

PARTICIPATORY M&E



Participatory M&E is about engaging different stakeholders, especially targeted beneficiaries, in monitoring and evaluation processes. It is done to generate better M&E information and/or to empower stakeholders. It is facilitated through two main approaches. The first is a set of tools and methods used to enable effective M&E. The second is the attitudes and behaviour needed to support meaningful participation.

Participatory M&E is about engaging different stakeholders within monitoring and evaluation processes. It is usually taken to refer to the involvement of targeted individuals, groups or communities. These are often known as 'beneficiaries' in common aid terminology (see box opposite). However, participation can mean different things in different contexts. Participatory M&E is located within a wider field of participatory approaches. These can be defined as:

"a growing family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable and empower people to share, analyse and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect." (Chambers 2008)

Participatory approaches evolved over many years. They arose out of participatory research traditions such as participatory action research (PAR), participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and farming systems research (FSR) (Parks et al. 2005). They then became very popular amongst CSOs in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly following Robert Chambers' work on bottom-up approaches to development.

Early on, participatory approaches were mainly used during project or programme design and planning, with less emphasis on participation during other parts of the project/programme management cycle. Later, however, participatory approaches were extended to cover monitoring, review and evaluation.

Over the past few years there has arguably been a movement away from participatory approaches and towards more top-down control amongst the donor community, with increased emphasis on results-based management (Chambers 2014). But participatory approaches in general, and participatory M&E in particular, are still routinely practised within many CSOs. Indeed, many smaller CSOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) were monitoring and evaluating their work with and alongside communities long before participatory M&E became popular with donors.

Traditionally, participatory M&E has been understood as the active involvement of targeted beneficiaries within M&E processes. A more recent trend has been to expand

The problem with the term 'beneficiaries'

INTRAC often uses the term 'beneficiaries', and has used it throughout the M&E Universe papers. This is because people generally know what it means. However, it is a term that many people who support participatory approaches dislike. This is for two main reasons.

Firstly, it assumes that communities, groups and individuals supported by a project or programme actually benefit from the intervention. This is not always true.

Secondly, and more importantly, it suggests a passive role for people receiving aid, and implies that they need aid from more powerful outside agencies. However, a core principle of participatory approaches is that people have rights to aid and should have the power to actively shape and make decisions about how aid is used.

Unfortunately, there is no consensus on an alternative. Terms in common use include citizens or constituents (particularly in relation to social accountability and addressing power dynamics); end-users and clients (particularly when support focuses on service provision); or affected people / populations / communities. This paper continues to refer to targeted or intended beneficiaries for convenience, whilst acknowledging that the term is not consistent with the spirit of participatory approaches.

the term to include wider stakeholders, such as the staff of development agencies. For example, complex methodologies such as outcome harvesting and appreciative inquiry are often described as 'participatory methods' even though participation sometimes only involves organisational staff. In some circumstances, the term is also used to cover the participation of wider development actors, such as CSO partners, country-based officials, key informants and experts.

Participation of all these groups in different M&E processes may be important at different times. For this paper, however, participatory M&E is understood as the engagement of targeted beneficiaries in monitoring and evaluation processes.

A rough guide to the difference between conventional and participatory M&E is shown in the table on the next page (based on IFRC 2008). In reality, the difference between conventional and participatory M&E is not always that clear cut, and work often lies on a spectrum between the two.

The purpose of participatory M&E

From the point of view of CSOs there are three main reasons to facilitate participatory M&E. The first is to generate **better-quality information**. This is because the targeted beneficiaries of interventions are often in the best place to ask relevant questions, identify changes in their local communities and contexts, and know how they are being impacted by projects or programmes. They are also in the best position to know whether or how projects or programmes could be improved. Involving them in participatory M&E therefore enables development agencies to acquire a better picture of the reality on the ground.

