaches to analysing data using many different techniques. There are statistical applications that can facilitate analysing quantitative data including packages such as SPSS and Excel. With qualitative data it is more useful to extract and classify information from text sources.

Once the data has been analysed it is important to share the information as widely as possible in the same way as discussed under point 4.7 of this guide.

4.9 Reports

There are many ways of reporting and disseminating to various stakeholders. Each organisation will have their own reporting formats for the different levels of monitoring and evaluation. The reporting format for a semi-literate midwife in Asia will be very different from a reporting format developed for a Country Director in Asia. Reports range from simple reports that outline what activities have been completed in any given project, to more complex analytical reports that can provide information that satisfies donors' needs in large programmes.

Whatever purpose the report has been prepared for, it is a systematic, well organised document which defines and analyses a series of activities, outputs or outcomes, and should include:

- The record of a completed activity or series of activities or outcomes
- Interpretation of the significance of the activity or event
- Evaluation of the facts or results of information presented
- Discussion of the outcomes of a decision or course of action
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

Reports must always be:

- Accurate
- Concise
- Clear
- Well structured

The following baseline report guidance comes from an unnamed organisation:

- The final report should not exceed 35 pages (excluding annexes)
- The report should include an executive summary of 3-4 pages, and follow the format of the baseline report template. The report should clearly state:
  - The authorship and the relationship between the author(s) and 'organisation'
  - Dates when fieldwork was carried out
  - Full explanations of methodology, including sampling and data analysis tools
  - Full details of the programme logic model, and how the variables relate to the programme and global indicators
  - Information on the aspects of the tools that were used, and any adaptations made
  - Information on confounding factors that will have influenced the information needs to be included
  - The report must contain details about data management

An essential element of many reports is the description of changes that are occurring within a project or programme. Many organisations are weak in this area. Specifically:

- reports intended to address change focus entirely on outputs or activities;
- they focus only on positive changes, not on negative changes or areas where expected change has not happened;
- they report change in an anecdotal way, with insufficient evidence to back the changes up; or
- reports claim that an organisation is responsible for changes that are more due to external influences.

Sometimes this can be due to inadequate M&E systems which fail to identify change. However, often it is simply an issue of how change is reported. When working on a project or programme it can be difficult to assess how much information to provide. If there is too much, the reporting of the change is buried under pages and pages of reports and if too little, it is hard for someone without an in-depth knowledge of the programme to understand the importance or relevance of the change.

When producing brief reports for an external audience (i.e. for people who are not working within your project or programme) you should be looking to provide enough information about individual changes for other people to make a considered opinion about the changes resulting from your work, and about any lessons learned. The list below provides some of the areas that should be considered when reporting on a change or changes:

- **Has there been change?** The basic question to address is whether or not things have changed. The changes could be positive or could be negative. In some cases it may also be worth specifically noting changes that have not happened, but which should have been expected.

- **How significant was the change?** Some changes are relatively minor, whilst others can be life-changing. It is worth considering whether you need to emphasise the significance of the change within your report.

- **How many people were affected by the change?** Sometimes changes are reported across a community. At other times, you might be reporting a case study based on just one or two people. In either circumstance, it is useful to know roughly how many people have been affected by the change, and how.

- **Which target groups were affected by the change?** Change does not normally happen equally across all stakeholders. Some may benefit more than others. A report should be clear about which particular target groups were involved in the change.

- **What was the impact on sub-categories or groups?** A report should emphasise any differences between different target groups, if known. For example, some changes might affect boys more than girls, or affect people with disabilities only. Simply reporting on change across a large number of different groups might hide significant differences.

- **Was the change intended or not?** This can be an extremely valuable source of learning. Sometimes the most profound changes are those that were unplanned. Describing changes of this kind can provide valuable lessons to feed back into planning cycles.

