M&E OF CIVIL SOCIETY FUNDS

intrac
for civil society

Civil society funds typically involve grant-making around a theme and/or location, and capacity strengthening of funded CSOs. Planning, monitoring and evaluation needs to be focused on at least three levels – project, grantee and the whole fund. Monitoring and evaluating a civil society fund involves the same kind of challenges as monitoring and evaluating a large organisation or complex programme.

This paper covers the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of civil society funds. Civil society funds typically contain two elements: grant-making around a theme and/or location; and capacity strengthening of funded CSOs. For example:

> *"The African Civil Society Fund (African Fund) is a grant making and capacity building initiative, whose mission is to strengthen and promote the values of an open society; a democratic political culture; an active civil society; universal human rights principles and standards; and the rule of law in African societies."* (African NGO Council u.d.)

Civil society funds may also be called different names, such as pooled funds or innovation funds, depending on the type and purpose. Funds may be managed from either developed or developing countries. They may operate in one country or sector only, or be spread across multiple countries and sectors. They may be funded by a single donor or by a consortium of donors (Giffen 2009).

Civil society funds vary a great deal, and are set up for many different reasons. Each fund is unique and requires a unique M&E approach. However, common elements exist in many funds. This paper aims to provide a checklist of things to think about when developing an M&E approach for a civil society fund. At the end of the paper, readers are then directed to other M&E Universe papers which cover more information on how to monitor and evaluate different aspects of a fund.

There is very little theoretical literature available on how to monitor and evaluate civil society funds. This paper is therefore based on INTRAC's own experiences in supporting or implementing civil society fund management in countries such as Ethiopia, Nepal, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and the UK. Although the paper is based on civil society funds, the broad principles may also be relevant to other kinds of funds. This paper is one of the more advanced papers in the M&E Universe, and relies on prior understanding of basic M&E issues.

The levels of a civil society fund

When monitoring and evaluating a civil society fund, the biggest challenge is that M&E needs to be carried out at multiple levels for multiple reasons (see diagram on next page). The difficulty mainly lies in the amount of M&E that needs to be conducted, rather than any one particular

Terms used in this paper

Civil Society Fund: a fund involving grant-making around a theme and/or location, often involving capacity strengthening of funded CSOs.

Grantees: CSOs, umbrella groups or consortiums receiving grants to implement projects and programmes. More than one grantee may run a single project or programme, and a single grantee may run more than one project or programme.

Fund manager: the organisation(s) managing the fund. These may be large International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs), Southern NGOs, management companies, or organisations specially set up to manage a particular fund. Often the management of a fund is put out to tender.

Donor(s): the organisation or organisations providing the money for the fund. They may be government-based donors or philanthropic organisations. Sometimes donors work individually – at other times they come together as a consortium.
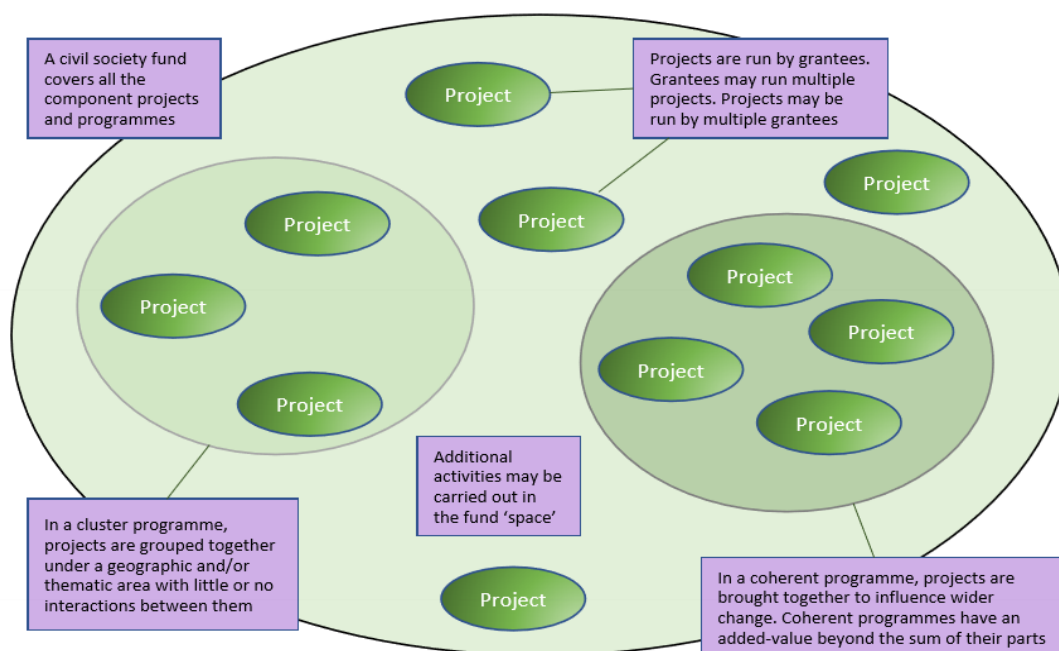
aspect. In this regard, an M&E system for a civil society fund is more like an M&E system for a large organisation or complex programme than for a simple project.

