DEVELOPING AN M&E APPROACH

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Developing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach for a simple project or small programme can be a relatively easy task. In many cases it is possible to follow generic steps to develop a simple, workable M&E system. But for more complex development interventions it becomes increasingly important to tailor M&E approaches to the particular programme, organisation, sector and type of work.

It is virtually impossible to do any kind of social development work without carrying out at least some monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This includes thinking and reflecting on what a project or programme is doing, and what is changing as a result. Project and programme staff may also spend a great deal of time looking at the external environment – what is happening around them – and thinking about what else could be done or what could be done differently. Activities such as visiting partners, talking to staff or beneficiaries in the field, recording conversations, observing the behaviours of different stakeholders or even reading local newspapers can all be seen as types of informal M&E. These kinds of activities are indistinguishable from basic management tasks. Sometimes, that is all that is required and there is no need to develop a more formal or more complex M&E approach.

However, for larger projects and programmes, and for most work receiving external funding, a more formal approach to M&E will normally be needed. The first decision to make is who will develop that approach. This will usually be the task of an individual or a small team. But a wider range of stakeholders may need to be engaged in consultation, design, refinement or piloting. These could include different departments within an organisation, as well as partners and/or potential beneficiaries.

Decisions made at this stage are extremely important, particularly for complex projects and programmes, or those involving multiple stakeholders. The best technical M&E approach in the world is unlikely to be successful unless there is a high level of wider buy-in and ownership.

Another key issue is when to develop an M&E approach. It is usually best to consider M&E at the earliest stage possible. However, for obvious reasons it is not normally possible to finalise an M&E approach until project or programme plans are clear and work has been approved. Even then plans may be subject to continuous change, and M&E approaches may need to be revised many times over the lifetime of a project or programme.

Guiding questions

Before designing an M&E approach, it is useful to address a few key questions. These will help inform the development of the M&E approach.

- **Who is this being done for?** Is it for the team implementing the project or programme? Is it for higher management? Is it for donors? Is it for those intended to benefit from the project or programme? These questions will affect the design of the M&E approach, and may inform who should be involved in that design.
- **What will be monitored or evaluated?** Different stakeholders will have different interests and priorities in terms of the information they need from M&E. They may also have different criteria for what success looks like. For example, at one end of the spectrum a government funder may define success in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – at the other end of the scale a rural woman might define success in terms of whether her life has got physically easier or not.
- **How will the monitoring and evaluation be carried out?** Answers to this question will shape the more technical areas of M&E – developing objectives and indicators, selecting different tools and methodologies, developing baselines, etc.

Other factors that might influence the design of an M&E approach are covered in more detail in the separate M&E Universe paper *"Influences on the M&E approach"*. They include:

- non-negotiables, such as processes or reports demanded by governments or donors;
- the purpose for which M&E is carried out;
- the type of work being undertaken;
- the nature of the organisation carrying out the work; and
- the available resources.

Developing a straightforward M&E approach

If a project or programme is relatively simple, and if M&E needs are likely to be straightforward, there are well-established guidelines that can be used to help design an M&E approach. These are described on the following page. Note that a project or programme may not need to implement all the different steps. But it should at least consider whether each step is necessary.

Step 1: Identify the purpose	The first step is to identify the main purpose(s) of the M&E approach or system. This could include basic project or programme management. It might involve accountability to donors, supporters or beneficiaries. It might be to enhance formal learning and improve performance. Or it might be for marketing or fundraising.
Step 2: Identify who participates	Identify at the start who will be involved in M&E and at what level. Decisions on who to involve may be based on whether their involvement would result in better information, whether it would be useful for them, or whether they have the right to be involved. Participation can range from being involved at the design stage to involvement in data collection, analysis and decision-making.
Step 3: Set objectives	Objectives should be set at different levels. This includes the activities to be carried out, the products or services intended to be delivered, the initial hoped-for changes that will be directly influenced by the project or programme, and the longer-term changes to which the project or programme seeks to contribute.
Step 4: Develop indicators	The indicators are the evidence which will help establish whether a project or programme has done what it planned to, and whether (or how far) the desired changes have taken place. Indicators are normally reported in terms of numbers (statistics, graphs, tables, etc.) or words (narratives, stories, explanations).
Step 5: Identify tools	Tools of data collection are used to help collect and analyse information in a formal way. There are many different tools available. However, most are similar, and are based on direct measurement, interview, observation or use of secondary sources. Tools may be linked formally to indicators, but might also be used to identify unexpected or negative changes.
Step 6: Consider analysis	The next step in the design process is to establish how analysis will be carried out. Formal analysis may be a simple exercise, such as sitting down with a group of stakeholders and discussing what information actually means. In some cases, statistical analysis or complex qualitative analysis may be required, and this should be established at the start.
Step 7: Establish data use	Information and analyses can be used for many different purposes such as adjusting activities, changing plans, informing future projects or programmes, sharing learning more widely and reporting to different stakeholders. A well-designed M&E approach will design at an early stage the mechanisms that will ensure that these different purposes are met, such as review meetings, workshops, newsletters and reports.
Step 8: Plan an evaluation	Sometimes it will be useful (or necessary) to take stock of a project or programme in the middle or at the end. A formal review or evaluation is often facilitated by external people who can give an unbiased opinion of what has changed because of a project or programme, and what work has gone well or badly. Evaluations may be most effective when planned right from the start of a project or programme.
Step 9: Carry out a baseline	Baselines are carried out at (or near) the start of a project or programme, and are designed to establish a starting point so change can be compared at a later stage. Baselines can range from simple data collection exercises to large and complex baseline surveys.
Step 10: Support the system	Even simple projects and programmes may need a supportive framework to ensure that the right information gets to the right people at the right time. This may include designing and facilitating training for M&E staff or beneficiaries, developing information flows and feedback loops, or developing data storage systems. It might also involve working to establish an organisational culture conducive to carrying out effective M&E.

