LEARNING-BASED M&E SYSTEMS

Organisational learning is widely accepted as an essential process for CSOs. It enables them to discover what does or doesn't work, and thereby improve their performance. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) can support learning in many ways. M&E systems designed to support learning include key elements that are not always present in systems primarily designed to demonstrate accountability or raise funds.

Organisational learning is widely accepted as an essential process for CSOs. It enables them to discover what works and what doesn't, and thereby improve their performance. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) can support organisational learning in many ways. But this varies dramatically across different CSOs. Some CSOs operate M&E systems that support learning, whilst others carry out little or no learning-related M&E.

INTRAC's experience in helping design, maintain and run M&E systems over the past two decades suggests that there are key characteristics of learning-based M&E systems that are not always present in systems designed primarily to demonstrate accountability to donors or raise funds. In this paper, these are divided into five sections:

- critical reflection and curiosity;
- culture and attitude;
- clarity around learning;
- clarity around the contribution of M&E to learning; and
- practical learning mechanisms.

Critical reflection and curiosity

In order to learn effectively, CSOs need to *want* to learn. CSOs that strongly desire to find out whether they are doing the right thing, or whether they could be doing it better, are much more likely to develop M&E systems that support learning. By contrast, CSOs that see themselves as agencies delivering tried and tested approaches are less likely to be curious about their own work, and as a result less likely to invest in learning-based M&E.

CSOs that are deeply committed to learning see critical reflection as important at all levels from head offices to field staff to beneficiaries. Critical reflection means constantly analysing data and experiences to gain new insights. It means going beyond recording what is happening (or what has changed) to asking *why* it has happened (or changed), what it means, and what should be done about it (IFAD 2002). This means placing much more emphasis on analysing M&E data rather than simply collecting and reporting it.

Many CSOs do not do this. Their M&E systems focus primarily on collecting data around activities carried out, and then reporting this data in different ways. And when

CSOs do collect information on the changes resulting from their work, they do not always analyse how those changes happened and what they might mean. A CSO which is genuinely curious is more likely to question itself and its own assumptions. Is it really doing the right things? Is there more that could be done with the same resources? Could it be doing things more efficiently or effectively? These are the kind of questions that drive learning.

Culture and Attitude

The development of an organisational learning culture is essential for critical reflection. No matter how curious individuals are within a CSO, it will be of little use unless the CSO itself has an organisational learning culture. This culture can show itself in different ways, some of which are described below.

- CSOs with a learning culture actively promote M&E systems that are open and honest. The reporting of mistakes or failures is positively encouraged, and staff at all levels feel confident in reporting what is actually happening, rather than what they feel ought to be happening.

- In a CSO with a learning culture, an M&E system may concentrate as much on what did not happen, or did not change, as what did. By contrast, a system based around fundraising or accountability to donors is rarely interested in what did not change – for example, how many advocacy initiatives failed to achieve real change, or how many pilot initiatives were not replicated, and why. CSOs operating learning-based M&E systems recognise that much can be learned from investigating why things didn't work in the way that was expected.

- CSOs with a learning culture tend to try to maximise the involvement of different stakeholders in the selection, collection, analysis and use of data. This not only helps triangulate information to ensure it is more robust (and therefore useful), but also means that analyses and lessons are more likely to be useful to those stakeholders.

- CSOs operating learning-based M&E systems try to ensure that information does not flow in one direction only, but that feedback and comments are institutionalised throughout the system. This ensures that people at different levels of a CSO regularly contribute to, reflect on, and use new learning and

analyses. By contrast, in CSOs without an effective learning culture, information is more likely to gravitate to the centre and be used there.

▪ Staff in CSOs with a learning culture feel that their opinions, ideas and suggestion are valued, and that people are interested in their findings. If other people seem interested in their opinions and ideas, or act upon them, staff are more likely to put them forward.

There are many internal and external pressures on CSOs to report good results whether they have been achieved or not, and active steps need to be taken to enable staff to resist those pressures. A learning culture does not exist in a CSO by default and needs to be carefully developed and nurtured. CSO's leaders have an important role in creating and maintaining a learning culture. If leaders are genuinely interested in generating and using learning through an M&E system than the likelihood is that staff working to maintain the system will respond. If leaders see M&E simply as a way to reassure donors or supporters, or raise funds, then it is much less likely that the M&E system will generate useful learning.

