

M&E Paper 5

The Challenges of Monitoring and Evaluating Programmes

Janice Giffen, December 2009

The recent focus on the need to measure (or demonstrate!) the results of social development work can pose problems when thinking about results at programme level¹. This is partly to do with both the different understandings of the term 'programme', and with the usual problems of levels of measurement and attribution.

This paper first attempts to present some clarity in understanding the different uses of the term 'programme', and then uses the different types of programme to demonstrate the issues that are thrown up for monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

1. Where did the focus on 'programmes' come from?

By the 1990s, many development actors, including both larger NGOs and donors, were beginning to accept that development assistance spread out over a large number of projects was making little difference to a country's development. Talk focused on the need to be more strategic in thinking and planning, and on the need to finance groups of projects which together might create synergy and achieve results which would prove to be greater than the sum of the individual projects. This understanding of the term 'programme' focused on identifying strategic or sectoral areas of work under which separate projects would contribute to the same overall programmatic objective.² At INTRAC, we have found the following definitions useful:

A **PROJECT** is a set of related activities planned to take place during a defined period of time to improve the situation of a specific group of people.

A **PROGRAMME** will have a range of strategies working towards defined outcomes. A programme can include a collection of inter-related projects and activities. It may be a mixture of development, relief, advocacy, networking and capacity building.

Geographic and thematic programmes

NGOs talked of 'adopting a programmatic way of working'. Sometimes this could mean that a group of projects in one **geographic** area would now be designated as a 'programme'. Alternatively, a programme could describe a particular **theme** – a group of projects which all focused on one type or sector of activity – for instance an educational programme, or a health programme. More broadly, a theme could focus on one particular issue – such as access to land – and then identify a variety of projects which would tackle different aspects relating to the issue (such as research on situation, education about land rights, creating alliances with other actors interested in land rights, etc). Programmes were thus described as geographic or thematic. Within the 'thematic' moniker one could find programmes which were the result of strategic thinking and focussed on very specific outcomes. However, one could also find loose groupings of projects that

¹ This is in addition to the problems of exclusively thinking about measuring planned outcomes, with all its concomitant assumptions about the linearity and replicability of the development process.

² A brainstorm at INTRAC produced the following list of what we mean by the term 'programme': Multi-year; Different elements related to one theme/region; Strategic – focused on broader/lasting impact and results focused (measurable); Holistic approach; A programme is likely to be implemented with partners; Major initiatives, which tend to cross organisational boundaries; Greater focus on results/impact – focus on accountability; Claims that synergy produces greater results; Larger amounts of funding; Reduced administration costs; Multi-level (from grassroots to higher levels); Different approaches working towards the same goal (service delivery, advocacy etc); Orchestra, not solo.

could be described as having similar objectives and were, perhaps, the pragmatic response from NGOs now being required to adopt a programmatic way of working.

Understanding the difference between a programmatic and thematic approach

Programmatic thinking is often conflated with thematic approaches. Whilst a thematic programme is, by definition, a 'programme', it is useful to distinguish between a thematic and a programmatic approach.

Programmatic approaches are more about:

- defining a strategic direction over a (longer) period of time
- defining a series of projects which together work towards programme objectives

Thematic approaches tend to relate to an organisations' desire to:

- Work on particular issues which they have defined as important
- Promote cross learning from one country to another where they are involved in similar areas of work
- Group their different pieces of work in different countries under a common heading, for reporting, marketing, and, perhaps, impact assessment purposes – however see below for further discussion on the problems of measuring the impact of thematic programmes.

Donor preferences for programmes

Donors favour a programmatic way of working as they want to fund more strategic thinking. The funding of multi-year programmes, rather than individual projects, also reduces donors' transaction costs.

However the requirement to work programmatically has meant that many NGOs have just grouped existing, perhaps loosely connected, projects into programmes. Some donors recognise that the NGOs they fund may have difficulty in moving to strategic programmes, and have adopted flexible interpretations of the term programme. Thus the SIDA definition of a programme:

'Sida uses the term "programme" to refer to a coherent part of the organization's operations that are directed towards a particular goal, has been formulated in a dialogue with the partner and that produces results that can be followed up. The programme's limits are determined by its own particular logic. A natural limit can be a country, a district or a thematic area. Sida and the framework organization reach an agreement concerning an adequate scope for the programme. The work within a programme can have different degrees of homogeneity, from loose coordination of different projects (which can be normal among grant mediating framework organizations) to rigidly coordinated projects with a clear theme. Cooperation between Sida and framework organization primarily occurs on the programme level.'³

Another variant of the term 'programme' among Northern NGOs arises where the Northern NGO has decided to work through local partners, rather than implementing programme components itself. Here, the difficulty may be that it is the Northern NGO that has the strategic vision of what the programme consists of, whilst its partners may have no ownership of this broader vision and may reasonably focus on the implementation and monitoring of its own contributing project. The question then is, who is responsible for monitoring overall programme impact and how can this be done. We return to these questions below.

