# THE SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT FOR M&E

A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system is usually harder to manage and implement than a one-off review or evaluation. This is because it relies on a system, instead of being a specific task carried out by individuals over a defined period. For an M&E system to work well, it is important to create a supportive environment, within which accurate and honest information can spread freely between interested parties.

There is a big difference between carrying out a discrete task, such as a traditional evaluation, a review, or an impact assessment, and implementing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. An M&E system is often considered more difficult to do well because it relies on a system, instead of being a one-off effort, carried out over a defined period by individuals with a specific task (Gosling and Edwards 1995, Simister 2000).

To serve a useful purpose, an M&E system needs to generate information and analyses that are accurate and relevant. Unfortunately, however, information produced by CSOs throughout the world is often of poor quality. This is sometimes because of technical issues, such as setting inappropriate objectives or indicators, failing to conduct baselines where needed, or using unsuitable tools and methodologies.

But most M&E systems do not succeed or fail for technical reasons. Instead, success or failure is more likely to be conditional on whether or not a CSO has managed to create an appropriate supporting environment, through which accurate and honest information can be generated and shared freely between interested parties.

## Dealing with bias

They are many potential reasons why an M&E system might generate incomplete or inaccurate information. Sometimes, CSOs are unable to access the information they need because it is too difficult or expensive to collect. Sometimes they collect the wrong information. For example, they may collect indicators that do not provide the right kind of evidence to show whether desired or anticipated changes have taken place. And sometimes they are forced or requested to collect information that is of little or no value to them to suit the needs of others, such as donors or host governments.

Often, however, CSOs generate biased information that leads to incorrect conclusions. There are many types of bias, and they are called by different names. Some of the more common ones are as follows (see Dozois et. al. 2010, White and Phillips 2012).

- **Framing bias** occurs when people's values, beliefs, culture or attitudes affect how they interpret events, issues or behaviours.

**Case study: The truth game**

During workshops, INTRAC sometimes conducts an exercise in which people are asked in pairs or groups to think about their daily lives, and discuss under what circumstances they would tell lies – or at least fail to tell the whole truth.

There are two main purposes to this exercise. The first is to emphasise the point that people do not always feel able or willing to tell the complete truth. When carrying out M&E work it is often assumed that people will generally tell the truth unless they have a reason not to. But if we acknowledge there are many times when we do not tell the full truth in our daily lives then we also need to recognise that we cannot accept at face value every piece of information arising from M&E work.

The second purpose of the exercise is to examine the conditions under which people might not be wholly truthful. Findings reveal that people are more likely to be dishonest when questioned:

- if they do not know (or trust) the person asking them questions;
- if they think they (or friends or colleagues) will suffer if they tell the truth;
- if they fear the truth will embarrass, upset, disappoint or offend their audience;
- when they do not know how the information they provide will be used;
- if they don't think anyone is particularly interested in that information, especially if people haven't acted on information they have provided in the past;
- if self-pride is at stake, and they don't want to be embarrassed;
- when issues are sensitive, and they don't feel comfortable discussing something;
- when they feel a certain answer is expected;
- when they feel threatened or bullied; or
- if giving a correct answer would involve too much time and effort (in other words when they can't be bothered to find out or explain the truth).

This partly explains some of the biases described in this paper. It also provides a basis for identifying processes that can help to encourage more honest data collection and analysis.

- **Confirmation bias** happens when people only notice or focus on evidence that supports what they already believe, or want to be true, and ignore contradictory evidence.
- **Selection bias** happens when people make generalisations based on information acquired

from individuals or groups that are not representative of wider populations.

- **Courtesy bias** occurs when people being interviewed provide information based on what they think a questioner wants to hear, rather than what they actually think.
- **Social acceptability bias** happens when people provide responses based on what is considered socially acceptable in a particular time and place.

Some of these biases are difficult to counter, and cannot be eliminated completely, especially within an M&E system where different people are routinely collecting and analysing information on an ongoing basis. But CSOs can develop processes to help minimise these and other biases. Some of these processes are described below (based on Simister 2000).