Clarity around learning

It is possible for a CSO to learn by collecting large amounts of information and analysing it to see what lessons emerge, in the hope that this learning will be useful. But CSOs operating learning-based M&E systems are much more likely to identify exactly what they want to learn and why. This helps orient the M&E system towards the kind of learning that is immediately useful.

Learning-based M&E systems usually include learning questions. These are questions directly related to a CSO's work that, when answered, enable it (or others) to act in order to be more effective. Learning questions may be designed to seek solutions to known challenges or problems, explore assumptions, test and revise theories of change, generate creative or innovative ideas, policies or practices, or contribute to a wider knowledge base (Britton and Thakali u.d.). Essentially, they are designed to find out what a CSO most wants to know in order to improve its performance, or the performance of others.

Leaning questions can be operationalised in many ways within an M&E system. This includes:

• placing them into results frameworks;
• incorporating them into regular reporting templates;
• including them as agenda items during regular meetings, workshops and feedback sessions;
• including them as evaluation questions during formal reviews, evaluations or impact assessments; and
• addressing them through one-off M&E or research studies.

Within learning-based M&E systems, CSOs often encourage staff and wider stakeholders to jointly agree and develop the learning questions to ensure wider ownership and

(hopefully) greater commitment to answering them. CSOs committed to learning through M&E are also more likely to develop strategies and mechanisms for answering the questions, and devote resources to doing so. This shows a commitment towards learning that goes beyond simple rhetoric.

Clarity around the contribution of M&E to learning

It is not true that CSOs need to have effective M&E systems in order to learn. Many CSOs learn without effective M&E systems, especially smaller CSOs that are based in the communities they serve. And many effective M&E systems contribute little to learning. However, it is always important to clarify how a CSO wants its M&E system to contribute to learning, and how the system interacts with other management functions.

CSOs operating learning-based M&E systems recognise that an M&E system needs to interact with different parts of an organisation. Learning may be generated or shared through M&E processes, but learning is a much wider process, and M&E may play only a minor role in all the individual and organisational learning that occurs within a CSO. It is therefore important that CSOs understand the role of M&E within wider learning processes, and how it both contributes to and feeds off wider learning. For example, an M&E system may generate tentative findings which later need to be explored through more in-depth research. Or an M&E system might provide information and analyses that contributes to a dedicated conference around an issue.

Many CSOs operating learning-based M&E systems formally integrate M&E with other management processes. For example, they promote planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) systems, rather than treating M&E in isolation. Even if M&E and learning are housed within different departments, the expectation is that these departments work closely together and support each other's work.

It is especially important that M&E systems designed to promote learning are based around accurate and realistic project or programme plans. Too often, CSOs spend large sums of money monitoring obsolete objectives or indicators, or reporting on out-of-date plans. This kind of work is never useful for learning and is often a drain on the resources of a CSO. This is not always the fault of the CSO concerned, especially if they are forced to continue using out-of-date results frameworks or plans because donors are unwilling to be flexible.

Practical learning mechanisms

Many CSOs aspire to be learning organisations, but it is not always that easy. Even with the best will in the world it is sometimes hard to give learning the kind of attention and prominence it requires when there are so many other demands on staff's time and resources. Translating good intentions into practice involves developing and resourcing practical learning mechanisms (see box on following page).

It is important to make sure that there are mechanisms not only for supporting learning but also for translating learning into improved performance. The ultimate test of learning is whether it is applied, either by the CSO generating the learning or by others. If not then it is an expensive luxury.

CSOs committed to using M&E systems for learning develop mechanisms for systematically improving their own policies and practices in the light of M&E findings: they incorporate learning from previous projects and programmes into new ones; they communicate their learning to a range of actors through different communications methods best suited for particular audiences; and they constantly evolve and innovate based on what they have learned.

