COMMUNICATION

To be useful, information acquired through monitoring and evaluation (M&E) needs to be communicated to different stakeholders. There are many ways to do this, depending on the audience and how the information will be used. Some CSOs have strategies for communication. But many CSOs collect, analyse and store M&E information without considering how it should be communicated.

To be useful, information acquired through monitoring and evaluation (M&E) needs to be communicated to different stakeholders. An evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR) normally specifies how information should be communicated and to whom. This is not always true of ongoing monitoring. Although some CSOs have strategies for communication and dissemination, much M&E information is routinely collected, analysed and stored without ever considering how it should be communicated.

There are many ways to communicate M&E information. Several factors influence how this is done. These include the following:

- the purpose for which the information will be used;
- the main audience for the information;
- when the information will be communicated; and
- issues around accessibility.

Clearly, the ***purpose*** for which the information will be used should influence how it is communicated. Broadly, this can be divided into two areas. Firstly, M&E information can be communicated to specific stakeholders to achieve a defined purpose. Common purposes include providing evidence for decision-making, demonstrating accountability for performance or results, enabling the supervision of projects and programmes, providing evidence for advocacy work, allocating resources and fundraising.

It is always important to consider how best to communicate information in order to achieve a specific purpose. For example, information needed for day-to-day decision-making within a project or programme should not be communicated in the same way as information designed to help raise funds for a CSO or contribute to government policy-making.

Secondly, the communication of M&E information can be an end in itself. Done well, it can help increase understanding between different stakeholders by helping them to appreciate other people's perspectives. For example, support staff working in the Head Office of a large NGO may find out what is happening in the field; people working in one sector or geographic location can find out what is happening in other places; and the public might learn more about the people who are supported through their taxes or contributions (Bakewell et. al. 2003).

Of course, it is possible that the information might then be used for a more specific purpose at some stage in the future. But sometimes the communication of M&E information is considered a good thing, whether or not anyone acts on that information.

It is always important to provide information in a way that best suits the ***audience*** for that information. There are many types of audiences, and not all require the same kind of information. For example:

- the trustees of a large NGO may require regular, short summary reports across different projects and programmes, with aggregated tables and statistics;
- project managers may require much more detailed information on the progress made by a single project;
- policy-makers might benefit from a short brief summarising the main issues, and making recommendations for change; and
- a member of the public that supports a CSO through donations might prefer to see a story of change, a photograph or a short video that enables them to connect with beneficiaries on an emotional level.

Sometimes it is up to the CSO generating the M&E information to decide how it should be communicated. But sometimes, especially when communicating information to partners or beneficiaries, it is useful to discuss this with the audience beforehand. This is a core element of participatory M&E.

It is important to remember that audiences are not homogenous, and different people prefer to receive information in different ways. Some people thrive on detail whilst others are satisfied with an overview. Some people like to carefully examine the evidence for change whilst others ignore anything that looks too technical. Some people have a good understanding of statistics and graphs whilst others are confused by numbers. Some people believe everything they are told whilst others never take information at face value. And some people want cold, hard facts whilst others prefer to connect with information on an emotional level. This means that CSOs either need to thoroughly understand the needs of a particular audience (e.g. key personnel within a donor organisation) or do their best to provide M&E information in different ways even for the same audiences.

It is also important to know ***when*** information needs to be communicated. For example, if decision-making meetings occur on a quarterly basis then it is important to communicate M&E findings before those meetings are held. Equally, if seeking to influence a government policy, it is important to supply information at the right time so that it has the maximum chance of achieving its purpose. If information needs to be communicated on a regular basis then it is important to consider how often this should be done.

A final factor is the ***accessibility*** of information (Better Evaluation 2013). For example, CSOs should consider, where possible, how information can be communicated to people with audio or visual disabilities, or whether stakeholders are able to access the venues for meetings. When communicating information to supported communities it is also important to know whether people are illiterate or semi-literate, in which case presenting information in written form will be of little use.

All these factors need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. As stated earlier, some CSOs have communication strategies or dissemination plans to guide communication. And communication is (or should be) considered at the start of most evaluations or major reviews. The key point is to be very clear about who needs what information, when and where. The risk otherwise is that M&E information is either not communicated at all or is communicated in the wrong way so that people become overwhelmed with information that they do not need and cannot use.

