TOOLS FOR M&E OF CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Changes arising from capacity strengthening work can sometimes be measured directly. A range of tools and methodologies can also be used to help assess capacity change. Most of these were not designed specifically with capacity strengthening in mind, but can easily be adapted for the purpose. CSOs engaged in capacity strengthening work often use multiple M&E tools and methodologies in combination.

In many circumstances, changes arising from capacity strengthening work can be measured directly. This is more common for technical capacity strengthening than for organisational capacity strengthening (see box opposite). For example, changes in fundraising capacity can be measured by capturing changes in the number of external funders supporting an organisation, or the amount of revenue generated. Or changes in the capacity of partners to carry out medical operations can be assessed by measuring recovery rates in patients.

Direct measurements such as these tend to bypass capacity assessment and go directly to the end result. This is sometimes easier, as it involves monitoring or evaluating tangible change, rather than a partner's theoretical capacity to do something. For example, it is easier to find out whether a local administration is clearing refuse than assess its capacity to do so. However, measuring the end result of capacity strengthening only works if a provider assumes (or can demonstrate) that results are not primarily due to other factors.

In many circumstances, and especially when engaged in organisational capacity strengthening, it is harder to measure results directly. In these cases, a range of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools and methodologies can be used to help assess capacity change.. These are often used in combination, with different findings from different tools and methodologies providing a degree of triangulation.

Terms used in this paper

Capacity: the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully.

Capacity strengthening: a deliberate process whereby people and/or organisations are supported to build, strengthen and maintain capacity over time.

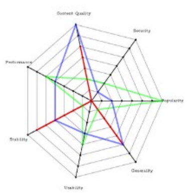
Providers: CSOs that provide capacity strengthening support to other agencies.

Partners: those accessing capacity strengthening support.

Technical capacity strengthening: capacity strengthening support aimed at addressing a specific issue, such as a partner's ability to develop funding proposals, manage health centres or teach pupils.

Organisational capacity strengthening: capacity strengthening intended to help partners fulfil their core functions and achieve their own mission; often aimed at internal issues such as identity, leadership, culture, strategies, staffing, structures and systems.

Monitoring and evaluation tools used in capacity strengthening work



Organisational assessment tools: Organisational assessment (OA) tools, also known as organisational capacity assessment tools (OCATs), are designed to assess organisational capacity and plan organisational capacity strengthening initiatives. Sometimes they are used for M&E purposes as well. They are the only M&E tool in widespread use designed specifically for capacity strengthening work.

There are numerous types of OA tools, designed for different purposes and situations. However, most have been designed according to a similar pattern.

- First, capacity is divided into discrete areas, such as internal management, relational management, ability to carry out core functions, human resources, etc. The different areas are often further broken down into more detailed statements (sometimes called indicators), each covering a different aspect of capacity.
- Next, a simple rating or grading system is developed to identify the capacity of a partner against each of the different areas (or statements or indicators).
- Then a simple process is put in place for rating capacity in the different areas identified in the first step. Normally, this is based on some kind of participatory exercise involving both the capacity strengthening provider and partner.
- Finally, providers and partners critically analyse and reflect on capacity. Sometimes, a graphical presentation of capacity is developed to help with the process of analysis.

Some use the term ***scorecards*** to describe OA tools that are narrower than the holistic tools used to assess entire organisations. Scorecards often represent a more limited subset of capacity areas. But the principles are the same – divide work into discrete areas, rate capacity, and act on the findings.

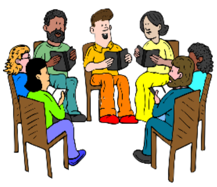
Organisational assessment tools tend to be used in three different ways. Firstly, they can be used to assess the capacity of an organisation to act as a partner or recipient of funds. Secondly, they can be used by organisations to identify their own internal organisational strengths and weaknesses. Once needs have been identified and prioritised, an action plan to bring about capacity change can be designed. Thirdly, organisational assessments can be repeated at discrete intervals. Changes in capacity 'ratings' can then be used as one way to assess how capacity has changed within the organisation. If necessary, these changes can also be investigated to assess whether or how far they are the result of a particular capacity strengthening intervention.

Organisational assessment tools are covered in more detail in a separate paper within the M&E Universe.

