DEVELOPING A PLAN

Most projects and programmes develop a formal written plan at the start. In many cases these plans contain information on how monitoring and evaluation will be conducted. The way in which a plan is developed, and the content of the plan, also have implications for how monitoring and evaluation is carried out later on.

A plan is usually a written document that describes the problems or challenges a project or programme will attempt to address, potential solutions, and activities designed to contribute to desired changes. Plans may be developed at many different levels: for example, strategic plans based at organisational, regional, country or sector level; programme or project plans; and operational plans such as annual, quarterly or monthly plans and budgets.

Plans may be developed for many different purposes. Some plans are developed to acquire approval or funding. Other plans may be developed to guide implementation over the course of a programme or project, or to allow managers to supervise or control work. Plans may be developed as stand-alone pieces of work, or they might have to fit within wider geographical or organisational plans. They may be written according to the needs of an implementing agency or they may have to be developed under headings dictated by other agencies, such as governments or donors. They might be designed to satisfy internal management needs or largely written for an external audience.

This can present difficulties for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practitioners. Planning and M&E are very closely related, and ideally plans should always be developed to reflect as accurately as possible a project or programme's challenges and proposed solutions. Yet with so many different ways of developing plans, and so many different motivations, there are bound to be cases where plans do not truly reflect the reality on the ground – either the nature of the challenge or the ability of an organisation to respond to that challenge. This is one of the key reasons why M&E practitioners should always be involved in planning processes wherever possible.

The process of developing a plan

For small organisations without external funders planning may be an implicit exercise resulting in little more than a few ideas on a piece of paper, or even in the heads of staff members. On the other hand, large organisations may have lengthy and complicated project/programme cycle management procedures that dictate how plans are developed and refined. But in either case the process through which plans are developed is likely to have a significant effect on future M&E work. This is for two main reasons.

Firstly, some of the key decisions on how to conduct monitoring and evaluation are taken at the planning stage. For example, objectives, indicators and the tools used to collect indicators are often identified at the planning stage, either before a project or programme begins or near to its start. Decisions on whether and/or how to conduct a baseline also need to be taken near to the start of a project or programme.

Secondly, the way in which plans are developed is likely to affect the ownership of monitoring and evaluation processes later on. For example, if an organisation hopes to develop a participatory monitoring and evaluation system then there needs to be some level of participatory planning. This might involve communities contributing to the identification of problems, the suggestion of solutions, the development of objectives and indicators, and the identification of methodologies for collecting information. If the selection of objectives and indicators is not at least partially influenced by communities then it will be much harder later on to persuade them to get involved in the collection or analysis of M&E information.

Equally, the way in which collaborative programmes are planned has implications for M&E. For example, some intermediary NGOs develop programme plans and then invite partners to comment, whilst others seek to develop plans collaboratively with partners. In the latter case there is likely to be much greater participation of partners within programme M&E processes as well.

Planning tools and methodologies

There are many different tools and methodologies that may be used to assist project or programme design and planning. Some of these are used purely for design and planning, whilst others may also influence how monitoring and evaluation is carried out at a later stage. Some examples of common tools and methodologies used in design and planning, and how they might influence M&E at a later stage, are described below.

- **Context or situational analysis:** This is an analysis and description of the current situation and context surrounding the problem, challenge or opportunity a project or programme hopes to work on. A situational analysis usually describes a situation in detail, focusing in particular on the primary intended beneficiaries and

how they are affected by the different challenges or problems identified. Findings from situational analyses are commonly used in baseline studies.

▪ **Visioning:** Visioning is a technique that helps stakeholders imagine and describe what an ideal situation might look like in a number of years' time. Visioning is designed to be a starting point to help people think about the end situation, and therefore what immediate changes need to be pursued. Visioning can be very useful in helping people to collaboratively develop longer-term indicators of change.

▪ **Stakeholder analysis:** A stakeholder analysis is an analysis of the people, groups or organisations that may influence or be influenced by a project or programme. Stakeholder analysis often informs decisions over which groups to inform, consult or control at different stages of a project or programme. Decisions on who to involve in planning, monitoring and evaluation may be taken during a stakeholder analysis

▪ **Problem analysis:** A problem analysis is normally conducted with different stakeholders, and is designed to achieve consensus on detailed aspects of a problem or challenge. Problem analysis often ends up with a problem tree, which illustrates not only how problems are inter-linked but also what might be the root causes. It is quite common to then develop an objectives tree or similar tool that includes a series of objectives at different levels, with the relationships and linkages between them clearly identified. An objectives tree may have implications for how objectives are defined within a project or programme, and how indicators and baselines are developed.

▪ **PRA/PLA:** PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) used to be called PRA (Participatory Rapid/Rural Appraisal). It is based around the participation of a broad range of different stakeholders, especially those affected by a project or programme, and consists of a large number of participatory tools and techniques. PLA / PRA can be used at any stage of a project or programme cycle, although it was originally designed to be used at the appraisal and planning stages. PLA / PRA is designed to gain an in-depth understanding of a community or situation, and is often used for M&E purposes. Using PRA / PLA at the planning stage has huge implications for how a project or programme might be monitored and evaluated at a later stage.

▪ **Scenario planning:** Scenario planning is a strategic planning method designed to help generate flexible, long-term plans. It involves developing different pictures of how the future might evolve – scenarios – and then considering how a project, programme or organisation might need to change if those scenarios become reality. Scenario planning relies on effective monitoring and review mechanisms. Organisations need the will and the power to make changes rapidly in the face of changing situations, and appropriate monitoring and review processes to identify those changes.