Methods of Communication

Many different methods can be used to communicate M&E findings. Some of these are described below.

Narratives are the most common way of communicating M&E findings. Narratives often cover descriptions of activities carried out, changes, lessons learned and recommendations. Some examples of specific kinds of narrative report are included below.

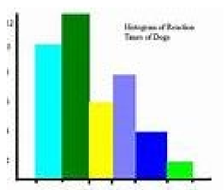
Formal reports
Many CSOs spend a large amount of time producing different reports for different audiences, including donors and/or government agencies, supporters, head offices, internal management, board members, trustees, partners and beneficiaries. Some reports are regular (e.g. quarterly or annual reports) whilst others are written in response to an issue or event. Most evaluations and formal reviews involve the development of a formal narrative report at the end.

Case studies or stories of change
A case study is a descriptive piece of work that aims to provide in-depth information on a development intervention. Case studies are usually written, although they can also be presented as photographs, drawings or videos. Stories of change are like case studies but are always focused on change. Stories of change usually attempt to show how a project or programme has contributed to change within the lives of targeted beneficiaries, or to other forms of change such as policy or organisational change. Case studies or stories of change are often presented within wider reports but may also be used on their own.

Newsletters
Newsletters that seek to summarise M&E results in an accessible language can help maintain the interest of different groups of people. Many CSOs produce regular newsletters as part of their M&E systems and consider them a useful way of sharing M&E findings on a regular basis.

Press releases
Press releases are often used by CSOs to communicate important M&E findings, or highlight issues raised through M&E.

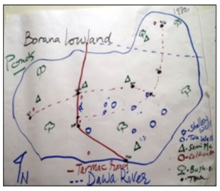
Policy briefs
Policy briefs are short papers that are written to highlight a particular issue or viewpoint. They are often designed to influence government decision-makers and contain recommendations for policies or plans. Policy briefs may be based on information acquired through M&E.



Many M&E systems result in the generation of statistical information. This ranges from summaries of expenditures and activities through to the presentation of results. Statistical information can be used to explain in-depth change in a single project or programme, or to summarise results across many different locations. Statistical information can be presented on its own but is more often communicated alongside descriptive or narrative reports.

Graphs and charts There are many ways of displaying statistical information. These include pie charts, bar charts, histograms, scatter charts and line graphs. Charts or graphs are most useful when the communication of trends and patterns is considered more important than the presentation of exact figures.

Tables and matrices Tabulation means presenting information in a table form, with clearly labelled rows and columns. This is useful when the presentation of exact figures is required, for example when communicating a set of audited accounts.



Complex data can be presented visually through maps, diagrams, calendars and timelines. These methods are routinely used when generating M&E information through participatory M&E. But they can also be used to communicate M&E information. Some of these methods are described further in the M&E Universe paper on Participatory Learning and Action (PLA).

Maps Within M&E, maps are drawings used to describe an area and identify key features from the perspective of communities. Different maps can be generated for different purposes, e.g. social maps or mobility maps.

Diagrams Diagrams can present information in an easily understandable form. Common examples are flow diagrams and Venn diagrams.

Timelines Timelines and time trends are constructed to show changes over time. This makes them particularly useful for M&E – seeing not just how things have changed, but also understanding the reasons and contributing factors.

Calendars Calendars can show key events and how they change over years, seasons, months, days or hours.

Photographs, videos, pictures and cartoons are all useful ways of communicating M&E findings. The big advantage is that they can communicate information from communities and beneficiaries directly to different audiences, without being filtered through a report. This means they can connect people to development issues on a more emotional level. As with charts, graphs and maps, they can be used on their own, or alongside other methods of communication, such as narrative reports.

Photographs Photography is often used within monitoring systems, either to supplement descriptions or convey information in a different way. Photographs can show activities undertaken or represent changes in peoples' lives. Photographs taken before and after a change can be a very powerful and objective way of communicating M&E findings.

Video Videos are also an effective way of communicating M&E information. Often, they are developed by an external person as a record of a project or programme. But they can also be developed by communities to communicate their own stories.

