M&E OF CAPACITY STRENGTHENING PORTFOLIOS

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Programmes involving capacity strengthening work with multiple partners require a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation. As well as monitoring capacity change in individual partners, additional processes may be needed to summarise and describe results across multiple partners, and assess contribution to wider programmatic change.

Capacity strengthening can be straightforward to monitor and evaluate when a CSO only works with a small number of partners. However, the challenges are much greater when working with a larger portfolio. If CSOs run programmes of work involving many different partners they need to take a more systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

In these cases, CSOs providing capacity strengthening support often fall into one of three traps (see James 2009):

- doing nothing, paralysed by the difficulties and costs;
- setting up a mechanical or misleading system; or
- setting up something that is too complex or burdensome for their partners.

In part, this is because M&E systems designed to support capacity strengthening work should ideally be negotiated and agreed individually between providers and their partners. Yet if M&E work with each and every partner is done in a different way, it can be very hard to summarise or analyse across a portfolio of work.

When working across large portfolios it is still important to design M&E approaches in a participatory way, and to ensure that M&E supports the capacity strengthening process rather than undermining it. But at the same time there may have to be additional M&E demands on partners.

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.

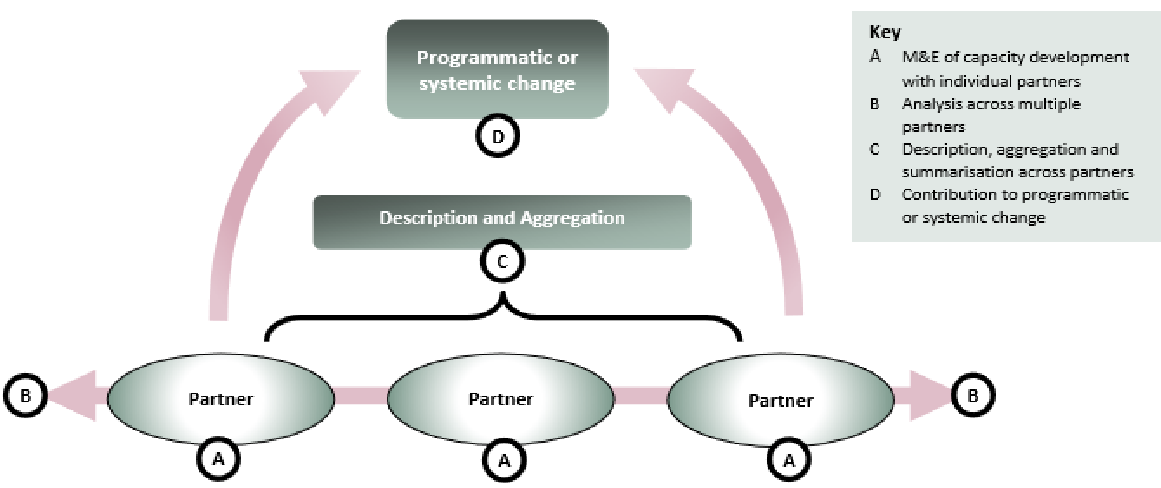
Partners: those accessing capacity strengthening support.

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.

This is illustrated in the diagram below. As well as M&E efforts designed to assess the changes brought about through capacity strengthening work with individual partners, additional M&E processes may be needed to conduct analysis across multiple partners, summarise and describe portfolio change, and assess contribution to wider programmatic or systemic change.

M&E of capacity strengthening portfolios at different levels



Additional M&E processes

Some of the additional M&E processes which may be needed in a large capacity strengthening programme are listed below.

- There may need to be a more encompassing theory of change or strategy, which explains the capacity strengthening support in its totality, and describes how it is intended to contribute to wider goals and objectives. This might include descriptions of how capacity strengthening activities will be oriented towards the collective needs of groups of partners, or of networks and coalitions, as well as tailored support to individual partners.
- Some CSOs develop an overall M&E strategy which explains the purpose(s) of M&E at the programme level. Capacity strengthening programmes are often funded by external donors, and M&E across the programme may need to be carried out for accountability to the donor, as well as for learning and improving at individual partner level.
- There needs to be some M&E coherence across a programme of work. If each partner develops its own M&E approaches, a huge amount of information will be generated which will be hard to analyse across the programme. Sometimes, programme-wide M&E processes can be agreed jointly with partners. However, this is not always possible. For example, INTRAC worked recently on a large civil society fund involving over 100 supported partners. It was simply not practical to consult all these partners, especially as many had yet to be selected at the time when M&E processes were designed.
- Individual capacity strengthening plans need to be supplemented by overall programme plans, detailing how support will be provided to multiple partners. For example, a capacity strengthening programme might involve support to multiple partners in common areas of work such as finance or leadership.
- Many capacity strengthening programmes have programme-level objectives, reflecting desired capacity changes at programmatic level. CSOs supporting multiple partners may also need to develop objectives that reflect wider programmatic or systemic change. For example, one of the purposes of a capacity strengthening programme may be to increase the extent to which supported partners engage with government, carry out advocacy work, better involve their own communities in participatory planning, or contribute to democratic debates.
- CSOs might wish to develop indicators (or questions) that can provide evidence of change against programmatic objectives. In an externally funded programme, CSOs will almost always be expected to develop programmatic indicators. (This is covered in the next section).
- M&E tools may need to be selected and applied across all partners in a programme. This is often necessary in order to develop programmatic indicators or baselines.
- CSOs may need to develop programmatic baselines. These may be set at different levels: baselines reflecting partners' capacities; baselines reflecting changes in the lives of communities supported by partners; programmatic change in areas such as government engagement or advocacy; or wider system change such as changes in the education system in a country. The level of baseline required depends to a large extent on how and why the capacity strengthening programme was set up.
- CSOs often need to analyse information across supported partners, as well as within individual partners. Information may need to be coordinated in order to produce regular programmatic reports or reviews. Learning mechanisms (e.g. workshops, newsletters) may be developed to share information across multiple partners, or to help generate joint analysis.
- Finally, evaluations at the programme level tend to focus on the entirety of support, as well as looking in-depth at support to individual partners. As with baselines, evaluations may focus on different levels of change, ranging from partner capacity to change at community level, and beyond to wider systemic change. Evaluations are often based on programme-wide theories of change or results frameworks. They are usually led by external people, and are sometimes designed to meet the needs of a donor, rather than capacity strengthening providers and their partners.