Developing a more complex M&E approach

Inevitably there will be times when work is not straightforward, and the M&E approach will need to be more complex as a result. Generally, the more complex a project, programme or organisation, the more an M&E approach needs to be tailored to particular needs. For example:

- Work in some areas is inherently difficult to measure, and there may be contested views about what constitutes success. In areas such as governance, conflict resolution, capacity development and empowerment it may be difficult to find simple indicators that will allow performance to be assessed. In these cases the indicators, the tools through which they are collected, and the type of analysis may need to be more sophisticated.
- In some interventions there may be industry-standard tools or methodologies that can be (or need to be) applied. For example, organisations involved in livelihoods programmes may be expected to use Household Economic Analysis surveys, whilst people working on an HIV&AIDS programme may be expected to understand the use of Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys. In these cases the selection of an appropriate tool often comes before the selection of the indicator – in other words a decision will be made to use a particular tool, and the indicators will be derived from that tool afterwards.
- Some types of work require methodologies that are not based around the identification and collection of indicators. For example, organisations involved in advocacy work often use M&E methodologies that are designed primarily to capture emergent change, rather than being focused on pre-defined indicators.
- There may be times when demands from donors or other external or internal stakeholders mean a project or programme has little choice over which indicators to capture, what tools to use, how to analyse data, or how to implement an evaluation.

In these situations M&E may become a more complex exercise. Yet the task should still be relatively straightforward to manage. By contrast, M&E approaches within complex programmes or large organisations are never straightforward. There are many differences between a simple project M&E approach and a complex one. Some of these differences are described below.

- In a complex programme an M&E approach may involve developing broader frameworks within which objectives and indicators are set, baselines carried out and evaluations facilitated. In such cases the job of M&E design may be less to identify specific indicators and tools, for example, and more to provide different options and standards for others to develop them.
- As the complexity of a programme or organisation increases, knowledge management becomes more of an issue. It becomes necessary to rely more on systems and processes for sharing data, knowledge and learning, and less on personal contacts and relationships. This may require the development of sophisticated databases or management information systems.
- Learning may become more difficult to facilitate in complex programmes or organisations. It may be necessary to develop formal procedures to prevent the loss of institutional memory, and ensure that lessons learned in one part of a complex programme or organisation can be shared or retrieved when required by others.
- Aggregation and summarisation may become more of an issue as programmes and organisations seek to summarise change across a range of different development interventions in different sectors and locations.
- In organisations and large programmes spread across many different countries, M&E approaches need to facilitate M&E at many different levels. Projects, partners, programmes, sectors and countries need to be able to operate independent M&E approaches that nonetheless engage with each other to create an overall M&E framework.
- In these situations it will also be important for M&E resources to be deployed strategically. This means directing a portion of M&E resources at those areas that are of most importance to a programme or organisation, rather than spreading resources equally across a whole organisation or programme.
- Above all, the more complex a programme or organisation the greater the need for supporting processes. These include training, induction and motivation for staff, as well as efforts to ensure there are sufficient budgets in place to ensure effective M&E at different levels. Efforts may also be needed to instil a vision or culture that is conducive to effective data collection, analysis and use. Here the role of an organisation's leadership in supporting or facilitating complex planning, monitoring and evaluation processes is likely to be critical.

In complex cases, considerable experience and skill may be needed to design, develop and manage an M&E approach. Whilst the experience of other programmes and organisations may be useful, those tasked with designing an M&E approach will frequently need to develop their own solutions in response to the specific needs of their organisation or programme. An understanding of basic planning and M&E (PME) principles and procedures will obviously be necessary. But it will not be sufficient on its own, and the ability to adapt and innovate will be crucial.

> *"A complex programme or organisation is not just a large project. And it cannot be treated as such for M&E purposes."*

Further reading and resources

Two other relevant papers in this section deal with Influences on the M&E approach and the development of M&E plans. There are many papers within the INTRAC M&E Universe map dealing with the different elements of an M&E approach mentioned in this paper. These include sections of the map dealing with data collection, data analysis and data use, as well as M&E systems and evaluations. More specific papers can be found on subjects such as setting objectives, indicators and baselines.

- Influences on the M&E approach
- M&E plans
- Data collection
- Data analysis
- Data use
- M&E functions
- Evaluation
- Setting objectives
- Indicators
- Baselines

Two papers that cover some of the elements of an M&E plan or framework are a document written by Nigel Simister for INTRAC on *Developing M&E Systems in Complex Organisations* and a short document produced by Rick Davies entitled *What Should be Found in an M&E Framework / Plan?*

- Developing M&E Systems for Complex Organisations: A methodology, by Nigel Simister, October 2009, INTRAC. This document is available from the INTRAC website.
- What Should be Found in an M&E Framework/Plan? by Rick Davies, second Draft, Tuesday, 01 April 2008. This document is available from the www.mande.co.uk website (cached).

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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.