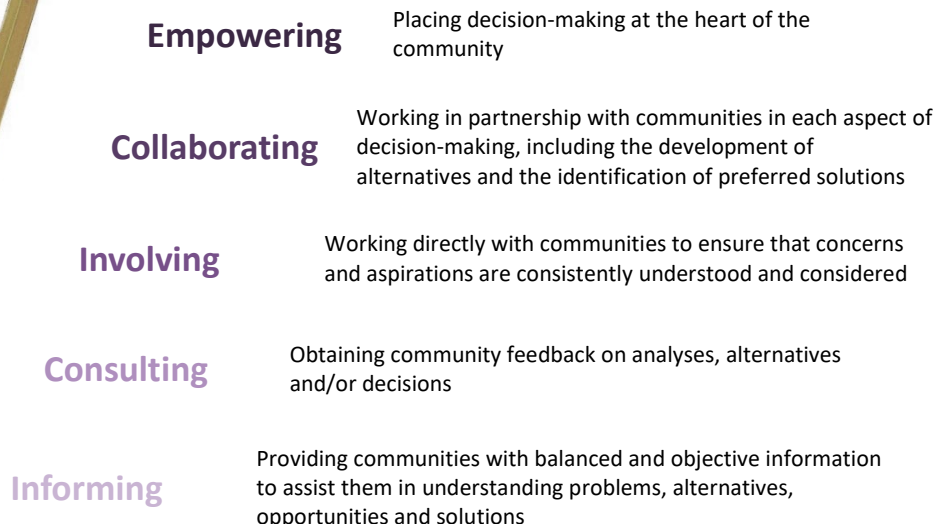
As participatory M&E is usually ongoing, this also means that timely, reliable and relevant information can be fed back into decision-making, thereby enabling a project or programme to rapidly adapt and improve. Participatory M&E can also enhance the targeting of development interventions by ensuring that activities are based on local knowledge and understanding of issues, and are therefore relevant to local needs.

The second reason is to **empower** targeted beneficiaries. This means letting them lead the development process, helping to develop their skills, and supporting them, when needed, to make their own decisions on issues that affect them. This has a number of potential benefits. For example, it helps to further build local capacities, and develops people's ability to monitor and manage their own development. This in turn helps to promote their ownership over projects and programmes. Further, it helps to ensure that any benefits are sustained once a project or programme comes to an end.

Another benefit of participatory M&E is that it can demonstrate and improve accountability to targeted individuals, groups or communities (sometimes known as downwards accountability). CSOs that are committed to downwards accountability often engage their targeted beneficiaries in participatory planning and M&E systems. The beneficiaries are then able to see how a project or

	Conventional M&E	Participatory M&E
Who plans and manages the process	Senior managers; outside experts	Community members; project or programme staff; facilitators
Role of intended beneficiaries	Provision of information only	Design and adaptation of M&E methodology; collection, analysis and use of data
How success is measured	Externally-defined, mainly quantitative indicators	Internally-defined criteria, often involving more qualitative judgements
Approach	Focus on scientific objectivity and independence of evaluators	Self-evaluation using methods adapted to the local context
Sharing	Delayed and limited or no access to results for targeted beneficiaries	Open, immediate sharing of results through local involvement in evaluation process
Use	Used primarily for wider learning and accountability to donors	Used primarily for local decision-making and action
Timing	Midterm and completion; sometimes after a project/programme finishes	Ongoing throughout the course of a project or programme

programme is progressing, provide their own analysis and recommendations, and thereby hold CSOs to account. Participatory M&E processes can also help beneficiaries build longer-term partnerships with CSOs, projects, government officials and other stakeholders, and thus



contribute to increasing citizen engagement and improving governance.

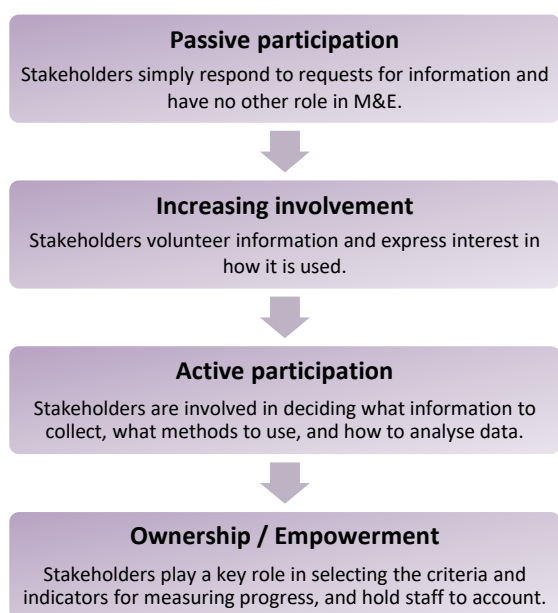
The third reason is to uphold targeted beneficiaries' **right to be involved** in decisions that affect them. CSOs that follow a rights-based approach to development are more likely to ensure that beneficiaries are fully engaged in both planning and M&E processes. This is because they believe it is the ethical and right thing to do.