Outcome Mapping: Although not specifically designed with capacity strengthening in mind, Outcome mapping is increasingly regarded as an effective method of planning and reporting on capacity strengthening work. Some consider it to be a good alternative to the logical framework approach, which relies on predicted changes across set timescales. This is for a number of reasons.

- Outcome mapping requires a project or programme to identify boundary partners – individuals, groups or organisations with which it interacts directly to support change. It is therefore particularly appropriate when assessing change at an organisational level (Earl et. al. 2001).
- Outcome mapping encourages a spread of possible outcomes – known as progress markers – ranging from initial changes one would 'expect' to see over the course of a project or programme to changes one would 'like' or 'love' to see. This avoids the need for precise prediction of the pace of change, or reliance on any one indicator.
- Outcome mapping focuses on behavioural change, and progress markers are designed to describe observable changes in actions, behaviours and relationships that will happen if capacity is enhanced. This helps avoid some of the more difficult challenges faced when measuring intangible concepts such as capacity, confidence or empowerment. Outcome mapping can be used to address the question: *'if capacity changes, what will I actually see?'*
- Outcome mapping explicitly recognises complexity, and the fact that capacity strengthening providers are not ultimately responsible for changes within boundary partners (ibid).

The idea of outcome mapping is to set a series of progress markers (which then becomes the outcome map) and then to collect and analyse information on these progress markers at regular intervals. Normally, outcome maps are developed independently for each supported partner. However, the methodology also allows for common maps to be applied across a range of partners if they are similar. Outcome mapping is a participatory methodology. When applied to capacity strengthening work it is designed to stimulate analysis and learning between providers and partners.



Most Significant Change: Like Outcome mapping, the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is often mentioned as an alternative to logical framework-based approaches. MSC is a method designed to record and analyse change in projects or programmes where it is not possible to precisely predict changes beforehand, and it is therefore difficult to set pre-defined indicators. It is also a tool designed to ensure that the process of analysing and recording change is as participatory as possible.

The purpose of MSC is to identify significant changes brought about through a project or programme, especially qualitative changes that cannot easily be captured through statistics. MSC relies on people at all stages of a project or programme sitting together to identify what they consider to be the most significant changes within pre-defined areas or domains. Although not specifically designed for capacity strengthening programmes, MSC can easily be adapted for such purposes by defining a domain or domains around *'organisational capacity change'* or *'organisational performance'*.

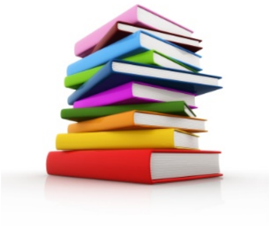
A key feature of MSC is that it involves a transparent process for the generation of stories of change that explains why and how each story was chosen. It is not designed to produce representative stories. Instead it is designed to find the most interesting or revealing stories of change.

Case study: CABUNGO

CABUNGO, a Malawian based organisation, used MSC to evaluate its capacity strengthening services as a pilot project. The pilot enabled CABUNGO to identify changes in organisational capacity such as shifts in attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviour. Changes were also seen in relationships and power dynamics. Most of the stories generated described internal changes within the recipient organisations, but some also described changes in their external relationships with donors and the wider community.

Participants in the evaluation process felt that the story-based approach was useful in helping CABUNGO understand the impact it had on the organisational capacity of its partners, and how its services could be improved. The key advantages of using MSC were its ability to capture and consolidate the different perspectives of stakeholders, both to aid understanding and conceptualisation of complex change, and to enhance organisational learning. The constraints lay in meeting the needs of externally driven evaluation processes, and dealing with subjectivity and bias.

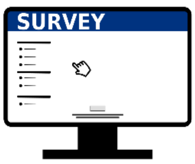
Source: Wrigley (2006)



Case studies and stories of change: These are often used as an alternative to quantitative methods because they are perceived to be better capable of describing the richness and complexity of individual, organisational and societal change. However, unless an organisation is clear about how they are generated and used, stories can be dismissed as anecdotal. In response, a number of different methodologies can be used to help introduce more rigour into the process. These include methodologies for handling multiple cases, such as the Most Significant Change technique (see above) or outcome harvesting.

