

M&E SYSTEMS



Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems enable projects, programmes or organisations to define, select, collect, analyse and use information for a variety of purposes. Sometimes they are called M&E frameworks or approaches, instead of systems. They range from small, largely informal systems run by community-based organisations, through to huge systems operated by NGOs working in multiple locations and sectors.

Most CSOs carrying out social development or humanitarian work are expected to design and implement monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. These systems should enable projects, programmes or organisations to define, select, collect, analyse and use information for a variety of purposes. M&E systems can range from small, largely informal systems operated by community-based organisations (CBOs) through to huge, formalised systems operated by organisations working across multiple regions and sectors.

There is no single, agreed definition of an M&E system. Within this paper a good M&E system is understood to mean *“a series of policies, practices and processes that enables the coherent and effective collection, analysis and use of monitoring and evaluation information”* (Simister 2009, p1). Three other terms are commonly used:

- Some organisations use the term **M&E framework** instead of M&E system. However, an M&E framework can also refer to a table containing objectives and indicators, such as a logical framework or results framework.
- The term **M&E approach** can also be used, although this is rarer. It is normally used by large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in multiple locations.
- An M&E system, framework or approach may be written up into an **M&E plan** or **M&E strategy**. An M&E plan (in this context) is a written description of how the system, framework or approach works. It specifies what M&E tasks need to be carried out by staff at different levels of an organisation, programme or project, and why.

M&E systems may be designed to cover many different levels. For example, most projects and programmes have M&E systems. But a system may also cover the entire work of an organisation, or its work within a country, region or sector. M&E systems often overlap. For instance, a large NGO may have a country-level M&E system (which it may call an M&E framework or approach). This might cover a number of programmes, each with its own programmatic M&E system (or framework). In turn, each programme may comprise many different projects, each with its own project M&E system.

An M&E system may be run by a single CSO, or it may cover work done by different operating partners. Some M&E systems are partly designed and implemented by supported communities or groups. And some M&E systems are operated by consortiums, coalitions and/or networks rather than individual CSOs.

Another key difference in M&E systems is that some development interventions – such as service delivery projects or advocacy campaigns – are timebound. This means they have defined beginning and end-points. But the work of many CSOs is ongoing. For example, a national-level NGO may continue to work for many decades in a location, even though some of the work is divided into discrete projects and programmes for funding purposes. An M&E system designed to support a timebound intervention is not likely to be suitable for open-ended programmes of work, and vice versa.

In summary, there are huge differences between M&E systems designed to support small, timebound projects run by individual CSOs in single localities, and those designed to cover ongoing work in many locations and across multiple sectors, potentially covering the work of multiple organisations. These differences are explained in the accompanying M&E Universe papers: *‘Project M&E systems’* and *‘Overview of complex M&E systems’*.

Scope of an M&E system

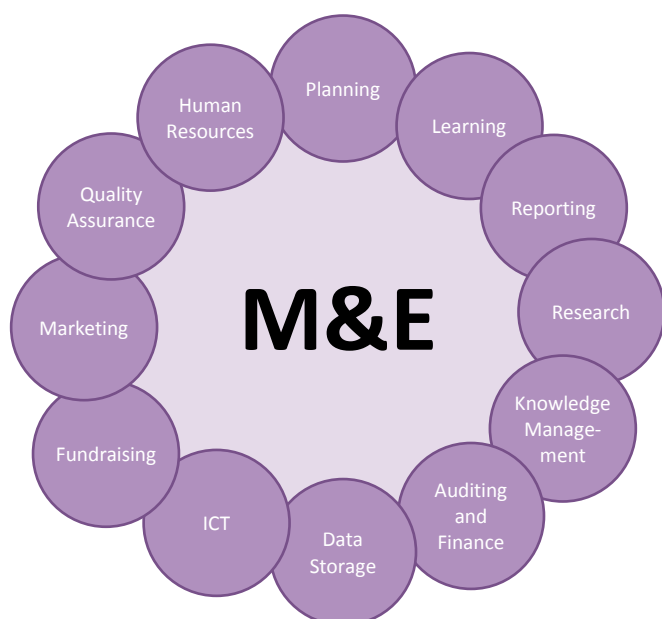
Some processes are always considered part of an M&E system. These include setting objectives and indicators, carrying out baselines, implementing tools and methodologies for collecting and analysing information, and conducting reviews and evaluations.

However, M&E is often combined with other processes within a wider system (or framework, or approach). For many years, CSOs have been formally linking planning and M&E systems together under **PME** (planning, monitoring and evaluation) systems. This is sometimes extended to cover reporting under a **PMER** system.

More recently, the trend is to integrate M&E and learning systems together to create a **MEL** (monitoring, evaluation and learning) or **PMEL** (planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning) system.

Sometimes an M&E system also needs to interact with wider management processes, such as knowledge management (KM), financial management, human resources, data storage, marketing, fundraising or quality assurance. For example, staff implementing an M&E system may need to rely on KM and/or data storage processes to ensure that the system operates properly. Equally, M&E systems may provide important information for fundraising or marketing teams.

Some M&E systems cover these processes, and some only interact with them (see diagram below). When designing an M&E system, almost the first decision to make is which processes the system should cover, which it needs to support, and which it has to rely on to operate properly.