- **Is it likely to be sustainable?** Some changes might be long-lasting, whilst others might be relatively short-lived. It may be useful to estimate how sustainable any reported change is likely to be and to indicate any risks or assumptions that might influence the sustainability.

- **What made the change happen?** Reporting on change by itself is interesting but rarely useful for learning purposes. However, if there is an assessment of how the change came about, or what were the key processes leading to it, others may be able to replicate the work (or avoid mistakes in the case of negative changes). Reporting on the key processes that led to a change also helps to substantiate any claim that the change was a result of a project or sub-programme's work.

- **How will the change result in positive changes in people's lives?** Sometimes the implication of change is unclear to outsiders. If you report on an impact – a long-term sustainable change – in people's lives then it is usually clear what the benefits are. However, if you are reporting on outcomes – the immediate changes resulting from your work – the significance of change may not be clear to everyone. For example, you might report that villagers have become more active in lobbying local government. Within your project/sub-programme the implications may be clear. But for an outsider you might need to spell out why you consider this an important change, and what you hope the ultimate long-term result (or impact) will be.

- **How do changes compare to baseline (if any)?** If you report that 75% of people in a location now have access to clean water, this could be considered as an extremely

important change. On the other hand, the situation might be worse than last year! Wherever possible, a report describing change should detail the original situation so that people can understand how large or important the changes are. This applies to both quantitative and qualitative changes.

- **How do changes compare to what was hoped for, or considered realistic?** Equally, if you report that 15 community management committees have now been formed in an area, the implication is that this is a positive change. However, if you planned to facilitate 100 such groups, this casts a different light on the information. It is therefore often useful to describe what was originally planned for, so that people reading your report can see immediately the scale of any change relative to your expectations.

- **What evidence do you have for your change?** This is arguably the most important aspect to report when describing any change or changes. There is a difference between describing the findings of a professionally-conducted, large-scale research study, and reporting findings based on a conversation with a couple of villagers. The description of evidence does not have to be substantial. It is enough to make an introductory statement such as *"the findings of focus-group studies in three villages suggested that…"* or *"anecdotal evidence suggests that …"* or *"independent research by government bodies has found that …"* This will allow the reader to make up his/her own mind about the value of your evidence. There is no reason at all why anecdotal evidence of change should not be described in a report. Provided it is clear that the change reported is not based on rigorous data collection and analysis methodologies, impressions of change can still be useful. The danger comes when anecdotal evidence is reported as if it were a firm conclusion based on rigorous evidence, instead of a tentative conclusion which needs to be further investigated if it is to be properly validated.

- **How was any change attributable to the work of your organisation or partners?** Unless reporting on the external socio-economic environment, you will probably have reason to believe that at least some of the reported changes are attributable to your own work, or the work of your partners. It is therefore useful to describe how you think your project or programme contributed to any change. Where necessary, you can also describe other factors or organisations that may have contributed.

- **With what degree of confidence can you state the change?** M&E systems often encourage people to be very definite in their opinions. For example, a logical framework encourages people to say whether a change has happened or not. In many cases, however, you may have some evidence that a change has occurred, but you may not be sure, or you might be sure the change has occurred, but not sure how far your organisation or partners contributed towards it. In these cases, it is usually better to state the change anyway, and to add some qualifying statements that make it clear how confident you are that change has occurred. If you think there are other possible explanations for why change has happened, it is often useful to state this as well. Again, anyone reading your report can make up his/her own mind provided they have the necessary information on which to base an opinion.

Of course it will not always be necessary to report on each of these areas for every single change. Otherwise your reports will be hundreds of pages long, and nobody will ever read them! However, you should seek to ensure that you provide enough information so that people can make up their own minds about the value or importance of the changes you describe, or provide references to source material so that people can investigate further if they so choose.

4.10 Learning mechanisms

A useful M&E system enables an organisation to continuously learn and improve on its operations, thereby increasing its effectiveness and impact. An M&E system is a key part of any learning organisation, defined as those that:

- Provide continuous learning opportunities.
- Use learning to reach their goals.
- Link individual performance with organisational performance.
- Foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks.
- Embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.
- Are continuously aware of, and interact with, their environment.