▪ **The logical framework:** The logical framework is a very common planning tool. It contains a set of objectives at different levels, and includes indicators against each

objective. It also outlines the tools or methodologies that will be used to collect information on those indicators. Projects and programmes often base their entire M&E system on the information contained within a logical framework, developed at the planning stage.

▪ **Outcome Mapping:** Outcome Mapping focuses on changes in the behaviour of the people, groups and organisations influenced by a programme. Like the logical framework, it is a planning methodology that has implications for how monitoring and evaluation is conducted. However, Outcome Mapping is designed to deal with complexity, and is not based around linear models of change. Outcome Mapping comes with its own set of monitoring practices, based around the logging and recording of changes (outcomes) over the course of a project or programme.

"The decisions you take at the planning stage, and the way in which your plans are developed, are likely to have significant implications for how M&E is conducted. Start as you mean to go on."

Reviewing plans

Perhaps the most important thing when developing a plan is to recognise that almost all plans are at some stage disrupted by changing situations. A plan is a necessary document that should guide the implementation of a development intervention, but it is only a guide, and should not be allowed to dictate events. A good monitoring and evaluation system will seek to test the assumptions behind a plan and constantly review the plan in the light of emerging evidence. A normal project or programme would be expected to review and update its plan many times over its lifetime.

Therefore, it is best to ensure a written plan is as short and simple as possible, whilst imparting the necessary information. This includes:

• being clear about the key messages;
• being honest about what it is a project or programme hopes to do or achieve;
• being clear and consistent in the use of language; and
• ensuring that staff joining the project or programme at a later date can adapt and change the plan as required.

The content of a plan

All plans are different, but there are often common elements that are contained in a strategic, programme or project plan. Some of these elements are contained in the box on the following page.

A Project or Programme Plan

Background and overview: The rationale and context for the project or programme. This can include: a summary of the findings from any previously undertaken situational analysis work; a summary of any key lessons learned during previous phases of the project/programme or other relevant work; a description of the geographic locations or sectors covered by the project or programme; the proposed timing and duration of the project/programme; and a description of the key target group(s) that it is hoped will benefit, together with a rationale for why they have been selected.

Goal, objectives and indicators: The objectives describe the specific, timebound changes that the project/programme intends to bring about within its scheduled timeframe. The goal may be a wider aspiration which is not necessarily timebound, and to which many organisations might contribute. Indicators may be defined against the project/programme objectives.

Project/programme design: The key working approaches employed to achieve the goal and objectives described above. This section could include relevant strategies and a description of key working approaches, and a description of how these might evolve over the period of the project/programme. It might also include a list of key deliverables, a description of key activities that will be undertaken over the course of the project/programme, and a brief description of the exit strategy, if appropriate. In some cases a project or programme might also wish to describe how it is addressing organisational cross-cutting issues such as gender, disability or the environment.

Partners and stakeholders: A description of the main partners or organisations that will work on the project or programme, or with which the project/programme hopes to collaborate, together with any other key actors, and their role within the project or programme. This could include organisations that might be the target of policy influencing work, or whose support needs to be gained. In a larger programme, this section might also contain details of smaller projects run by individual partners.

Resources: A description of the resources that will be required to implement the project or programme. This will include human resources, financial resources and other support needs, along with an assessment of how these might change over the course of the project or programme.

Risk assessment and management: An outline of the main risks and assumptions associated with the project or programme and how these will be managed. This section might also include notes on protection, staff security and any risks associated with partnerships with different groups.

Monitoring and evaluation: A brief description of how the project or programme will be monitored and evaluated over its lifetime. This should include a summary description of any baseline work conducted, any specific monitoring processes, details of any scheduled mid-term reviews, evaluations or impact assessments, key external reporting schedules, and details of how learning will be shared both within and outside the project or programme.
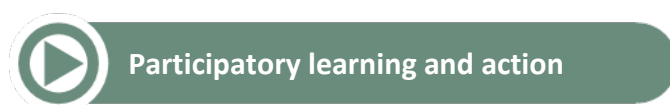
Annexes: A project or programme plan might also contain annexes containing more detailed information. This could include some of the following:

- A logical framework or equivalent planning tool
- A detailed budget for the project/programme as a whole, or the first part of it
- A detailed M&E plan, including an indicator matrix specifying who is responsible for collecting indicators against the main objectives, how they intend to collect them, and when
- An activity chart or Gannt chart outlining detailed activities to be carried out

Further reading and resources

Further papers within this section of the M&E Universe describe the influences that affect the design and implementation of M&E approaches, and the development of M&E approaches and plans. There are also papers relating to two of the planning methodologies mentioned in this paper, PLA/PRA and the logical framework. To access these papers directly, click on the relevant links below.

▶ **Influences on the M&E approach**

▶ **Participatory learning and action**

▶ **Developing an M&E approach**

▶ **The logical framework**

Some other useful resources that cover a range of different planning tools and methodologies, some of which have been mentioned in this paper, are as follows:

- *Tools for Development: A handbook for those engaged in development activity*, *version 15* (2003). Published by the UK Department for International Development and available online.
- Guijt I. and Woodhill J. *A Guide for Project M&E*. International Fund for Agricultural Development. Available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic.
- A series of practical tools for international development can be found at *www.tools4dev.org*.
- Gosling L. and Edwards M. (2003), *Toolkits: A practical guide to planning, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment,* 2nd edition. Save the Children, London. This book is available through the Save the Children website

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INTRAC is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.

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