As a general rule, the larger the organisation, the increased likelihood that different processes are split into different departments. For example, in a large NGO, there may be different departments for M&E, research, knowledge management and marketing. In some of the larger United Nations (UN) agencies there are even separate departments for planning, monitoring, evaluation, learning, reporting and verification. However, in a typical project M&E system, the same staff members are responsible for all aspects of the project – planning, M&E, learning, financial management, reporting, etc. – and there is less need for coordination across different departments.

Principles of an M&E system

The design of an M&E system is influenced by many factors. These include (but are not limited to):

- the main purpose(s) of the M&E system;
- the nature of the organisation, programme or project implementing the system;
- the type of work carried out;

- the resources available; and
- external influences, such as donors.

Projects, programmes and organisations may be very different from each other. This means that their M&E systems may be very different as well. However, INTRAC believes there are some common principles that should operate across most M&E systems (see Bakewell et. al. 2003, p11).

- **Participation:** Ensuring the participation of different stakeholder groups helps enhance ownership, and can improve the quality of information generated through an M&E system. The contributions of these groups should be encouraged and valued. An M&E system should also be designed in such a way that it uses and develops the capacity of those involved.
- **Cost effectiveness:** An M&E system should not be over-complicated. It should be understandable to different stakeholders. Where possible, it should use information generated through normal management processes, rather than creating additional tasks that need to be added to everyday work.
- **Gender-awareness:** An M&E system should be gender-aware. Women's and girl's concerns and experiences should be considered as well as men's. Where relevant, data should be disaggregated by gender. And differing impacts on men and women (or girls and boys) should always be considered.
- **Information provision:** An M&E system should provide information that helps relevant stakeholders answer four universal evaluation questions: Has the project, programme or organisation done what it said it would do? Has it done it well? What difference has it made? Has it done the right things?
- **Analysis and decision-making:** An M&E system should not focus on the collection of information only, but should also ensure that information is analysed and used for decision-making. An M&E system should make a difference to how things are done.
- **Unintended consequences:** An M&E system should not assume that the changes resulting from a project, programme or organisation are limited to anticipated changes only. It should also be designed to identify unexpected and/or negative changes.
- **Proportionality:** It is important to ensure that the overall benefits of an M&E system match or outweigh the costs. M&E systems require resources in terms of money and staff time, and it is important that the rewards at least match the efforts involved.
- **Evolution:** An M&E system should not always have to be fixed at the start of a project or programme. Sometimes it needs to be adapted or adjusted in the light of evolving experience.
- **Honesty:** M&E work should, as far as possible, be carried out and reported in an honest and transparent way. This means creating an environment in which information is openly analysed, debated and reported.

Elements of an M&E system

M&E systems can cover many different elements of work. Some are included within most M&E systems. Others are contained in some systems but not others. The table below provides an overview of some of the more common elements found within M&E systems. These elements are described in more detail in the M&E Universe paper on 'Project M&E systems'.

It is important to note that the different elements tend to be the same whether within a small, project M&E system or a large, organisational M&E system. However, they may be applied very differently. For example, a project M&E system might involve setting clear indicators that can demonstrate change. By contrast, an organisational M&E system might involve developing a menu of different indicators, designed to be used by different projects and programmes in different circumstances and contexts.

Common Elements in an M&E System

The context of an M&E system

- A statement of the M&E system scope and purpose
- Core M&E principles
- Guidelines governing the participation of different stakeholder groups within M&E
- An M&E plan, setting out what M&E tasks need to be carried out, when and how

The selection of information

- A strategic plan
- A results framework, such as a logical framework or Outcome Map
- Goals and objectives
- Indicators
- Learning or evaluation questions
- An activity plan
- Key risks and assumptions

The collection of information

- Tools and methodologies for collecting data
- Templates or forms, used to record information
- A baseline to assess the situation at the start of a project or programme
- Control or comparison groups
- A sampling system
- The routine and ongoing collection of information

The analysis of information

- The ongoing, informal analysis of information
- Formal quantitative or qualitative methods of analysis
- Learning mechanisms, designed to generate and/or share lessons

The use of information

- Regular reports
- Methods for communicating information to different stakeholders
- Mechanisms to help M&E findings influence decision-makers

Evaluation

- Formal evaluations
- Informal or formal reviews
- Impact assessment(s)
- Research

The supporting environment

- IT / databases
- Knowledge Management (or data management) systems
- A budget for M&E work
- Job specifications for key M&E staff, or staff with M&E duties
- Training and support for those carrying out M&E tasks

Further reading and resources

The M&E Universe paper on project M&E systems provides further information on the different elements typically contained within an M&E system. It is recommended for beginners or those concerned mostly with project-level M&E. The paper providing an overview of complex M&E systems starts to look deeper into M&E systems covering multiple projects, programmes or organisations.



Project M&E systems



Overview of complex M&E systems

References

- Bakewell, O; Adams, J and Pratt, B (2003). *Sharpening the Development Process: A practical guide to monitoring and evaluation*. INTRAC, UK.
- Simister, N (2009). *Developing M&E Systems for Complex Organisations: A methodology*. INTRAC, 2009.

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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.

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.

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