In most civil society funds, planning and M&E needs to be carried out independently at a minimum of three distinct levels, with information and analyses then flowing between the different levels. At each level a fund manager needs to consider what plans need to be made, what objectives or indicators to define, what methodologies or tools to use, who to involve in data collection and analysis, how and when reporting should be completed, how learning should be generated and shared, and how data should be stored, amongst other things. Many of these decisions can be delegated down to the level of the grantee organisations, but all need to be in place. Some of the different levels of a fund are covered below.

Project level

The **project** is usually the most basic level. Projects are run by grantees – either singly or together. Typically, grantees have to apply for the funding to run projects. This is often based on some kind of call for proposals. At the proposal stage, grantees may be requested to develop products such as theories of change, results frameworks (sometimes logical frameworks), objectives and indicators.

A Typical Civil Society Fund

A civil society fund covers all the component projects and programmes

Projects are run by grantees. Grantees may run multiple projects. Projects may be run by multiple grantees

Project

Project

Project

Project

Project

Project

Project

Project

Project

Project

Additional activities may be carried out in the fund 'space'

In a cluster programme, projects are grouped together under a geographic and/or thematic area with little or no interactions between them

In a coherent programme, projects are brought together to influence wider change. Coherent programmes have an added-value beyond the sum of their parts

Project

These products can sometimes be used as the basis for M&E throughout the project. However, INTRAC has found it is also useful to ask grantees to develop and/or refine results frameworks (including objectives, indicators, sources of information and activity lists) once a proposal has been accepted and the project has begun. This is because grantees may have a better idea of what is involved once they have started a project, and may feel under less pressure to articulate unreasonable expectations of what can be achieved once funding has been agreed.

Project M&E requirements, such as collecting, analysing and reporting information, may be the same for all grantees, or there may be different requirements for different levels of grant, or different types of grantee. For example, some civil society funds have pots of money designed to enable smaller or emerging CSOs to implement micro-projects. These may not require as much M&E.

M&E does not have to be complicated at project level. INTRAC has usually found it better to allow small or emergent grantees to develop simple tables of objectives and indicators, such as the ones used in a Sudanese programme (see following page), rather than forcing them to grapple with the technical and sometimes difficult language of a logical framework.

Grantees are normally expected to monitor their own projects throughout their lifetime, often with some support and supervision from fund managers (e.g. monitoring visits). Conversely, fund managers are normally expected to monitor whether grantees are observing compliance requirements, such as safeguarding and auditing.

Grantee level

Whilst M&E at project level normally looks outwards to changes in the lives of supported communities, policies or the environment, M&E at grantee level is more concerned with the effect that a civil society fund has on grantees.

Most civil society funds contain significant elements of *capacity strengthening*. This often involves a mixture of formal support (such as training, workshops and events) and informal support (such as mentoring and accompaniment). Sometimes, capacity strengthening support is provided by the fund manager(s) – either through specialist staff or hired consultants – and sometimes money is provided to grantees to purchase their own capacity strengthening support.