Summary

CSOs implementing learning-based M&E systems are clear about what they need to learn, and how they might apply that learning to make life better for their beneficiaries. They see learning as an essential process that enables them to improve, rather than a luxury to be indulged depending on sufficient time and resources. M&E carried out primarily to support learning takes additional time and resources. But CSOs that are committed to using M&E for learning believe the benefits are worth the cost.

Some Practical Mechanisms for Supporting Learning Through M&E Systems

Planning systems: In order to learn it is first helpful to be very clear about what a CSO aims to achieve and how. This can be done by developing an explicit theory of change or logic model, such as a logical framework. This should be accompanied by clear assumptions, along with practical plans to test those assumptions where necessary. This supports learning by helping to understand whether a CSO's theory of change is valid or not, and changing it where it is not.

Learning strategy: Many CSOs have learning strategies. Within these, it is helpful to explain how, when and where M&E systems can contribute to learning at different levels of a CSO. This should be accompanied by clear plans and associated resources.

Objectives and indicators: CSOs can set learning objectives and/or indicators, and incorporate them into logical frameworks or results frameworks. This helps ensure that learning is in the front of managers' minds when they report on a project or programme.

Questions: Learning questions can be developed. They, too, can be inserted into results frameworks to ensure that they are regularly reported on. This helps ensure that learning is given prominence when reporting on the performance of a CSO.

Tools and methodologies: CSOs that are serious about using M&E to support learning often develop or adapt their own tools and methodologies in order to serve their own learning needs. They develop expertise in the kinds of tools or methodologies they need to answer their own learning questions, rather than simply using tools and methodologies designed by others. A new tool or methodology, or one applied in a new way, is more likely to generate new learning than an old tool or methodology.

Participation: CSOs with learning-based M&E systems try to maximise the involvement of a variety of different stakeholders in the definition, collection, analysis and use of data. This helps ensure that any analyses and lessons learned are useful to those stakeholders. It also allows more stakeholders to benefit from learning-based M&E processes.

Evaluations: Formal reviews, evaluations and impact assessments can be designed to help answer CSOs' learning questions, and develop recommendations for change. The learning questions can be written into the Terms of Reference, and evaluation processes can be designed to maximise learning.

Analysis: CSOs engaged in learning-based M&E often aim to analyse information using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies where appropriate. Using both methods allows for deeper learning than using one approach only.

Communication: There are many ways of communicating M&E findings. CSOs that wish to help others learn often develop multiple communication products and processes, tailored to different audiences and purposes.

Sensemaking and sharing: CSOs interested in learning often create safe spaces for stakeholders to come together to share learning and generate new learning. These spaces can be organised at different levels of a CSO – project, programme, organisation etc. There are many ways of facilitating sensemaking, either within or outside an M&E system. These include workshops, conferences, staff retreats, virtual chat rooms, weblogs, podcasts and different kinds of social-networking.

Reports: Within learning-based M&E systems, report templates are usually designed to capture learning, and should focus on analysis and recommendations as much as activities and results. CSOs can regularly refresh report templates by asking for answers to different learning questions each time a report is required.

Databases: Some CSOs develop databases or resource centres that can store lessons learned and retrieve them on demand. These are often developed and designed outside of M&E systems, but can be used for M&E purposes. Other CSOs develop dedicated M&E databases to help store and share learning information.

Induction and training: CSOs can develop training and induction processes that support staff to consider how they might engage in learning, or how they might use M&E processes to support organisational learning.

Resources: Finally, CSOs wishing to engage in learning can devote resources to ensure that at least some of the M&E work carried out within the organisations is dedicated wholly or partly to learning and the use of that learning to enhance performance.

Further reading and resources

Many of the topics discussed in this paper are covered in other papers in the M&E Universe. These can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

▶ Learning	▶ Communication
▶ Sensemaking	▶ Data and knowledge management
▶ Quantitative analysis	▶ Qualitative analysis
▶ Data analysis	▶ Reporting

References

- Britton, B and Thakali, S (undated). *Learning Questions.* Framework.
- IFAD (2002). *A Guide for Project M&E*, by Irene Guijt and Jim Woodhill, produced by the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

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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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