

# RESEARCH



There is often a large amount of overlap between social development research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Both can involve the collection, analysis and use of information in order to generate lessons and draw conclusions about the effectiveness of development interventions. Sometimes M&E and research are considered separately. But sometimes they need to be integrated as part of a wider system.

Within social development, research can be used for many different purposes. These include identifying the needs of communities and targeted beneficiaries, supporting the design of projects and programmes, helping to make the case for change, and assessing what has changed because of a development intervention and why. Research can range from small, rapid pieces of work designed to review existing information through to large international studies lasting many years (Laws et. al. 2013).

In some cases there may be very clear differences between research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). For example, research is not always focused on a development intervention or set of interventions, whereas M&E always is. Conversely, research is almost always designed to generate new knowledge or understanding, whereas M&E is often more concerned with issues such as project / programme management or compliance.

Clearly, however, there is often a large amount of overlap between research and M&E. Both can involve the collection, analysis and/or use of information in order to generate lessons and draw conclusions about the effectiveness of development interventions, with the ultimate aim of improving decision-making and performance. This means that in some situations development practitioners need to ensure that research and M&E are properly integrated as part of a wider information system, rather than being treated as entirely separate functions.

## *Research in the project and programme cycle*

There are several occasions when research might be used within the project or programme cycle. Some of these are described below.

- Research is often conducted before a project or programme starts, as part of a situational analysis. This type of research is often focused on the needs of communities and target beneficiaries, and aims to contribute to the design and planning of the project or programme.
- Research may be carried out alongside projects or programmes to better understand evolving contexts. For example, many governance programmes carry out

regular Political Economy Analyses, which are often based on rigorous research.

- In many complex programmes, M&E findings may highlight the need to better understand an issue. Research may then be commissioned to look more in-depth at an issue, and to generate findings that can then be used to improve the programme, or contribute to a wider body of knowledge.
- Research is often used extensively within advocacy projects and programmes, or programmes with policy influencing as a major component. In these cases the research focuses on generating information and analyses that can be used to lobby or persuade decision-makers.
- Projects, programmes or organisations that use Theories of Change may find that they need to review assumptions, especially when change at one level fails to translate into change at another level. In such cases research is often conducted to test the assumptions, and if necessary recommend their revision or rejection.
- Increasingly, impact evaluations and impact assessment studies are being based around rigorously applied research methods, such as randomised control trials (RCTs) and qualitative comparative assessment (QCA). These evaluations and impact assessments adopt the standards and principles of scientific research, and findings are judged based partly on the rigour of the methodology used (Stern et. al. 2012).
- Research projects and programmes need to be monitored and evaluated in the same way as any other project or programme. M&E may be carried out to assess how well the research was planned, commissioned and carried out; whether it was relevant; how well it was done; how findings were used (if at all); and what were the ultimate results on target populations.

## *Research in complex programmes*

There are many projects and simple programmes which never need to engage with formal research at all. Or if they do then there is a clear separation: monitoring is carried out by staff throughout the project or programme; evaluation is conducted by external consultants at the end;

and research is carried out separately by a different group of people with little or no interaction with the M&E system.

But in larger and more complex programmes, or across entire organisations, there may be considerable interactions between M&E and research. In these cases, M&E staff may need to consider how research interacts with, and complements, planning, monitoring, review, evaluation and impact assessment processes.

*“Once you go beyond a certain level of complexity, research and M&E may begin to look remarkably similar.”*

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## Further reading and resources

Further papers on this section of the M&E Universe deal with monitoring, evaluation, review and impact assessment.



For further reading, INTRAC recommends the book edited by Laws et. al. (2013) referenced below. This is not available freely on the internet, but is available from different booksellers. An article by Rogers (2014) called “*Ways of framing the difference between research and evaluation*” provides some theoretical background to debates around the differences and similarities between research and evaluation. This can be found on the better evaluation website at:

[http://www.betterevaluation.org/blog/framing\\_the\\_difference\\_between\\_research\\_and\\_evaluation](http://www.betterevaluation.org/blog/framing_the_difference_between_research_and_evaluation),

## References

- Laws, S; Harper, C; Jones, N; and Marcus, R (eds.) (2013). *Research for Development: A Practical Guide*. Second Edition. SAGE Publications. February 2013.
- Stern, E; Stame, N; Mayne, J; Forss, K; Davies, R and Befani, B (2012). *Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations: Report of a study commissioned by the Department for International Development (DFID)*, Working paper 38., April 2012.

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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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