Finally, there is another use of the term 'programme', which does not necessarily focus on hard, measurable change. For instance, there may have been a strategic decision to put some money in to support the development of civil society, regardless of specific outcomes, just to provide general support. For example, in post conflict situations, it may be strategic to make funds available to support community groups, survivors' groups, etc without expecting hard, measurable outcomes.

³ www.sida.se/English/

This can be regarded as programmatic, and of course there may be ways of measuring outcomes, but the programme should not be expected to be focusing on hard, expected, outcomes.

The Paris Declaration and the focus on support to national governments

As part of the move towards greater harmonisation between donors, and the move towards alignment with country-owned programmes, OECD/DAC donors have signed up to using more '**Programme Based Approaches**' (PBAs) under the Paris Declaration, and its follow-on the Accra Agenda for Action.

'A Programme Based Approach is a way of engaging in development cooperation based on the principle of coordinated support for a locally owned programme of development, such as national poverty reduction strategy, a sector programme, a thematic programme or a programme of a specific organisation.'⁴

The Paris Declaration calls for increased use of PBAs, setting a target of 66% of all ODA to be provided in this form by 2010. The emphasis tends to be on comprehensive planning and on the replication of standard models of service delivery at a large scale. Most PBAs are thus government-led in sectors such as education and health, where scaling up of service delivery is feasible. A particular form of a PBA is at sectoral level, known as Sector Support or Sector Wide Approach (SWAP)⁵. The rationale here is for harmonised support for a particular sector, through sector budget support (where there is a corresponding sector budget) or through some form of pooled funds (see below). Both PBAs and SWAPs provide a mechanism for bypassing fragmented funding from different donors. Those NGOs and CSOs wanting to implement parts of such PBAs are usually sub-contracted to implement specific parts of the programme. PBAs generally favour centralised and rules based procedures, including procedures for the monitoring and evaluation of work. PBAs are especially favoured in service delivery type programmes, such as health and education. The rationale for PBAs is that they should organise programmatic work around programmes that are owned and, ultimately managed by, the State. NGOs and CSOs that are involved in the implementation of such programmes will normally have to comply with the centralised reporting and accountability requirements.

The use of '**pooled funds**' is preferred by some donors in some contexts. This can be seen as a compromise modality, which enables some form of donor control of expenditure in preference to direct (general or sectoral) budget support. A pool of funds is kept separate from the ordinary workings of the government budget, and is used for a particular programme or sectoral area of work. In some cases the accounting and reporting procedures are modelled on government accounting systems, in others they can be modelled on the systems of a particular donor or international organisation, and in some cases they are custom designed for the particular sector or programme. **Local funds** are a particular form of pooled funds, created to disburse funds locally and are both financing instruments and funding agencies. They provide a mechanism for responding to local needs, largely through grant funding and often encourage applications from partnerships of NGOs, local organisations (including local authorities).⁶ Here, the moniker

⁴ EC definition of Programme Based Approach. The EC states that: 'PBAs have the following features: leadership by the host country; a single comprehensive programme and budget framework; a formalised process of donor coordination and harmonisation of donor procedures for reporting, budgeting, financial management and procurement; and demonstrable efforts to increase the use of local systems for programme design, implementation, financial management, monitoring and evaluation.'

⁵ The DAC Guidelines on SWAPs state: 'A coherent and consistently applied sector policy is at the heart of any successful SWAp and focuses the partner government, donors and other stakeholders on achieving collective results. It must be derived from, and consistent with, the partner government's overall strategic objectives and strategic framework (including the poverty reduction strategies. . .)'

⁶ They can provide a means for targeting resources at disadvantaged groups and communities and are increasingly replacing the 'small projects' budget of many donors which was previously going to NGOs. NGOs and CSOs can apply for these funds, although the procedures involved tend to preclude many small CSOs with limited capacity. The management of local funds is often put out to tender, and some funds have been managed and implemented by large INGOs, or local branches of large, northern, accountancy firms. These would have their own reporting requirements.