In either event, fund managers usually conduct ongoing M&E to assess how the capacity of grantees is changing over time. M&E is often based on methods to assess change at the level of individual grantees. Sometimes, however, civil society funds may involve training sessions run for a wider group of CSOs – not necessarily just those in receipt of grants.

In addition to assessing capacity change within individual grantees, fund managers often need to *summarise or aggregate capacity change* across multiple grantees. This may involve the use of common M&E tools or methods. Summarising capacity change across multiple grantees is harder than assessing change within individual grantees.

Programme level

Projects within civil society funds are sometimes, but not always, combined to form programmes. Broadly, there are two types of programmes. The first is a *cluster programme*. In a cluster programme, projects are grouped together under a geographic and/or thematic area. However, there may be little or no interactions between the projects, and a cluster programme can often be seen as the sum of its parts.

Tables used at the Proposal Stage in a Civil Society Fund in Sudan

RESULTS

1. What is the impact (overall long term change) your proposed intervention intends to work towards?
What will be different in the long-term, and for whom, over what timescale?

2. What outcomes (changes) do you think can be achieved by the end of the project period? Please fill in the table below, including as many outcomes as you feel are important.

| Outcomes
The changes you hope will be achieved by the end of the project period. | Evidence
The indicators (or monitoring questions) that will show whether or how far the desired outcomes have been achieved. | Baseline
The situation at the start of the project. | Source / Methodology
The information source(s) or methodology(s) that will be used to show whether or how far the desired outcomes have been achieved. |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

3. What outputs will be delivered over the course of the project? Please fill in the table below, including as many outputs as you feel are important.

| Outputs
The key outputs (deliverables) that will be delivered over the course of the project. | Source
The information source(s) that will be used to show whether or not outputs have been delivered. |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

For example, in a large civil society fund dealing with multiple themes, all the projects involving water and sanitation (WATSAN) may be brought together in a cluster programme. Results could then be aggregated to show the numbers of people supported on WATSAN across the programme. Note that it is generally easier to aggregate activities and outputs than outcomes.

The second type of programme happens when projects are brought together as a *coherent programme.* This type of programme seeks to influence wider change by combining different projects so they have an added-value beyond the sum of their parts. Coherent programmes may be planned from the beginning, or they may evolve over the period of a civil society fund.

For example, in the Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP) in Ethiopia, individual projects gradually coalesced around a series of programmes dealing with issues as diverse as prison reform, chat addiction and support for pastoralist communities. Once these programmes had been identified, they began to be planned, adapted and implemented as coherent programmes, with programme-level goals and strategic plans. These programmes were supported by lead partners (grantees), operating alongside the fund managers to manage the programme, including coordinating and implementing programme-level M&E.

Coherent programmes often need to aggregate and summarise change across multiple projects in the same way

as cluster programmes. However, they may also have their own programme planning, monitoring and evaluation systems, with their own programme theories of change, results frameworks, objectives and indicators. M&E within a coherent programme needs to focus not just on the component projects, but also on assessing the wider change a programme is trying to bring about, and its own contribution to that change.

Fund level

M&E across a civil society fund can be divided into five parts, each of which usually needs to be addressed.

Fund-level M&E: Most civil society funds have a stated purpose, other than supporting CSOs, and most are required to develop theories of change and/or strategies, as well as results frameworks, to capture change across the fund. These are normally accompanied by fund-level objectives, indicators, and sometimes evaluation questions.

In many cases fund managers are expected to produce a logical framework (or equivalent) at fund level, often to provide a level of accountability to the donor(s). In some (perhaps most) cases the logical framework is not conducive to actually managing the fund, as logical frameworks are not good at handling complexity. The logical framework therefore needs to be supplemented by a more appropriate results framework. For example, CSSP

in Ethiopia used a wider results framework incorporating a set of evaluation and learning questions, whilst a civil society programme in Sudan used an Outcome Map alongside a logical framework.

