M&E DEBATES

There are often fierce debates around the purpose of monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and how it should be conducted. These debates matter for two main reasons. First, it is important to constantly reassess how M&E can best be used to support social and humanitarian development. Second, donors are often heavily influenced by the debates, and they sometimes dictate how M&E is conducted within CSOs.

Most academics and development practitioners agree that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is important. But they do not always agree why. There are often fierce debates around the purpose of M&E, and how it should be conducted. Some of these debates are ongoing, such as whether M&E should primarily be conducted for learning or accountability. Others, such as the debate surrounding the appropriateness of randomised control trials in the early 2000s, become hot topics for a while, but then fade over time.

M&E practitioners working in CSOs are sometimes tempted to dismiss these debates as being too academic, or not relevant to their work. But they matter. This is partly because it is important to constantly assess and reassess the value of M&E, and how it can be used to support social development and humanitarian work. But it is also because institutional donors are often heavily influenced by the debates, and they tend to have a large say in how M&E is conducted throughout the aid chain, from funders through to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector bodies, philanthropic organisations and community-based organisations (CBOs). This then has a real impact at community level.

Some of the key debates of the last two decades are covered in dedicated papers in other parts of the M&E Universe. For example, there are short sections summarising debates in the papers dealing with the logical framework approach to planning, results-based management, the use of randomised control trials (RCTs), adaptive management, and the use of technology in M&E. Papers within this section of the M&E Universe, however, cover debates that cut across many different areas of M&E. The papers are as follows.

- ***Donor demands:*** CSOs often receive money or other kinds of support from institutional donors. In return, donors place demands on CSOs' M&E systems. This has implications for how those systems are designed and implemented. For example, CSOs may have to collect specific indicators, use certain methods of data collection, or conduct analyses in ways dictated by their donors. Tensions have risen in recent years with increasing calls for more and better M&E. The *'Donor demands'* paper explores how donors can positively influence CSOs, but also examines what happens when things go wrong. In addition, it provides some basic advice on how CSOs can manage donor relations.
- ***Learning and accountability:*** There is an ongoing debate within social development concerning the primary purpose of M&E. Most agree that M&E should be used for both learning and accountability, but there is no overall consensus about which one is more important. The debate matters as there is often tension between the two purposes. The paper on *'Learning and accountability'* explores some of the key differences between M&E for learning and accountability (especially to donors). It concludes by discussing whether the debate needs to be reshaped to emphasise the importance of improving performance, rather than just considering learning as an end in itself.
- ***Measurement and assessment:*** Within M&E, people often talk about measuring results, and refer to measurable objectives or indicators. However, it is not always clear what the term '*measurement'* actually means. The *'Measurement and assessment'* paper examines when it is necessary and/or possible to measure change, and when it is better to aim for an assessment of change, or even an illustration of change, instead.
- ***Dealing with uncertainty:*** Many things in social development can be measured with a high level of accuracy. But at other times it is not so easy, and M&E findings may be subject to a degree of uncertainty. This is especially true where CSOs work in complex or difficult environments, where evidence may be contradictory, inconsistent or hard to find. Building on the previous paper on *'Measurement and assessment'*, the paper on *'Dealing with uncertainty'* describes some basic processes CSOs can use to reduce uncertainty. However, it concludes that M&E findings will often remain uncertain to at least some degree, and that CSOs need to manage this uncertainty rather than trying to completely eliminate it.
- ***Attribution and contribution:*** CSOs often need to assess whether, or how far, their actions were responsible for bringing about a change or a set of changes. The paper on *'Attribution and contribution'* examines the difference between the two terms, and describes a range of different approaches used to assess influence over change. It also covers the relative strengths and weaknesses of these approaches, and describes in which circumstances they are most appropriate.

- ***Quantitative and qualitative methods:*** One of the oldest debates in M&E surrounds the relative value of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The '*Quantitative and qualitative methods*' paper compares the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different methods, and examines under which circumstances they are appropriate. It also describes a number of ways in which quantitative and qualitative methods can be combined to build on the strengths of both, and to offset their relative weaknesses. The paper includes a short discussion on the growth of mixed methods evaluations.
- ***Value for money:*** Value for money (VfM) analysis can be conducted in many ways, and can be used for M&E as well as during planning and design. It is one of the hardest areas to manage in M&E. This is partly because people often have different understandings of what VfM means. In addition, there are often unrealistic expectations. The paper on *'Value for money'* examines some of the core concepts of VfM, and describes some methods that can be used to assess VfM at different stages of the project or programme cycle.
- ***Participatory M&E:*** Participatory approaches to M&E evolved over many years. They arose out of participatory research traditions, and became very popular amongst CSOs in the 1980s and 1990s. CSOs tend to facilitate participatory M&E for three main reasons. The first is to generate better M&E information. The second is to enhance the empowerment of targeted beneficiaries. This means putting them in charge of the development process, helping to develop their skills, and supporting them to make their own decisions on issues that affect them. The third reason is to uphold targeted beneficiaries' right to be involved in decisions that affect them. The paper on *'Participatory M&E'* describes some of the key features of participatory M&E. In particular it focuses on the attitudes and behaviours needed to support genuine, empowering, participatory M&E.
- ***Beneficiary feedback mechanisms:*** Recently, there has been increasing interest in supporting beneficiary feedback mechanisms (BFMs) as one way of facilitating participatory M&E. BFMs are designed to encourage the targeted beneficiaries of a project or programme to provide ongoing, real-time feedback on progress. This then allows timely adjustments to be made. Ideally, this allows beneficiaries to help shape and adjust development interventions that affect their lives. The paper on *'Beneficiary feedback mechanisms'* describes how BFMs are used to support or complement M&E, and examines the conditions under which they can be most effective.

Further reading and resources

Links to the different papers described within this paper can be found below. Three other papers have been included as they also cover topical debates. These cover the logical framework, results-based management, and the use of randomised control trials.

- **Donor demands**
- **Measurement and assessment**
- **Attribution and contribution**
- **Value for money**
- **Beneficiary feedback mechanisms**
- **Results-Based Management**
- **Learning and accountability**
- **Dealing with uncertainty**
- **Quantitative and qualitative methods**
- **Participatory M&E**
- **The logical framework**
- **Randomised control trials**

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INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, INTRAC has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on monitoring and evaluation. Our approach to M&E is practical and founded on core principles. We encourage appropriate M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts, and we work with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs.

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