4.11 Data storage

A good M&E system is dependent on how information is stored and retrieved at different levels.

Data storage will depend on how much information is being collected, how it will be used and the skills available to the organisation. The most important point to remember is that if information is stored in such a way that it is difficult to retrieve and share with stakeholders it is worse than useless. Partners and project staff get frustrated if they input information into an M&E system and no feedback is forthcoming. It is better to collect less information that can be processed and used well than to collect large amounts of information that are too difficult to retrieve and no one has time to analyse.

4.12 Supporting processes

Once an M&E system is fully developed the most important thing is to ensure is that all staff are able to engage with it. There is no point in having a comprehensive and well developed system if the organisation's personnel are unable to use the electronic programmes or find it too difficult to complete standard reporting formats. It is also important that the information gathered is shared with appropriate levels of staff. For example, partners who deliver on the projects need information fed back to them on how well the activities are contributing to objectives and how well they are achieving their set targets. They do not necessarily need feedback on information that has been aggregated for donors.

It is also important to develop a process for reporting mistakes. If staff feel that they will be punished for making mistakes they will try not to report them. This can lead to people at best exaggerating successes and ignoring failures or at worst telling lies that show the project to be doing much better than it is.

4.13 Practical issues

The resources required to implement and maintain an M&E system include the personnel and finances available to undertake M&E work.

Good M&E costs money. Most donor agencies understand that. Many allow a percentage of the overall cost of a project or programme, generally ranging from 3% to 10%, to go to M&E. An organisation also needs to assess how much they can afford to spend on M&E. The cost of all the different elements should be taken into consideration before embarking

on the process and remember it ALWAYS costs more than we thought it would in the planning phase.

5. Conclusion

There are many methodologies, tools and M&E processes that can be adapted to different organisations. Some are aimed at producing formal evaluation information, whilst others are intended to deliver an on-going assessment of how things are going. It is always necessary to adjust tools to fit an organisation's own needs. It is difficult to specify a single methodology for developing an M&E system as it requires contextual knowledge to decide what is best to use. To some extent the choice of monitoring and evaluation techniques will fall to individual person responsible for M&E.

The above toolkit has outlined some methods and tools. Yet establishing systematic M&E is not about simply introducing some new procedures – it is about establishing a culture, a way of thinking where reflection and learning become part of the everyday way you work. It is more about how we *think*, not what specific techniques we use.

So the bad news is that there is no magic bullet. No one size will fit all. It will take time and some effort to establish an effective M&E system.

But the good news is that if people are prepared to put in the time and determination it is possible to measure what we do and what we change.

Useful Resources on M&E

- http://betterevaluation.org/
- Monitoring and Evaluation News (MandE)
- CDRA Monitoring and Evaluation Resources (Community Development Resource Association)
- PSO's Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Learning Theme (PSO)
- Participatory M&E in Practice - Praxis Paper 21 (INTRAC)
- Learning and Accountability: A monitoring and evaluation consultant's perspective - Praxis Note 32 (INTRAC)
- Impact Assessment: Understanding and assessing our contribution to change - M&E Paper 7 (INTRAC)
- ONTRAC 37: Rethinking M&E (INTRAC)
- Who Measures Change? An introduction to participatory monitoring and evaluation of Communication for Social Change (Communication for Social Change)
- Impact Evaluation: http://www.interaction.org/impact-evaluation-notes
- M&E how to: http://evaluationtoolbox.net.au/
- Programme evaluation and social research tools (a large collection of links): http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods/

M&E Book List

- Toolkits: A Practical Guide to Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Assessment - Save the Children Development Manual (Save the Children)
- Sharpening the Development Process: A Practical Guide to Monitoring and Evaluation (INTRAC)