Case studies and stories of change can be used to develop a portfolio of changes and lessons that can then be used to help summarise the work of capacity strengthening providers and/or capacity changes in supported partners. The stories can often be used for accountability and communications purposes. However, if they are truly to be used for learning and improving two main features need to be in place. Firstly, the methodology for selecting the stories must be transparent. Secondly, the stories themselves must be based on robust information that has been properly verified and analysed.

One option for large capacity strengthening programmes is to provide stories based on random sampling, which means choosing a selection of partners as a focus for in-depth case studies. This allows some extrapolation of findings, thereby enabling CSOs to estimate the overall effects of a capacity strengthening programme.



Surveys: Surveys can be used to generate M&E information, especially within larger capacity strengthening programmes. They involve asking supported partners (or multiple staff within partners) to reflect on capacity strengthening support, identify what has or hasn't changed, assess which capacity strengthening methods worked best, etc. Results can then be compiled to acquire an overall picture of change, either within an individual partner or set of partners.

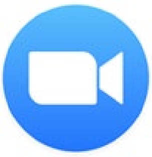
Surveys can also be used at the end of training courses or other forms of capacity strengthening events to assess immediate responses to training. Sometimes, they are used after training to assess what people or partners have done differently because of the training.

However, there are dangers associated with using surveys to assess capacity change. With the advent of resources such as Survey Monkey a certain amount of 'survey fatigue' has set in, and response rates for surveys may be very low. This has been INTRAC's experience over the past few years. Where response rates are low, information can still be generated for communications purposes, and stories of interest may arise. But such information should not be treated as representative. There is often a large element of self-selection associated with survey response. If providers of capacity strengthening support wish to use surveys to assess change in a more methodological manner they also need to take steps to ensure response rates are high.

Client satisfaction forms: M&E might also be based around client satisfaction, mirroring the type of M&E conducted by many private businesses. If used sensitively and appropriately, client satisfaction forms can also serve as useful downwards accountability mechanisms, as they allow partners to comment on the support they receive. However, care needs to be taken if capacity strengthening is linked to other forms of support. For example, many International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide capacity strengthening support to Southern-based NGOs as part of funding packages. In these cases it can be hard to get honest responses about the value of capacity strengthening work.

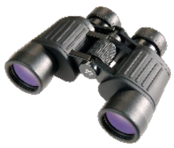
Sometimes partners purchase capacity strengthening services from different providers with money, or voluntarily devote staff time and resources to capacity strengthening. In these cases M&E can sometimes be based around a more market-led approach, on the assumption that if partners come back for more support (or persuade others to do so) it must be because they valued the previous support and found it useful. This can be seen as a valid M&E approach for demand-led capacity strengthening work.

Another proxy measure of client satisfaction might be the extent to which capacity strengthening resources are accessed. Some capacity strengthening providers monitor downloads of resources or track how often websites or blogs are accessed to gauge whether and how they are meeting the needs of different stakeholders. For example, INTRAC makes no attempt to systematically assess the impact of its M&E Universe series of papers on M&E (although spontaneous comments are always gratefully received). Nonetheless it regularly monitors and analyses access and download statistics as a proxy measure of how useful the resources are as a capacity strengthening vehicle.



Sensemaking: All the methods described in this paper can be used for generating information. But many different processes can also be used to share information, and to jointly make sense of key questions, such as what has changed, what was the contribution of the capacity strengthening provider, what do the changes mean, why are the changes important, and what should be done differently in the future?

Vehicles for sensemaking include conferences, workshops, discussion papers, after-action reviews, research studies, reviews, formal evaluations and impact assessments. Through carrying out a range of different sensemaking exercises, different stakeholders can be brought together jointly to build up a picture of change, and make recommendations for the future. These exercises may also be useful in addressing wider aspects of capacity strengthening work such as the enabling or constraining environment, relationships, power dynamics, and impacts on targeted communities (see Lipson and Hunt 2008).



General M&E tools: Many standard tools are used within M&E. These were not designed with capacity strengthening in mind, but most can be applied to capacity strengthening work. For example, individual or group interviews are often used to acquire information from partner staff. Focus group discussions can help small groups of staff to collaboratively discuss capacity strengthening support, and changes within an organisation. Observation can be used to see how relationships are changing within an organisation. And partner documents, records and policies can be scrutinised to see how, or whether, capacity change is happening.

A range of more complex tools and methodologies can also be adapted for capacity strengthening purposes. Some of these are listed below.

