

INFLUENCES ON THE M&E APPROACH



Many different factors can influence the design of a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach. These include 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. Demands from external organisations such as donors, supporters or governments, may also need to be considered.

At some stage most development interventions – whether a large, multi-country programme run by an international organisation or a small project based in a remote village – will need to decide how, when and where to carry out monitoring and evaluation (M&E). They will then have to develop an M&E approach, system, framework or plan (the terminology is not consistently used within social development and does not really matter at this point).

It is almost always easier to make key decisions about an M&E approach during the planning stage of a project or programme, as the range of potential options is greater. For example, halfway through a project or programme it may be too late to develop a baseline to compare results with a starting point. Equally, it is much more difficult to develop a participatory M&E system if a project or programme was not designed in a participatory way.

However, whether it is developed at the planning stage or afterwards, there are a number of key influences that affect the way in which an M&E approach is designed. These are grouped into five areas as follows:

- non-negotiables;
- 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.

Non-negotiables

Whilst it might be nice to have the freedom to develop an M&E approach from a blank sheet of paper, in reality there are almost always different stakeholders to satisfy. These can be divided into two groups: external and internal stakeholders.

External stakeholders might include powerful institutions such as donors and governments. They might also include the public, partners or intended beneficiaries. Internal stakeholders, especially within larger organisations, might include head offices, regional offices and country offices, as well as organisational departments such as marketing and fundraising departments, or human resource departments. All these different actors and stakeholders may have expectations concerning an M&E approach, and may make demands that then need to be satisfied.

The nature of these demands varies. Some of the more common requirements are to:

- develop a specific planning tool (such as a logical frameworks);
- define objectives within broader donor, government or organisational strategic objectives;
- capture specific indicators;
- use specific tools of data collection and analysis;
- facilitate external reviews and evaluations; and
- produce reports at specific times and/or according to fixed formats.

In some cases, those designing an M&E approach can find that there is virtually no room for manoeuvre, and the M&E approach is almost completely defined before a project or programme starts (see case study below).

Case study: VSO in Southern Africa

In 2005, INTRAC helped develop an M&E system for a VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) programme in Southern Africa, designed to combat HIV&AIDS. The system was designed to cover a range of work carried out in six countries in the region. However, a number of factors affected the potential scope of the new M&E system:

- New international guidelines on monitoring and evaluating VSO projects had recently been issued by the VSO head office in London. These were non-negotiable.
- The programme had two major donors. Each donor had its own differing information requirements. These requirements were a basic condition of funding.
- The six participating countries had developed their own independent M&E procedures and practices before they had become part of the programme, and wished to continue using these.

This left very little room for manoeuvre. Rather than being designed with a blank page approach, the new programme M&E system instead attempted to reconcile and streamline the various information demands made by different agencies, both internal and external.

Sometimes it might be possible to push back on different demands, and attempt to negotiate solutions. At other times it might be simpler to accept the different demands and design an M&E approach to take them into account.

Either way, demands from different external and internal stakeholders are likely to have a significant effect on how M&E is conducted during a project or programme.

The purpose for which M&E is carried out

Another key influence is the purpose for which M&E is intended. An M&E approach designed to enable basic project or programme management will not be the same as one primarily designed to show accountability to governments or donors. Equally, an M&E approach designed to learn and improve will not be the same as one intended to support marketing or fundraising.

Smaller organisations are more likely to develop M&E approaches that are aimed at one particular purpose, whilst larger ones may develop M&E approaches that serve multiple purposes. But in either case it is always important to ensure that organisations are clear about how they and others intend to use M&E information.

The purpose for which M&E is carried out always influences a range of decisions. These include how plans are developed, who develops objectives and indicators and how, the type of tools used to collect and analyse information, the extent of learning and sharing of M&E findings, and even how much money and time is spent on M&E.

The type of the work undertaken

Many decisions on how an M&E approach is designed depend on the exact nature of the development intervention. At the most basic level, more time and resources will need to be spent on M&E if a project or programme is working in a new or innovative area where the learning of lessons may be considered more important than the actual benefits for a small population. In such cases a great deal of effort may be put into M&E. By contrast, a simple project designed to distribute mosquito nets may not need or want to invest nearly as much in M&E.

For some types of work there may be industry standard M&E approaches. For example, in the health sector there are many industry-standard indicators. In some sectors of work there are also common methodologies for data collection and analysis. These include Household Economic Analysis for livelihoods projects, and Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys for work in the field of HIV&AIDS.