Sometimes participatory M&E is carried out for just one of the three reasons described above. Sometimes it is carried out for more than one reason. Participatory M&E in its fullest form is carried out for all three reasons – because it produces better and more timely information; because it helps empower targeted beneficiaries and increases their ownership over development processes; and because it is the ethical thing to do.

Levels of participation

If CSOs want to facilitate participatory M&E they need to decide what level of participation to aim for. The diagram on the previous page shows a rough typology, based on CSSP (2014). In reality, participation may be facilitated at different levels at different times. Sometimes it may be enough to inform or consult beneficiaries; sometimes participation can be designed to be more collaborative; and sometimes it is carried out to genuinely empower communities. All of these are legitimate ways to enable participation. The key thing in any context is to be explicit about the purpose of participation, and honest about what it is designed to achieve.

Based on this categorisation of participation more widely, INTRAC categorises participation within M&E using a four-stage model (see Bakewell et al. 2003).



This allows quite a wide variation of possibilities for beneficiary involvement in M&E processes. At one end of the scale they can be involved through interviews, focus

group discussions, observations and so on, without having any real say in how M&E is conducted, or how findings are used. At the other end of the scale, beneficiaries can play a leading role in defining objectives, identifying indicators, deciding how and when information is collected, analysing information, and using the analyses to improve their own lives and hold CSOs to account (Gosling and Edwards 1995).

Participatory M&E is facilitated through two main approaches.

- the tools and methods used to facilitate participation; and
- the attitudes and behaviour needed to support meaningful participation.

Any level of participatory M&E uses tools and methods designed to facilitate participation. However, participatory M&E designed to facilitate active participation or ownership/empowerment also places a very high emphasis on the attitudes and behaviour needed to support it.

Tools and methods

Numerous tools and methods can be used to facilitate participatory M&E. Some of these are described below.

- Many standard tools for data collection, described elsewhere in the M&E Universe, can be used as participatory M&E tools. These include individual or group interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and the development of case studies. Although they are sometimes used to extract information, they can be facilitated in ways that support deeper participation of beneficiaries within M&E.
- An extensive set of tools have been specifically designed to support participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation. Many of these are based on visual aids, such as pictures, diagrams, charts and maps, often using locally available materials. Others are based heavily on the spoken word (such as songs, drama and theatre), as opposed to written materials, which are more common in conventional M&E but may exclude illiterate or semi-literate people. Many of the tools are covered in the M&E Universe paper on Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). They are flexible tools which can easily be adapted depending on the purpose, the context, and the culture of the people using them.
- The increased availability of new technologies has led to a growth in participatory M&E tools based on Information Communications Technology (ICT). This includes methods such as crowdsourcing and micro-narratives, which can encourage the active participation of different stakeholders, but rely on people having access to mobile phones.
- Recently, there has been increasing interest in beneficiary feedback mechanisms (BFMs). These are designed to encourage the targeted beneficiaries of a project or programme to provide ongoing feedback to allow for timely adjustments to be made. Ideally, this

allows beneficiaries to help shape and adjust development interventions that affect their lives. BFM's may be based around technology (such as the use of mobile phones) or they might use more traditional methods such as notice boards or group meetings. BFM's are covered in a separate paper within the M&E Universe.

- Lately, there has also been a growth of interest in *participatory numbers*. This means the systematic use of participatory methods to generate numeric data that can then be statistically analysed. It involves the generation of numbers from different sources using participatory approaches, methods, and behaviours. The numbers can then be standardised to at least some extent, and processed (often aggregated) by outside facilitators.
- Evaluations are often seen as top-down exercises, run by outside experts. However, some types of evaluation (e.g. participatory evaluation, gender-responsive evaluation or empowerment evaluation) are specifically designed to support the active participation, ownership and empowerment of beneficiaries at different stages in the process, for example, establishing the purpose of the evaluation, contributing to data collection and analysis, supporting reporting and communication, and using the findings. Even if an evaluation is not explicitly designed to support beneficiary participation there are usually ways to ensure some degree of participation.
- Sometimes, participatory tools or methods may be applied as a supplement to more top-down methods. For example, an evaluation might establish a randomised control trial (RCT) to find out what has changed because of a project or programme. At the same time, targeted beneficiaries could be supported to engage in data collection and analysis processes that help explain how and why changes occurred, and then encouraged to take actions based on the findings.
- Finally, even in the most top-down, expert-led fields of M&E, some CSOs have found ways to facilitate the meaningful participation of beneficiaries. For example, cost-benefit analysis (CBA) is usually considered a methodology designed to be used by experts with a background in economics and statistics. But some CSOs have managed to apply CBA in a participatory way with communities (Anderson et al. 2013). Other CSOs have explored how social and environmental changes can be assessed alongside more common measures of economic benefits with the support of communities.