'programme' denotes some coherence at the point of granting (eg NGO micro grants) – but this does not mean that all funded projects will necessarily be contributing to one set of clearly defined programme objectives, and it would often be meaningless to try to measure such programme impact, other than as a capacity or coalition building mechanism.

The focus on MDGs

Often donors require NGOs demonstrate their contribution to the achievement of MDGs. This is easier for those NGOs which work in clearly defined sectors (or single issue NGOs) which themselves have an MDG which is guiding the objectives of the sectoral work. And where NGOs are working with governments (perhaps being sub-contracted by governments), then NGOs are hopefully part of the overall planning process for achievement of MDGs.

However, for many NGOs, donors' focus on MDGs is problematic. Most NGOs' work is not part of a government programme, and indeed, much of the work of an NGO might be around peripheral areas of MDG goals. For instance, an NGO might be more concerned with enabling particular groups of the population (the disabled; other marginalised groups) to access clean water, rather than focusing on provision of numbers of clean water points per head of population. It is this latter number that the MDGs are concerned with, and which is the proper concern of national governments.

Furthermore, for those NGOs which are not working on single issues, or for those which have elected to work in thematic programmes which may include projects in different countries, then any attempt to measure (or guess at) the NGO's contribution to achievement of MDGs becomes a semantic exercise without any real meaning. This seems to be recognised where donors accept statements from NGOs which merely indicate those MDGs which particular programmes may be assumed to be contributing to – without any attempt at quantification.

2. Monitoring and evaluating programmes

Different types of programme throw up different issues for their monitoring and evaluation.

Programmes defined at NGO level

Where an NGO has defined its own programme strategically, and where it consists of a set of projects which have all been designed to contribute to one (or a few) overarching programme goals, it is easier to think about developing a monitoring and evaluation system, especially if the NGO is implementing the projects itself. This would focus on expected impact and outcomes at the overarching programme goal level, and would also include expected outcomes and outputs for each of the contributing projects. It would be obvious how the expected outcomes of each project should be contributing to the programme level outcomes and impact and in some cases, where nested logframes have been used for planning purposes, it is possible to designate the outcomes of individual projects as outputs at programme level. Such examples are few and far between. More often it is a question of thinking about how the measurement of indicators at individual project level can be aggregated up to show some measure of progress at programme level. In certain types of programme, where contributing projects are very similar (health, education, water supply), it may be easier to aggregate results at project level in order to provide programme level measures of progress. However, for impact level assessment – at programme level – one is usually looking for more qualitative measures of change.

Example 1

For instance, an education programme in a particular country can specify indicators that can be aggregated - numbers of children in school, drop-out rates, repeat-rates, all disaggregated by gender etc. Such numbers are easily aggregated, and can be supplemented by more qualitative studies on quality of education, tracking/longitudinal studies, changes in attitudes etc which can be replicated within different contributing projects.

Where an NGO's programme is less strategically focused on achievement of programme level goals, then M&E for programme level is more difficult. Examples of such cases are where the programme is either a collection of rather unrelated projects, or where the programme is thematic, possibly across different countries, and has been conceived more as a learning tool. Here, the logic is to measure achievement of high level objectives (expected impact at programme level) separately – and then to demonstrate causal linkages between outcomes of contributing projects and the overall programme outcome/impact. This can be messy, and it can be easy to criticise the methodology – especially where it is difficult to demonstrate causal linkages between project level and programme level outcomes⁷. In such cases, people often recognise that all one can do is to demonstrate 'plausible association'.

Example 2

For a programme around land rights, at programme impact level, one could measure progress around expected change, such as legislation, media coverage, changes in attitudes, general levels of awareness etc. Contributing projects might have their own M&E system. Problems could arise around issues of attribution, determining how far each project contributed to overall programme outcomes. Here it would be a case of demonstrating 'plausible association' with rigorous case studies etc

Example 3

It would be difficult to measure impact of an NGO education programme, which covers (probably small) projects in several different countries. Whilst it would be easy to collect the usual numeric indicators relating to education, and to conduct some of the studies given in example 1, it would be difficult, or perhaps meaningless, to measure outcomes and impact at programme level – other than to say that specified numbers of children have been educated etc and to supplement this with individual project studies.

