

Results-Based Management is a broad performance management strategy that has been increasingly adopted by institutional donors over the past decade. It has significant implications for strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation. Results-Based Management seeks to place the measurement of results at the heart of management. It has many supporters and critics, and there are passionate debates about how useful or appropriate it is within social development.

Results-Based Management (RBM) has been around for a long time. It has become increasingly popular in the donor community over the past decade, and particularly since the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, where countries from around the world endorsed an attempt to change the way in which donor and developing countries collaborated. There is no single definition of RBM, but a typical definition is as follows:

*“RBM is a management strategy by which all actors, contributing directly or indirectly to achieving a set of results, ensure that their processes, products and services contribute to the achievement of desired results (outputs, outcomes and higher-level goals or impact). The actors in turn use information and evidence on actual results to inform decision making on the design, resourcing and delivery of programmes and activities as well as for accountability and reporting.” (UNDG, 2011, p2)*

There are a number of key elements of RBM. These include the following (see for example Hailey and Sorgenfrei, 2004; Garbutt and Bakewell, 2005; Mango, 2014).

1. The identification of clear and measurable objectives.
2. The identification of indicators to measure progress towards objectives.
3. The setting of targets associated with objectives and indicators.
4. The establishment of a monitoring system for regular data collection and the comparison of targets with actual results.
5. The integration of evaluations to provide complementary performance information that is not available from monitoring systems.
6. The use of performance information for internal management accountability, learning and decision-making, as well as for external performance reporting to stakeholders and partners.

Increasingly, RBM has become associated with the use of linear planning tools such as the logical framework (or logframe) and results chain terminology. A results chain is the sequence of results considered necessary to achieve desired objectives, beginning with inputs, moving through activities and outputs, and then to outcomes and impacts.

## RBM debates

RBM is hugely controversial within the development context, and there are fierce debates about how appropriate it is in different circumstances. Supporters of RBM point to the fact that it reflects an increasing concern with greater accountability between large institutions and host governments – something that is an inherently good thing. They also point to the fact that the purpose of RBM is partly to enhance the role of strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation within management processes. Again, this is something most would agree is a reasonable goal.

Some supporters of RBM acknowledge that the ‘management’ side of RBM is often overlooked, but see this not as a failing of the general principles but as a failure of application. For example, the UNDG RBM manual explicitly talks about the flexibility needed to change activities and strategies when needed, in collaboration with a range of different stakeholders (UNDG, 2011).

Indeed as one INTRAC colleague is fond of saying, “*why wouldn’t you want to manage by results?*” As M&E practitioners surely we should want to see our work taken seriously and considered when managers make decisions?

On the other hand, some critics argue that RBM is often applied in a very rigid way with a focus on the achievement of hard, measurable results. This can lead to a number of problems.

- Firstly, there may be a bias towards doing what is measurable. The risk is that targets and performance indicators over-simplify development efforts, because of an assumption that only verifiable and measurable facts are important and other types of knowledge have no value (Eyben, 2013). This can lead to agencies focusing increasingly on simple, measurable change instead of more complex initiatives with goals that are difficult to measure. A popular quote at the moment (see Van Ogenvalle et. al., 2012) is a comment made by former USAID President Andrew Natsios, that: “... *those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable.*”

- A second potential bias is that RBM may encourage the pursuit of short-term rather than long-term change. In social development, some changes take many years to materialise, and may be due to the contributions of many different organisations. This does not sit well with the imperative to manage by results over short timescales.
- Thirdly, RBM may not be so appropriate when working in areas where there are different views of what constitutes success. This is because RBM encourages a focus on measurable, unambiguous indicators and targets, whereas the reality in many social development settings is that there are often different interpretations of what constitutes success.
- Fourthly, there is an argument that RBM has become too dominant. Some argue that what used to be creative tension between a *“flexible and enabling role in supporting an empowerment process of social change and the obligation to demonstrate results and fulfil internal rules and regulations ... is no longer creative”* because the obligation to demonstrate results has become increasingly dominant (Eyben, 2013, p5).

INTRAC’s own experiences over the past few years confirm that many CSOs are coming under increasing pressure to justify funding through the measurement of results at different levels, and some of this is down to the RBM agenda. International NGOs that are closest to large, institutional donors may find it the most difficult to conform to RBM principles as it can be very difficult for them to measure results across different locations and sectors. This inevitably affects other CSOs as demands and expectations are pushed down the aid chain.

But the debate is also framed in the context of an ever-sharpening divide between development practitioners

wedded to RBM principles and those more in favour of complexity theory. The latter can be characterised as preferring M&E approaches such as Most Significant Change, Outcome Mapping and stories of change to logframes, measurable targets and evidence-based approaches. Discussions around RBM therefore need to be seen as part of much wider debates around social development and the contribution of the aid industry as a whole.

## Summary

Many arguments in social development in general, and M&E in particular, end up coming down to how tools or approaches are applied, rather than their intrinsic value, and RBM is no different. Indeed the principles on which RBM is based – greater accountability, more harmonisation, taking M&E seriously – are hard to argue with.

But it is also the case that any system designed to manage by results will be harder to apply in situations where change is nebulous, long-term or contested. This is the arena in which many CSOs operate, and it is perhaps not surprising that so many (by no means all) are suspicious of the RBM agenda.

Ultimately, assessing progress should always play a part in management. This frequently involves assessments of predicted, measurable change. But management is also about making value judgements about other aspects of change, identifying unexpected or negative changes, monitoring the external environment, and constantly questioning what else could be done instead of what is being done. RBM focuses most keenly on one aspect of management – the identification of predicted, measurable change – and INTRAC believes it is important in some circumstances that this is balanced by other methods and approaches that enable more flexible and nuanced monitoring and evaluation of projects and programmes.

***“To measure whatever can easily be measured is okay as far as it goes  
To disregard that which cannot easily be measured is artificial and misleading  
To presume that what cannot easily be measured is not very important is dangerous  
To say that what cannot easily be measured does not really exist is fatal.”***

Source: Adapted from Yankelovich (1972)

## Further reading and resources

Other papers in this series deal with logical frameworks and how to make logical frameworks more useful in complex situations. Many organisations have manuals on Results-Based Management (RBM) and many are freely available on the internet. One such is the United Nations Development Group Manual (see reference below). A critique of the evidence and results agenda by Rosalind Eyben is available from the Big Push Forward website.

- *Results-Based Management Handbook: Harmonizing RBM concepts and approaches for improved development results at country level*, United Nations Development Group, October 2011. This manual is available from: [www.undg.org/docs/12316/UNDG-RBM%20Handbook-2012.pdf](http://www.undg.org/docs/12316/UNDG-RBM%20Handbook-2012.pdf)
- *Uncovering the Politics of 'Evidence' and 'Results': A framing paper for development practitioners*, by Rosalind Eyben, April 2013, is available from [www.bigpushforward.net](http://www.bigpushforward.net)

## References

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- Yankelovich (1972). *"Corporate Priorities: A continuing study of the new demands on business."*

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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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