It is not always easy to develop overall indicators to measure what a fund is trying to achieve. A lot depends on how narrowly the fund is focused. It is obviously much easier to assess the combined impact of a fund providing support to representatives of ex-mining communities in a narrowly defined geographic area than a fund designed to support health or education across an entire country.

If a fund is able to define some over-arching objectives, it can then seek to measure change in two ways. One is to use its own resources to attempt to assess change. The other is to use third-party information (such as information generated by UN agencies or governments measuring progress against the Strategic Development Goals) and then use M&E methods designed to assess the fund's contribution to any identified changes.

How far a fund manager goes down this road depends to a large extent on its relationship with the donor(s). A fund with a strong desire or need to report on overall results in order to be accountable to donors may need to invest heavily in mechanisms to ensure adequate reporting against fund-level outcomes or impact.

For some kinds of funds, donors and fund managers may be more interested in assessing the impact of a few key projects, rather than assessing change across an entire portfolio. For example, donors and fund managers supporting innovation funds are often more interested in investigating the impact of a small number of successful projects.

Aggregation or summarisation of results across a portfolio: As with programmes, it is generally easier to aggregate activities and outputs, and more sophisticated methods may be needed to summarise changes across a portfolio of work.

The precise balance between measuring the overall impact of a civil society fund, and summarising change across the component parts is different for each civil society fund, although both usually have to be addressed. Based on INTRAC's experiences, the key factor would appear to be critical mass. If a grant or fund mechanism has sufficient critical mass that it has reason to believe that it can have a significant or measurable effect on a geographic region or sector (or even a theme such as the amount of innovative or sustainable work carried out) then it is reasonable to seek to assess change directly within that area. In this case it makes sense to develop a clear Theory of Change at the outset of the fund, and to develop appropriate objectives and indicators at the portfolio level which do not necessarily rely on information emerging from grantees. If there is no such critical mass then a picture of change needs to be developed through aggregating or summarising results from different projects and grantees.

Monitoring of fund management. This includes the monitoring of activities, deliverables, budgets, finances,

procurements, contracts, compliance, relationships, logistics, equipment, personnel and risks. In fund management it is especially important to monitor the pipeline of projects from applications through to completion, as well as the prompt and efficient disbursement of funds. Monitoring sometimes needs to focus on establishing whether an appropriate mix of CSOs was supported, e.g. the balance between established and emergent CSOs.

Often, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of fund management involves directly soliciting the views of grantees. This can be done via satisfaction surveys or interviewing grantees (individually or as a group). These kinds of methods can enable fund managers to find out what grantees think about different aspects of fund management, such as selection, approval, fund disbursal, ongoing feedback, and capacity strengthening support. In turn, this can also enable a degree of downwards accountability.

Sometimes, fund managers go beyond grantees and talk to unsuccessful applicants to get their views on issues such as the advertisement of calls for proposals, the selection process, and follow-up measures for unsuccessful applicants. One of the most important functions of a civil society fund is deciding which CSOs to fund, and 'backing the right horses'. Getting the views of both successful and unsuccessful applicants may help establish how well a fund is doing this.

Adaptive management: Adaptive management is often needed to navigate the socio-economic and political environment in which a fund operates. A lot of this kind of work is carried out by fund managers informally. This includes talking with different stakeholders – including donors and host governments – monitoring what is happening in the external environment, and discussing issues with grantees. Adaptive management might also involve more formal exercises such as targeted research (e.g. to understand the challenges with, and opportunities for, supporting the development of civil society in the context), the judicious use of project evaluations, or the use of ongoing planning methods such as regular contextual analyses.

Adaptive management is particularly important when civil society funds are designed to play a strategic role in shaping the development of civil society in a country. In such circumstances, the success or otherwise of a fund in influencing these strategic areas may be at least as important, if not more so, than the combined results of the individual projects and programmes within the fund.

Learning across multiple projects and programmes: This is almost always a key issue for civil society funds. Learning may focus on the experiences of grantees in planning and implementing projects and programmes, but might also cover what grantees are learning about the environment in which they operate.