In summary, many tools and methods have been developed specifically to support the active participation of targeted beneficiaries in M&E processes. But even traditional M&E methods can often be facilitated in ways that allow beneficiaries at least some control over the process. Where there is a will there is a way.

Attitudes and behaviour

Although participatory tools and methods are useful, what often distinguishes genuine, empowering participatory M&E is how it is facilitated. This can exhibit itself in many different ways.

- **Culture and context:** When carrying out participatory M&E it is important that the languages and concepts used are compatible with, and appropriate to, local cultures and context. Languages and concepts need to reflect how respondents think and communicate, not how 'outsiders' think.
- **Seeking the silent voices:** It is also important to actively seek out the often silent voices, such as women, lower caste or classes, people living with disabilities, people living in remote places, the marginalised, the most vulnerable and the disempowered. This helps ensure that different groups of people are part of the M&E process, and also helps to challenge existing power structures.
- **Triangulation:** Triangulation involves examining changes or lessons learned from different points of view, or in different ways. There are many ways of triangulating information. These include comparing different sources of information, applying different methods, and using different investigators. Triangulation helps to ensure that M&E information is more reliable, and does not just originate from one voice, one method, or one way of thinking.
- **Multi-disciplinary teams:** One approach to triangulation is to ensure that different people with different skills and views make up the teams responsible for data design, collection and analysis. Ideally, this should include insiders (people who are part of the community) and outside facilitators. This can also help offset the biases of individual facilitators.
- **On-the-spot analysis:** In participatory M&E, findings are reviewed in real-time, before moving further. The teams and communities involved can thereby jointly build up a better understanding of what is happening, and can subsequently work out how to address data gaps, or focus on new, emerging issues.
- **Validation of data:** With participatory M&E it is particularly important to validate data, not just to accept everything that is said. Validation should always be done with and alongside communities, including the poorest, most vulnerable and hardest to reach. This is another way of making sure that the voices of the strongest or loudest do not dominate.
- **Optimal ignorance and appropriate imprecision:** People involved in participatory M&E should only collect and analyse information to the level of accuracy needed to inform decision-making and action in the community. This contrasts with many M&E and

research methodologies which are aimed at establishing findings to very high levels of precision to meet the demands of academic audiences (Chambers 1983).

- **Sharing:** Participatory M&E needs to be seen, and facilitated, as a joint process of learning and action between targeted groups and communities and development actors. This includes the sharing of ideas, methods and materials, encouraging joint reflection and analysis, and joint decision-making based on results. This helps offset any suspicion that targeted groups and communities need to learn from outsiders but not the other way around (Chambers 2008).

With active participation, or where empowerment is a stated purpose of participatory M&E, it is always important to remember that data collection and analysis is not just carried out to reach the correct conclusions. It is at least as important to encourage people to analyse their own situations and arrive at their own conclusions. The process should enable and empower them to continue making decisions based on data collection and analysis long after a project or programme has ended.

Challenges

Many of the benefits of participatory M&E are covered in the earlier part of this paper. These include:

- better information on what is changing;
- better targeting of development interventions;
- enhanced performance based on more accurate collection and analyses of information;
- enhanced empowerment of beneficiaries;
- increased ownership of projects and programmes;
- increased local capacity of communities to monitor and manage their own development;
- enhanced sustainability of projects and programmes;
- better downwards accountability to targeted groups and communities; and
- fulfilment of people's right to be involved in decisions that affect them.

Nonetheless, there are many challenges associated with participatory M&E. Some of these are described below (see IDS 1998; IFRC 2011; Hailey and Sorgenfrei 2004).

- It is essential that anyone supporting participatory M&E has good facilitation skills. Facilitators need the skills and attitudes required to manage participatory M&E in a conducive and empowering way. Amongst other things, this may require openness, a willingness to listen to different points of view, and a recognition of the knowledge and role of different participants.
- If not done well, there is a danger that participatory M&E can simply reinforce existing imbalances in power structures within groups or communities. For example, more powerful ethnic, religious or gender voices may dominate analysis and decision-making.

