Influences on the M&E Approach

INTRAC

There are many different factors that may influence the design of a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) approach. These include demands from external organisations such as donors, supporters or governments. Other factors might include the proposed use for M&E data, the nature of work undertaken, the nature of the organisation planning the work, and the available resources.

At some stage most development interventions - whether a large, multi-country programme run by an international organisation or a small project based in a remote village - will need to decide how, when and where to carry out M&E. This will result in the generation of an M&E approach, system, framework or plan (the terminology is not used consistently within international development and does not really matter at this point).

It is almost always much easier to make these decisions during the planning stage as the range of potential options is greater. For example, halfway through a project or programme it may be too late to develop a baseline to compare results with a starting point. Equally, it will be much more difficult to develop a participatory M&E system if a project or programme was not designed in a participatory way.

However, whether or not it is developed at the planning stage or afterwards, there are a number of key influences that will affect the way in which an M&E approach is designed, and need to be taken into consideration. These are grouped into five areas:

- Non-negotiables
- The purpose for which M&E is carried out
- The nature of the work undertaken
- The nature of the organisation
- The available resources

Non-negotiables

Whilst it might be nice to have the freedom to develop an M&E approach from a blank sheet of paper, in reality there are almost always different stakeholders to satisfy. These can be divided into two groups: external and internal stakeholders.

External stakeholders might include powerful institutions such as donors and governments, who often make significant demands on M&E. In some cases there may also be demands from the public, partners or intended beneficiaries. Internal stakeholders, especially for larger organisations, might include head offices, regional offices and country offices, as well as organisational departments such as marketing or fundraising departments, or human resource departments.

The nature of these demands varies, but some of the more common requirements are:

- developing specific planning tools (e.g. logical frameworks);
- defining objectives within broader donor, government or organisational strategic objectives;
- capturing specific indicators;
- using specific tools of data collection and analysis;
- facilitating external reviews and evaluations; and
- producing reports at specific times and/or according to fixed formats.

In some cases, M&E designers can find that there is virtually no room for manoeuvre, and the M&E approach is almost fixed in stone before a project or programme starts.

Case study: VSO in Southern Africa

In 2005, INTRAC helped develop an M&E system for a VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) programme in Southern Africa, designed to combat HIV&AIDS. The system was designed to cover a range of work carried out in six countries in the region. However, a number of factors affected the potential scope of the new M&E system:

- New international guidelines on monitoring and evaluating VSO projects had recently been issued by the VSO head office in London. These were non-negotiable.
- The programme had two major donors. Each donor had its own differing information requirements. These requirements were a basic condition of funding.
- The six participating countries had developed their own independent M&E procedures and practices before they had become part of the programme, and wished to continue using these.

This left very little room for manoeuvre. Rather than being designed with a blank page approach, the new programme M&E system instead attempted to reconcile and streamline the various information demands made by different agencies, both internal and external.

Sometimes it might be possible to push back on different demands, and attempt to negotiate solutions. At other times it might be easier simply to accept the different requirements and design an M&E approach to take them into account. Either way, demands from different stakeholders are likely to have a profound effect on how M&E is conducted during a project or programme.

The purpose for which M&E is carried out

Another key influence is the purpose for which M&E is intended. An M&E approach designed to enable basic project or programme management will not be the same as one primarily designed to show accountability to governments or donors. Equally, an M&E approach designed to learn and improve will not be the same as one intended to support internal communications.

Smaller organisations are more likely to develop M&E approaches that are aimed at one particular purpose, whilst larger ones may develop M&E approaches that serve multiple purposes. But in either case it is always important to ensure that organisations are clear about how they and others intend to use M&E information.

The purpose for which M&E is designed will always have implications for how plans are developed, who sets objectives and indicators and how, the type of tools used to collect and analyse information, the extent of learning and sharing of M&E findings, and even how much money and time is spent on M&E.

The nature of the work undertaken

Many decisions on how an M&E approach is designed depend on the exact nature of the development intervention. At the most basic level, more time and resources will need to be spent on M&E if a project or programme is working in a new or innovative area where the learning of lessons may be considered more important than the actual benefits for a small population. In such cases a great deal of effort may be put into research, evaluation and impact assessment. By contrast, a simple project designed to distribute mosquito nets may not need or want to invest nearly as much in M&E.