Sometimes this learning is captured via dedicated sections in grantee reports. More often, however, fund managers

develop appropriate learning mechanisms such as workshops, conferences, chat rooms, or dedicated online spaces to generate, share and disseminate learning across a civil society fund.

Other levels

Whilst almost all civil society funds need to be monitored and evaluated at the level of projects, grantees and the overall fund – and many have programme elements as well – there may be other areas of work in the 'fund space' that require M&E. These are unique to each fund.

For example, a key objective of the Kulana Liltanmia Programme (KLP) fund in Sudan was to develop and support local capacity strengthening providers, capable of providing ongoing support to CSOs after the fund had run its course. As another example, the Foundation for Civil Society in Tanzania, after an initial period of supporting multiple CSOs on an ad-hoc basis, set itself the objective of identifying lessons within clusters of projects, and using these lessons to advocate more broadly on governance issues. And the African Civil Society Fund (African NGO Council u.d.) has a mandate to help mobilise resources for CSOs.

A civil society fund may also generate quite a high profile in a country, and may establish a role in negotiating directly with government, either to allow grant-making to go more smoothly, or even to try to create more space for civil society. If so, M&E may need to be conducted in these areas as well.

Finally, donor(s) may want to pursue their own objectives through a civil society fund, and may require progress against these objectives to be monitored and evaluated. Sometimes these objectives are consistent with development aims such as improving health or livelihoods outcomes, boosting the capacity of CSOs, or learning in order to improve performance, in which case they are likely to be reflected in the overall fund results frameworks. However, there may also be unspoken or unwritten aims such as generating political capital for donors, or creating business opportunities. Donors may want these areas to be monitored, even if not keen to acknowledge them publicly.

Evaluation

Most civil society funds will be large enough to warrant at least one evaluation or formal review over their lifetime.

Evaluations normally look at multiple aspects of a civil society fund, covering all levels of work.

However, it is important to note that evaluations will not be able to operate effectively unless a civil society fund has been appropriately monitored and evaluated over its lifetime. Indeed, even if this is the case, a multi-year civil society fund can be so complex, and have so many dimensions, that even experienced evaluators may find it hard to make sense out of decisions taken at different times and for different reasons in reaction to different events.

Therefore, in INTRAC's opinion, evaluation methods that focus on ongoing support and engagement (e.g. developmental evaluation, utilisation focused evaluation, real-time evaluation) are more appropriate for evaluating civil society funds than more traditional forms of evaluation that only happen at the end, when analyses are often too late to be of much use.

Civil society funds may offer good opportunities to use available M&E resources to investigate the long-term, sustainable results achieved by projects or programmes after they have ended. This is because funds (and therefore available resources for M&E) often outlast component projects and programmes. Assessing longer-term results in this way can reveal more than traditional project or programme evaluations which are only carried out at the mid-point or end of a project or programme.

Assessing longer-term change is useful in all kinds of civil society funds, but may be particularly useful in innovation funds, where the success of a few projects can justify the funding of many.