- When carried out well, participatory M&E can provide a framework for clarifying and negotiating differences between stakeholders, and developing consensus on what the priorities are. But it can also expose tensions between the needs of communities and external development agencies. Opening up M&E to a wider range of stakeholders may expose conflicts around what is most important, how it should be tracked, and whether goals are being met.
- Similarly, participatory M&E might require shifts in power between CSOs and their intended beneficiaries. Development interventions may be challenged, and communities may request radical changes. A lot then depends on how policymakers and development agencies react to these requests. If they are not willing to change then participatory M&E can quickly lead to frustration.
- Participatory M&E is most effective when supported by organisations that are willing to regularly review and adapt policies, processes and procedures, and change them in the light of evolving findings. However, participatory M&E may result in very different findings in different places. Supporting organisations therefore need the flexibility to adapt interventions differently in different locations at the same time. This is not an easy thing to do. Staff from organisations that are not themselves participatory in nature may struggle to support participatory approaches.
- Done well, participatory M&E can be very time-consuming, and usually requires significant, long-term engagement in communities. This in turn means it is costly. In addition to the time spent, CSOs may also need to recruit, train, manage and supervise community members, or hire more facilitators to support participatory work.
- It is also important that the time and resources of supported communities or beneficiaries are considered. Although they are not usually paid, community members or targeted beneficiaries may have to devote significant time to M&E activities. This may be time that could be spent productively elsewhere. Therefore, it is important to balance the costs to the people participating with the potential rewards. It is also important to recognise that many people may not want to take part in participatory M&E, and that no one should be pressurised into becoming involved.

Summary

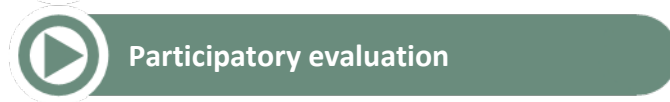
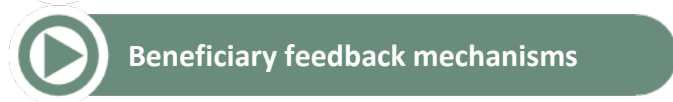
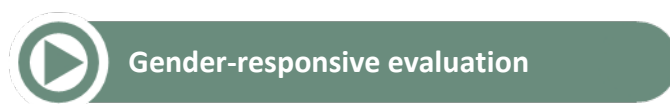
CSOs have been at the forefront of supporting and facilitating participatory M&E over the past 40 years. Traditionally, this has meant working with supported groups and communities in areas of work such as social development, empowerment, mobilisation, and humanitarian work to help them define, collect, analyse and use their own information.

Sometimes, participatory M&E has been designed to produce better quality information for CSOs. There is nothing wrong with this, provided it is clear to all that this is the purpose. However, participatory M&E can also be carried out to empower targeted individuals, groups or communities, with the aim of reversing traditional power

relations between 'beneficiaries' and external development agencies and actors. In these circumstances, there are many challenges, and CSOs need to look deeply and honestly at how their own internal policies, processes and structures support or hinder participatory M&E.

Further reading and resources

Another paper in the M&E Universe deals with Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). This describes many tools and techniques designed to support participatory planning and M&E. Some of the other tools and methods mentioned in this paper can be found by clicking on the links below.



Many of the ideas, concepts, resources and materials on participatory M&E have been developed from work by Robert Chambers, a leading practitioner and academic since the 1970s. One useful resource is an online paper called *'Relaxed and Participatory Appraisal: notes on practical approaches and methods for participants in PRA/PLA-related familiarisation workshops, Participation Resource Centre at IDS'* which is available freely from the internet. Two of Chambers' most popular books are listed in the reference section below. Another is *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, published in 1997.

The IDS website <http://www.participatorymethods.org> contains useful guidance on a range of participatory methods and tools. It is managed by the Participation, Inclusion and Social Change Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies and has a dedicated tab dealing with participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation.

Some examples of ways to use participatory numbers can be found in a book (*Participatory Impact Assessment: A Design Guide*) on participatory impact assessment methods developed by the Feinstein International Center to measure the impact of livelihoods interventions. The book was written by A. Catley, J. Burns, D. Abebe and O. Suji, and was published in 2013.

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