## Processes for enhancing the quality of collection and analysis

*(These guidelines can apply to staff working within an operational CSO, or staff working within partner organisations. The guidelines may also apply to beneficiaries involved in participatory M&E systems. However, this is dealt with in a separate paper within the M&E Universe.)*

**Training, supervision and motivation**

At the most basic level, the collection and analysis of accurate information depends on the skills of the staff responsible for carrying out the work, and on how well they are supervised and trained. Well-trained and supervised staff are usually more capable of collecting high quality information, and better able to understand and offset some of the biases described above, especially when assessing social change, or identifying key lessons learned. There is much a CSO can do to support staff. Some CSOs develop training materials to be used during induction or later on. Resources can range from formal guides and manuals to interactive media and workshop materials. Training materials should be designed to help staff recognise what is required of them under an M&E system, and provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out required tasks. More informal training can also be administered. This can range from peer-to-peer support and mentoring through to on-demand assistance from outside experts.

**Awareness of the purpose of monitoring and evaluation**

It is important to ensure that staff know how the data they collect is used. Many studies (e.g. Connor (1993)) have shown that staff are much more likely to spend time and effort collecting high quality data if they understand the value of the work they do, and are confident that those whose job it is to analyse and use that data will take account of it, and act upon it if necessary. As well as understanding the overall purpose of M&E within an organisation, programme or project, staff also need to thoroughly understand their own roles and responsibilities. This means ensuring these are clearly laid out in job descriptions and work plans.

**Non-threatening monitoring**

To be effective, monitoring and evaluation need to be non-threatening exercises. If staff feel that they are likely to be punished for making mistakes, or for failures in their projects or programmes, they will try not to report them. At best, this leads to staff exaggerating successes and ignoring failures; at worst, they may claim a project or programme is doing much better than it really is. However, it is not enough simply not to penalise people. CSOs need to actively take steps to create an environment in which different stakeholders feel they can be completely open and honest when collecting, analysing, sharing and reporting information. This applies to staff within organisations, to partners, and to beneficiaries.

**Information flows**

It is also important to ensure that information flows both to and from the field. Nothing is worse than a system where people collect information at field-level and pass it up to higher levels for analysis and decision-making. Anyone participating within M&E work – whether staff, partners or beneficiaries – should receive feedback on analyses or decisions made at higher levels. A monitoring system should therefore encompass not only the collection of data but also the *'communication system in which information flows between all the people involved'* (Gosling and Edwards 1995, p86). A two-way flow of information has two important benefits. Firstly, it ensures that data is actually analysed and used, and so serves an important function. Secondly, the feedback of results and analyses to the field allows staff to see *how* the data they provide is used.

**Opportunities to comment on data and analyses**

If an M&E system is to progress beyond a rigid process in which data is collected at field level and analysed at higher levels, mechanisms need to be established allowing field staff to participate in the analysis process. If field staff are given the opportunity to comment on the data they produce, and resulting analyses, through regular review mechanisms, their sense of ownership of their work is likely to increase, and so therefore is the quality of that work. CSO staff at all levels should therefore be involved in informal review processes. Reviews should be regularly organised at a variety of different levels, and may need to be institutionalised throughout an organisation, programme or project.