The strategies used to promote change also have a very significant influence on the M&E approach. The type of M&E methods used to assess basic service delivery projects are very different from those designed to assess capacity building, policy influencing or community mobilisation work. Each type of strategy tends to include its own particular indicators, tools, methodologies and approaches, and these are often radically different from one another.

The nature of the organisation

Clearly, the needs of a large, international NGO working across multiple sectors and countries are very different from the needs of a small organisation working in a single village, where there may in fact be no need for a formal M&E system at all. In general, the larger and more hierarchical the organisation, the more need for formalised planning and M&E approaches that assist internal communications as well as learning and accountability.

Another important factor is the ethos of an organisation, which is heavily influenced by its leadership. For example, an organisation that sees itself as rights-based is much more likely to invest time and effort in participatory planning and M&E as a matter of principle. Culture is also a key determinant. Some organisations are very open to self-questioning – constantly wanting to ask themselves whether they are doing the right thing, whether they are making a difference, and what else might they be doing to bring about change. Such organisations are perhaps more likely to devote time and resources to M&E and learning than an organisation that sees itself primarily as an agency contracted to deliver services dictated by donors or governments.

The available resources

Finally, there is the issues of resources. These include the capacity of staff to design or carry out M&E tasks, the number of staff available, the time they have to devote to M&E, and the amount of money that can be spent on M&E. The level of resources available will perhaps have the greatest influence over the design of an M&E approach. For example, a process that must be completed within days and with no extra resources will require a very different M&E approach to one that has a timeframe of many months and a large budget.

The capacity of staff to design and carry out M&E tasks may be a large constraint on the ability of an organisation, project or programme to use complex tools and methodologies. In some cases organisations use outside help, such as M&E consultants, to help set up or maintain M&E systems or approaches; but it is still by and large internal staff who will be the primary stakeholders.

Other factors may be important. For instance, in some cases, internal staff may have the ability and motivation to conduct excellent M&E, but they may have little time available or support from senior management. In addition, the money available to an organisation has to be spread across many different areas, and the requirement to keep overhead costs down often means that less money is spent on M&E than might otherwise be desirable. A question for many organisations, programmes and projects is how much money to spend on M&E, and whether that money would be better spent elsewhere – for example spending less money on assessing the impact of a piece of work and perhaps supporting more people as a result.

Summary

There are many influences that affect the design and delivery of an M&E approach. Some of these derive from an organisation itself whilst some influences are external. The influencing factors will, in combination, set boundaries on what can or cannot be achieved through M&E. INTRAC believes that the combination of different influences effectively means it is pointless searching for magic bullets or 'off-the-peg' M&E systems that will serve all an organisation's M&E needs. Instead, M&E approaches need to be carefully tailored to the needs of the relevant project, programme or organisation on a case-by-case basis.

Ultimately, many organisations need to draw a balance between developing planning, monitoring and evaluation approaches that serve their own needs, and also trying to meet the needs of donors, governments and head offices. This is never an impossible exercise, but does often require careful navigation between different influences and expectations. Ultimately, the purpose of INTRAC's M&E Universe Map is to support M&E practitioners' efforts in this area by making clear the range of available options. But it is also important to recognise that developing an M&E approach is not always an easy task, and there is often a large gap between theory and practice.

Further reading and resources

Further papers in this section deal with the development of an M&E approach, and the development of M&E plans that describe how the M&E approach will work. Other papers can be found on two of the subjects covered in this paper: how M&E data is used and the resources available to carry out M&E.



Two other papers that deal with influences on M&E approaches for different sized organisations are detailed below. The M&E Guide for Small and Diaspora NGOs is more suited for smaller NGOs, whilst the second document is aimed at larger organisations.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation: A guide for Small and Diaspora NGOs**, by Anne Garbutt, October 2013. This document is available from the INTRAC website.
- **Investing in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: Issues for NGOs to consider**, by ITAD, in association with NEF Consulting, and edited by Jennifer Chapman, March 2014. This document is available from the BOND website at www.bond.org.uk/investing-in-mel

Author(s): Nigel Simister

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.

M&E Training & Consultancy

INTRAC's team of M&E specialists offer consultancy and training in all aspects of M&E, from core skills development through to the design of complex M&E systems.

Email: info@intrac.org

Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851



M&E Universe

For more papers in the M&E Universe series click the home button