Some sectors or work may also have industry standard M&E approaches. For example, in the health sector there are many different types of industry-standard indicators, whilst this is not true of the child protection or governance sectors. Equally, there may be standard tools such as Household Economic Analysis for livelihoods projects or Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys for work in the field of HIV & AIDS.

In addition, the strategies used to promote change will have a very significant influence on the M&E approach. The type of M&E methods used to assess basic service delivery projects are often very different from the methodologies designed to assess capacity building, policy influencing or community mobilisation work. Each type of strategy tends to include its own particular indicators, tools, methodologies and approaches, and these are often radically different from each other.

The nature of the organisation

Clearly, the needs of a large, international NGO working across multiple sectors and countries are very different from the needs of a small organisation working in a single village, where there may in fact be no need for a formal M&E system at all. In general, the larger and more hierarchical the organisation, the more need for formalised planning and M&E approaches that assist internal communications as well as learning and accountability.

Another important factor is the ethos and culture of an organisation, which is heavily influenced by its leadership. For example, an organisation that sees itself as rights-based should be much more likely to invest time and effort in participatory planning and M&E as a matter of principle. Culture is also a key determinant. Some organisations are very open to self-questioning - constantly wanting to ask themselves whether they are doing the right thing, whether they are making a difference, and what else might they be doing to bring about change. Such organisations are perhaps more likely to devote time and resources to M&E and learning than an organisation that sees itself primarily as a agency contracted to deliver services dictated by donors or governments.

The available resources

Finally, there is the question of resources. These include the capacity of staff to design or carry out M&E tasks, the number of staff available, the time they have to devote to M&E, and the money available. The extent of these key resources will perhaps have the greatest influence over the conduct of M&E. For example, a process that has to be completed within days and with no extra resources will require a very different M&E approach to one that has a timeframe of many months, a large budget and a team of evaluators.

The capacity of staff to design and carry out M&E tasks may be a large constraint on the ability of an organisation, project or programme to use complex tools and methodologies. In some cases organisations can use outside help, such as consultants, to help set up or maintain M&E systems or approaches; but it is still by and large internal staff who will be the primary stakeholders.

Other factors may be important. For instance, in some cases, internal staff may have the ability and motivation to conduct excellent M&E, but they may have little time available or support from senior management. In addition, the money available to an organisation has to be spread across many different areas, and the requirement to keep overhead costs down often means that less money is spent on M&E than might be desirable. A key question for many organisations, programmes and projects is how much money to spend on M&E, and whether that money would be better spent elsewhere (for example spending less money on assessing the impact of a piece of work and perhaps supporting more people as a result). All these different factors need to be taken into account when designing an M&E approach.

Summary

There are many influences that will affect the design and delivery of an M&E approach. Some of these derive from an organisation itself whilst in some cases influences are external. The influencing factors will, in combination, set boundaries on what can or cannot be achieved through M&E. INTRAC believes that the combination of different influences effectively means it is pointless searching for magic bullets or off-the-peg M&E systems that will serve all an organisation's M&E needs. Instead, M&E approaches need to be carefully tailored to the needs of the relevant project, programme or organisation on a case-by-case basis.

Ultimately, many organisations desire to walk a narrow line between developing planning, monitoring and evaluation approaches that serve their own needs, whilst also trying to meet the needs of donors, governments and head offices. This is never an impossible exercise, but is not always an easy task, and does often require careful navigation between different influences and expectations.

> *"In the end, an organisation needs to ensure that the M&E approach serves its own organisational needs. An M&E approach designed primarily to serve the needs of external agencies is unlikely to be successful in the long-term."*

Further reading and resources

Further papers in this series deal with the development of an M&E approach, and the development of M&E plans that describe how the M&E approach will work. Two other papers that deal with influences on M&E approaches for different sized organisations are detailed below. The M&E Guide for Small and Diaspora NGOs is more suited for smaller NGOs, whilst the latter document is aimed at larger organisations.

- Garbutt, A. *Monitoring and Evaluation: A guide for Small and Diaspora NGOs* . October 2013. INTRAC, UK.
- *Investing in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: Issues for NGOs to consider*, by ITAD, in association with NEF Consulting, and edited by Jennifer Chapman, March 2014, BOND, UK.

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INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, INTRAC has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on monitoring and evaluation. Our approach to M&E is practical and founded on core principles. We encourage appropriate M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts, and we work with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs.

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