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| *Informal monitoring channels* | No formal M&E system can cover all the different eventualities that might occur during a project's lifetime. Instead, project managers and field staff often spend much of their time collecting information on a range of matters not covered by pre-defined indicators. These could include changes in the wider environment – such as important political events or changes in weather conditions – unanticipated problems or opportunities affecting the implementation of projects, and any unexpected impacts of the projects themselves, including effects on beneficiaries. However, in order for this kind of information to be systematically identified, and any lessons learned fed back into future activities in other areas, channels of communication need to be established through which information can be passed to higher-level managers on an irregular basis. This requires the co-operation and commitment of field staff, who will only volunteer information if they are confident that it will be considered and used if necessary. It is therefore important to reassure staff at all levels of a CSO that their experience, knowledge and opinions are valued. |
| *Use and analysis of data at field level* | A golden rule is that the quality of information collection and analysis is highest when the people carrying out the work actually need the information for their own purposes. Staff are therefore much more likely to spend time and effort collecting high quality data if it is useful to them in their own work. If staff are encouraged to make their own analyses of M&E data, and act upon those analyses where necessary, they will no longer be collecting data entirely for the benefit of others, but to fulfil their own needs and requirements as well. The more that M&E information is used by staff in the field, the greater interest they will have in ensuring that it is accurate, and that analyses are valid. |
| *Decentralisation of decision-making* | If partners, field-staff and/or beneficiaries are to be encouraged to use data for their own purposes, there are two major implications. Firstly, they need to be allowed a say in the design of M&E systems. This is to ensure that at least some of the data they collect is relevant to their own needs. Secondly, decision-making needs to be decentralised to enable partners, staff or beneficiaries to act on the data and analyses they generate. This may mean developing and encouraging participatory M&E systems that facilitate the active involvement of different stakeholders. |
| *Organisational culture* | Whilst formal processes and systems are important, the effectiveness of any M&E system will ultimately depend on whether or not a CSO is able to develop an organisational culture that supports effective M&E processes, and encourages learning and constructive criticism (Save the Children 2004). This means ensuring that a CSO is able to look at its own performance in a self-critical light, and report honestly on errors or failures to other stakeholders, all the way from donors and senior management through to service users. It also means cultivating a sense of curiosity in a CSO, so that staff and partners are interested in the kind of results they are achieving, and what they are learning along the way. This culture cannot be developed simply by imposing formal systems and procedures on different stakeholders. An appropriate M&E culture can take many years to develop. |
| *Effective leadership on M&E* | It is ultimately the responsibility of a CSO's leadership to ensure that this kind of culture is developed. Leadership is responsible for conveying the vision of an organisation, programme or project (the direction in which it is going) to its staff, and organising their efforts to pursue that vision. It is also responsible for creating the conditions under which stakeholders at all levels feel that M&E work is valued, and feel that they can contribute fully within M&E processes. It is therefore particularly important that leadership encourages open, honest information collection and analysis at the top levels of an organisation, programme or project. |

The processes listed above are all important. Some of them can be accomplished relatively easily. For example, it is fairly easy to put in place measures designed to ensure that staff are properly trained and supervised. On the other hand, an appropriate M&E culture can take years to establish. But unless these issues are addressed within CSOs, M&E systems can quickly degenerate into *'zombie'* systems where information is collected mechanically, but ends up unanalysed and unused.

At the same time, whilst CSOs need to ensure that the right processes are in place, they also need to accept that it is rarely possible to get perfect information, especially when dealing with complex social change. There will always be biases, and although sometimes these can be mitigated, at other times they simply need to be recognised. This means it is important to be critical, albeit constructively. This in turn means refraining from always taking evidence at face-value, and recognising the need to probe further where necessary.

It is particularly important to create relationships based on trust when CSOs work through partners or community-based organisations, who may tend to regard them as a donor, as much as a partner.  The more different organisations trust and respect each other, the more likely they are to be open and honest when carrying out M&E work.

## Further reading and resources

Other papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with two other subjects relating to the supporting environment for M&E, namely 'resources for M&E' and 'data and knowledge management'. Separate papers deal with project and complex M&E systems.

▶ Project M&E systems

▶ Overview of complex M&E systems

▶ Data and knowledge management

▶ Resources for M&E
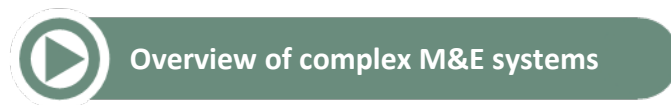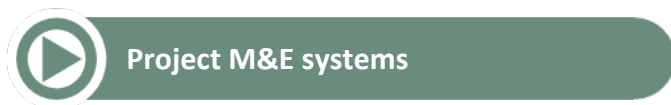
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INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, INTRAC has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on monitoring and evaluation. Our approach to M&E is 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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