Conclusions

M&E within a civil society fund does not require different methods or approaches than M&E within other kinds of social development work. Indeed, monitoring and evaluating a civil society fund often involves the same kind of challenges as monitoring and evaluating a large organisation or complex programme. Two key challenges are that there may be many different elements of M&E to consider across different levels of a civil society fund, and processes often need to be established all at once at the beginning. The trick is to break down the required M&E into its component parts, and develop these one-by-one over a period of time so as not to become overwhelmed.
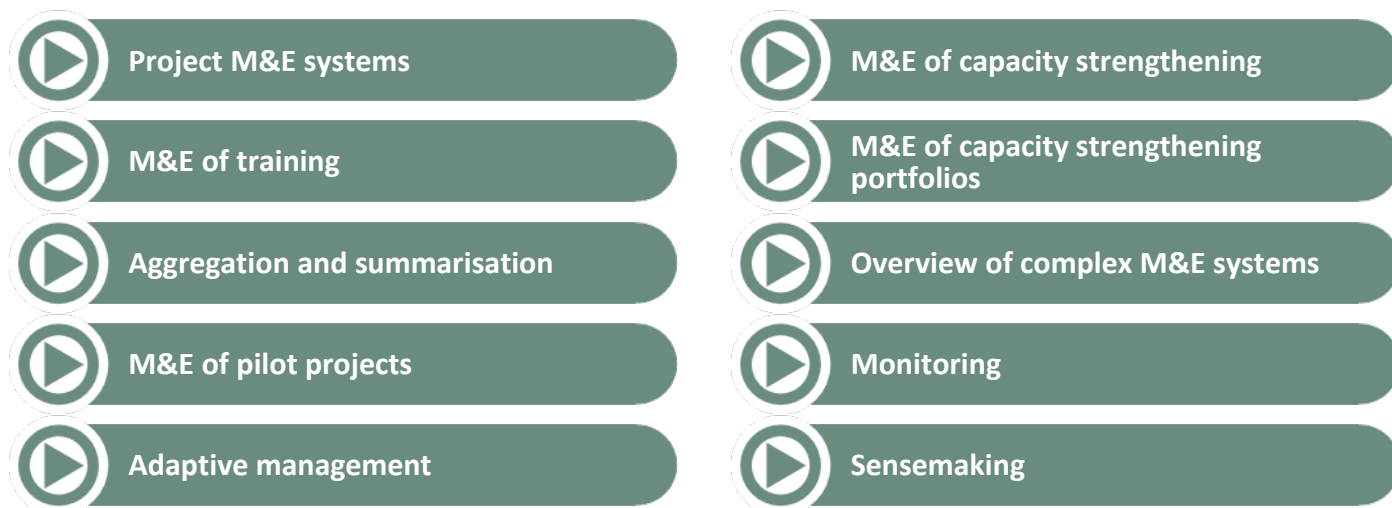
Further reading and resources

Many other M&E Universe papers are relevant to the M&E of civil society funds. These include the following:

➤ The paper on **project M&E systems** can be used to help develop processes and guidelines for project-level M&E.
➤ The paper on **M&E of capacity strengthening** provides information on how to assess whether the capacity of grantees is changing over time.
➤ The paper on **M&E of training** can be used to decide how to monitor and evaluate a training programme involving participants from multiple organisations.
➤ The paper on **M&E of capacity strengthening portfolios** provides advice on how to summarise or aggregate capacity change across multiple grantees.

- The paper on *aggregation and summarisation* provides comprehensive advice on how to aggregate or summarise results across complex programmes of work. It can be used to develop processes for aggregating / summarising across cluster programmes, coherent programmes, or the entire portfolio of a fund.
- The paper titled '*overview of complex M&E systems*' is the first of a series of papers covering M&E systems for organisations and complex programmes. Along with subsequent papers in the series, it can be used to help develop M&E systems for coherent programmes or an entire civil society fund.
- The paper on *M&E of pilot projects* provides information on how to monitor and evaluate a portfolio of innovation projects, and may have relevance to some kinds of civil society fund.
- The paper on *monitoring* can be used to develop a checklist of things to cover under fund management.
- The paper on *adaptive management* describes some of the processes that can be used to manage complex portfolios of work.
- The paper on *sensemaking* details a number of mechanisms that can be used to support learning across projects, programmes and organisations.

All of these papers can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

▶ Project M&E systems	▶ M&E of capacity strengthening
▶ M&E of training	▶ M&E of capacity strengthening portfolios
▶ Aggregation and summarisation	▶ Overview of complex M&E systems
▶ M&E of pilot projects	▶ Monitoring
▶ Adaptive management	▶ Sensemaking

References

- African NGO Council (undated). *About the African Civil Society Fund*. Retrieved from https://africanngocouncil.org/civil-society-fund, October 2021.
- Giffen, J (2009). *The Challenges of Monitoring and Evaluating Programmes: M&E paper 5.* INTRAC, Oxford, UK.

Author(s):
INTRAC

Contributor(s):
Nigel Simister, Dan James, Rod MacLeod, Jeremy Astill Brown

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.

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.

Email: info@intrac.org   **Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851**

intrac for civil society

M&E Universe

For more papers in the M&E Universe series click the home button