Pictures and cartoons Cartoons are an effective way of sharing information that has been gathered through M&E processes. They can sometimes add a note of humour into a report and can enable people to see things differently.

Recent technological advances have made it much easier to present and communicate information in new and innovative ways. Some of these facilitate greater interaction than would be allowed by a report, table, graph, photograph or video. Technological advances mean people can actively engage with communicated M&E information instead of just passively receiving it.

Websites Many CSOs, particularly larger ones, operate websites that contain information on their organisations, and can be used to disseminate M&E findings. Sometimes the websites also allow people to comment on these findings. Websites may contain blogs (short, written pieces, posted on a website, written in an informal or conversational style) or weblogs (a series of entries arranged in reverse chronological order, updated frequently with new information about particular topics). They can also host narratives, graphs, charts, maps, pictures, videos, and many other kinds of media.

Social media sites	Social media sites are web-based communication tools that enable people to interact with each other by accessing and sharing information. They have risen in prominence rapidly since the early twenty-first century. Many CSOs have dedicated social network sites, especially (but not exclusively) to communicate with younger audiences. Common social media sites include Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
Podcasting	A podcast is an event that is broadcast in sound and/or pictures over the internet. Some CSOs organise podcasts to share M&E findings.
TV and radio	Some CSOs communicate M&E information via TV and radio, especially in societies where few people have access to the internet. TV and radio are less likely to be the media of choice for routine communication of M&E information, but can sometimes be used to highlight issues of particular interest.
E-dialoguing and e-conferencing	There are many ways in which technology can allow people from remote geographic areas to come together. These methods can be used to communicate M&E findings and generate discussion. They include virtual chat rooms, teleconferences, video conferences and webinars. These are hugely valuable to M&E teams wishing to communicate information across wide geographic locations (always provided the technology works of course).
Infographs	Infographics are graphic, visual representations of information, data or knowledge, intended to present information quickly and clearly. They can improve people's ability to see patterns and trends. Infographics have evolved a lot in recent years. Previously they were only developed by experts. Now they are designed to allow anyone to produce and present complex data in a simple visual form.

At the other end of the scale, more artistic and traditional methods of communication such as poems, drama, mime and song can be used to share M&E information with others. Investing in these activities can help prevent M&E becoming a sterile exercise, and can support much more widespread understanding and discussion of change.

Song and dance	Songs and dances can be produced by communities to share their M&E analyses and findings, or communicate their feelings about an issue
Theatre	Theatre can be an excellent way of communicating M&E findings. For example, a CSO, together with a community, could select a key issue on which to make a play, develop a drama, and perform that to a wider audience. Issues arising can then be discussed.
Creative art	M&E findings can also be communicated through monologues, paintings, poems, mime, or any other kind of creative art.

M&E findings can be communicated verbally. This is the best way for many audiences. Many people can take in spoken information who would not necessarily read a report or look at graphs or tables. Speaking directly to a target audience allows messages to be tailored to the unique individual or group, and allows for some discussion of findings as well.

Meetings and workshops	There are many ways in which CSOs can communicate M&E findings in meetings, either as a supplement to, or instead of, written reports. These include regular team meetings, presentations, in-house workshops and briefing sessions. Wider stakeholders might be engaged through external workshops and conferences.

Feedback sessions	Feedback sessions in the field are often a vital way of communicating M&E findings to primary stakeholders such as partners and beneficiaries. Feedback sessions can be used to discuss issues unique to the location concerned, or wider M&E findings from work in many different locations.
Informal conversations	Finally, one of the best and important ways to communicate M&E information is through informal conversations. M&E staff often share information with those they trust and use these conversations to help develop their analyses. Some of the best M&E communication happens in restaurants, bars, kitchens, cafes and bathrooms. In many CSOs if you find a kettle then a whiteboard or flip-chart is never far away.

Further reading and resources

Some of the subjects mentioned in this paper are covered in further papers in the M&E Universe. These include papers on reporting, Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), case studies and stories of change, photography and video, and quantitative analysis.

- Reporting
- Reporting change
- Case studies and stories of change
- Participatory Learning and Action
- Photography and video
- Quantitative analysis

There is a section on communicating M&E findings in section 6 of the IFAD Guide to M&E by Irene Guijt and Jim Woodhill, and produced by the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

References

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