Outcome harvesting

Outcome harvesting is becoming increasingly popular as an M&E methodology. It is designed to collect evidence of multiple changes, and then work backwards to assess both the significance of change, and contribution to change. Outcome harvesting is based around monitoring questions that help people focus on what changes to look for. In a capacity strengthening programme, outcome harvesting can be used in two different ways. First, it can be used to look for capacity changes within partner organisations. These may then be investigated to see how significant they are, and what helped influence them. Second, it can be used to look for wider change – perhaps within supported communities or systemic changes at programme level – and then work backwards to identify how or whether capacity change in partners contributed.

Tracer or longitudinal studies

Support to individual partners can also be assessed using purely qualitative techniques. One way is to develop a qualitative baseline (a story of what the situation is at the start of the support) and describe a picture of what the situation might be in the future. Regular monitoring then builds a series of pictures over time, showing what has changed and why. When applied across multiple partners, this then becomes a tracer (or longitudinal study) designed to assess change at discrete points in time. In some capacity strengthening programmes, tracer studies can also be applied at the level of individuals. For example, individuals may be contacted at regular intervals within or after a training programme to explore how their capacity has changed, or to explore how they have used newly acquired skills or knowledge.

Appreciative inquiry	Appreciative Inquiry is a participatory form of inquiry. It puts a different focus on how information is collected, analysed and used, compared to traditional M&E methods. It deliberately focuses on what is working well, and how things could be made even better, rather than on problems and difficulties. It can be used to help plan, monitor and evaluate any kind of development intervention. Some people consider it particularly useful in capacity strengthening programmes as a way to build on existing strengths, ensure positivity, and resolve some of the tensions that can be caused when people openly discuss capacity issues.
Contribution analysis or process tracing	Contribution analysis and process tracing (and more recently contribution tracing) are methods used to assess contribution towards development outcomes. They involve developing a theory of change for how an intervention believes it has influenced change, looking for evidence at each level of the theory, and then examining alternative hypotheses (theories) of how the change might have come about. These methods can be used in two ways for capacity strengthening. They can be used to identify capacity change in a partner, and then work backwards to try and identify what caused that change. Or they can be used to identify change at wider programmatic level, and work backwards to identify contributory factors, which might include changes in the capacity of a partner or group of partners.
Action research	Action research is a participatory research method, which is carried out by those with a particular interest in addressing a problem. It is reflective in nature, and involves four main steps: planning, taking action, reflecting, and identifying learning, which is then fed into decision-making. Simply put, it is about learning from experience, and then applying this learning to future work. This then leads to ongoing cycles of improved learning and 'doing'.
Impact grids	An impact grid is a tool that helps stakeholders involved in a development intervention analyse multiple changes by mapping those changes onto a grid. A typical grid charts the extent of change alongside the degree of contribution of the intervention. Impact grids can be used for many different purposes. They are only normally used after enough time has elapsed within a programme for changes to emerge. Impact grids can be used to help identify and analyse different capacity changes, either within an individual partner or within a wider capacity strengthening programme.
Timelines	Timelines may be useful when documenting change processes within a partner, or within a group of partners in a capacity strengthening programme. They often involve charting what has been done in a capacity strengthening programme, what has changed (both positive and negative), what others have done, and what has changed in the external environment. Timelines chart these events in order of when things were done, or when changes were observed, in order to support analysis. They are frequently developed in participatory workshops. They provide an opportunity to document and synthesise institutional knowledge, often capturing information on the history of an intervention that is only known to those who were directly involved.
Journals and diaries	Journals and diaries are designed to store information chronologically (according to time). They can be developed and updated by capacity strengthening providers. Alternatively, staff within supported partners can be encouraged to keep and maintain journals, as part of the capacity strengthening process.
Post-training assessment forms	Changes in the knowledge and behaviour of individuals can often be assessed through different forms of training evaluation or assessment forms. This is discussed further in the M&E Universe paper on M&E of training.

Further reading and resources

Many of the tools and methodologies described in this paper have dedicated papers elsewhere in the M&E Universe. These can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

- Organisational assessment tools
- Most significant change
- Surveys and questionnaires
- Outcome harvesting
- Appreciative inquiry
- Outcome Mapping
- Case studies and stories of change
- Contribution analysis
- Tracer studies
- M&E of training

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