Example 4

Where a Northern NGO works through local partners, and where it has defined a programme which consists of separate projects implemented by separate partners, then the M&E of programme level objectives (and overall programme impact) may be problematic. Whose responsibility is this? Can the Northern NGO insist that programme partners measure contribution to higher level objectives which, perhaps, they have no ownership of? An example may be a Child Rights Programme which consists of separate projects such as education, establishment of children's parliaments', HIV/AIDS awareness raising, provision of water for marginalised families etc.

Faced with the problems of measuring impact of disparate activities, many INGOs have opted to define specific 'areas' or 'domains' of change which attempt to classify the overarching aims or goals of the organisation. Thus a large UK NGO working on issues of child rights has defined five 'Dimensions of Change' in the lives of children around which all their work is focused and according to which all their work can be classified. Other INGOs have defined 'Strategic Change Objectives', which describe the focus of their work, and provide a mechanism by which they can demonstrate the aggregated impact of their work. However, such a mechanism for demonstrating impact is – to my mind – more of a marketing tool rather than a realistic attempt to determine the real impact of the agency's work.⁸

Whereas strategically determined projects and programmes can identify expected outcomes and impact, and progress can be measured according to agreed indicators etc, the issue becomes more murky where 'synthetic' objectives and measures of impact have been defined. These 'synthetic' objectives may be useful in helping focus an NGO's programming at the planning stage – helping them focus on whether particular projects are likely to lead to these identified strategic

⁷ The use of 'Outcome Mapping' in both planning and evaluation is an attempt to get around this problem by articulating, at the outset, how each contributing project is expected to contribute to overall programme outcomes, and the areas of work that are the responsibility of each actor.

⁸ And one European bilateral donor explicitly denied funding to a well known Northern NGO on the basis that its Strategic Change Objectives were not monitorable.

change objectives, but measuring actual contribution of projects to rather vague or high level objectives will tend to be rather impressionistic.

Larger programmes to which an NGO might contribute

Where an NGO is one actor in a larger, often state run, programme, then the M&E system may have already been determined as part of the procedures of the programme. However, the same theoretical issues outlined above, may still apply according to how strategically focused the programme is. It will be conceptually easier to establish M&E systems for sector programmes or programmes where it is very clear how contributing projects are expected to contribute to overall programme goals. These systems will usually be established at the outset, and contributing projects will report accordingly. For less coherent programmes it may be difficult to demonstrate the contribution of each actor to the overall programme goals. The programme funders will be examining the model, and may fund specific lower level studies to explore the extent to which the work of contributing projects is likely to influence the achievement of programme level objectives.

However, there are other issues, similar to those outlined above for NGO programmes working through partners. Where an NGO is, itself, a 'partner' contributing to a larger programme, it may not feel it can be held accountable for the larger programme objectives because they are following a plan/design over which they have no control. It is often argued that the contracting agency has the responsibility to look at wider outcomes and impact. However, in practice this rarely happens. The 'outcome mapping' methodology attempts to articulate these issues and identify which actors have responsibility for which outputs and outcomes.

Conclusions – we need clarity when talking about 'programmes' and an understanding of the issues arising from different programme models

- NGOs and CSOs need to be clear what they are talking about when discussing 'programmes' and a 'programmatic approach'.
- A minimum definition might be that a Programme implies a combined goal, shared impact, joint planning. This use of the term may exclude thematic programmes – especially when they are implemented across different countries. Such thematic programmes may be more about learning and sharing experiences and approaches, than focusing on specific, measurable change. This definition would also exclude those programmes which are really funding mechanisms – for instance a small grants programme - except where there are real overarching objectives which the funding mechanism hopes to achieve (other than capacity building).
- When talking about monitoring and evaluation a programme, it is useful to include the goals and objectives of contributing projects as part of the hierarchy of objectives, rather than just focusing on high level results. Otherwise we run the risk of leaving a 'missing middle' – between measuring the outcomes and impact of projects and measuring the high level programme impact. Where such a 'missing middle' is inevitable, then we are reduced to demonstrating 'plausible association'.
- The need to demonstrate results, and impact, has been responsible for the creation of synthetic measures of impact, such as 'domains of change'. These may be useful at the planning stage of a programme, in helping define the different components of intangible change. They are less useful as a real measure of actual change and of the contribution of individual projects to such change.
- The term 'programme' is used in many different ways. This broad use is likely to continue. However, if we are more rigorous in our understanding of how the term is being used, there is more hope for being able to develop useful M&E systems for programmes.

INTRAC
Oxbridge Court, Osney Mead,
Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851
Fax: +44 (0)1865 201852
Email: info@intrac.org
www.intrac.org