All these different processes might mean additional burdens on supported partners. CSOs providing capacity strengthening support may attempt to reduce these burdens as far as possible, but cannot always completely cushion partners.

Developing capacity strengthening indicators at portfolio level

Many CSOs providing programmatic capacity strengthening support are asked at some stage to develop objectives and indicators – often described within logical frameworks – to assess progress across a portfolio of work. At the output level this can be relatively straightforward. For example, most providers can easily count how many partners or individuals they support. It may also be straightforward to count some types of capacity strengthening support, such as training, hosting events, developing resources, etc. (although some forms of capacity strengthening support, such as mentoring or accompaniment, may be harder to quantify). In addition, most CSOs are able to assess the quality of their support with a judicious mixture of quantitative and qualitative evidence.

However, developing outcome indicators at portfolio level is frequently more of a challenge. Essentially, it is much easier to summarise and aggregate performance in any field of work across a range of interventions where:

- the same indicator definitions are used, and are applied consistently;

- a common tool or methodology is used to collect and analyse data;
- work is carried out over similar timescales;
- the quality of information collection and analysis is consistent; and
- contributions to change are similar.

Where capacity strengthening is concerned, the issue of consistency is more pertinent because of the nature of the work. Ideally, as stated previously, a capacity strengthening provider would want to agree M&E tools and methodologies with partners, and possibly adapt these to local circumstances as well. But across a programme of work this may not be possible, and in order to summarise change a provider may need to agree or impose common tools or methods. At best this may be seen as inhibiting local ownership of the process. At worst it might introduce additional layers of bureaucracy that are detrimental to the capacity strengthening process. Unfortunately, in many situations this may be unavoidable.

Of course it may not be necessary to measure change in every single supported partner using a common tool. In very large programmes of work a sample of partners may be sufficient to enable generalisable findings.

The table below demonstrates how different indicators can be developed at programme level, based on some common tools and methodologies (each of which is described in an additional paper in this section of the M&E Universe). It is important to note that the usual sequencing is often reversed when developing programme-wide indicators for capacity strengthening work. Rather than developing an indicator and then identifying a tool or method to collect it, the tool or method is identified first, and the indicator is developed afterwards. In other words, when developing a portfolio M&E system it is first necessary to identify the data collection method which will be used across all parts of the portfolio, and then work backwards to generate a common indicator.

Capacity strengthening indicators within programmes

Method	Possible indicators	Notes
No consistent method *(capacity strengthening results are assessed using different tools, methods or approaches for each partner)*	• # of partners / organisations with enhanced capacity • # and description of capacity changes observed • # of organisations with enhanced capacity to engage with local government	These indicators are weak and can be challenged quite easily. The indicators can be made stronger by clearly outlining the areas of capacity support, as in the third indicator.
Direct measurement *(consistent capacity strengthening support is provided to multiple partners, designed to achieve clearly tangible change)*	• # of successful funding proposals produced each year by partners • # of partners integrating gender equality into their programmes • # of partners / NGOs establishing formal relationships with government bodies	If support is provided to a portfolio of organisations on the same subject (in these examples producing funding proposals, integrating gender equality or establishing formal relationships with government) then developing indicators should be easy.
Capacity development action plans *(CSOs often develop action plans with partners, sometimes based on organisational or needs assessments)*	• # and description of partners showing enhanced capacity in one or more areas of their action plans • # of organisations pursuing a capacity strengthening action plan at least one year after the start	Action plans for individual partners may all be very different, so there may be little consistency in the indicators. As a result, portfolio indicators might need to be very broad, or might need to be based on pursuance of the plans themselves.
Organisational Assessment tools / scorecards *(Organisational assessment tools that are repeated at regular intervals to assess capacity change)*	• average capacity score against different areas of support (e.g. M&E, leadership) • # of organisations showing an increase in capacity score in at least one area of support	By their nature, organisational assessment (OA) tools tend to generate quantitative indicators. The challenge is to enable a level of consistency of information collection and analysis that will make such indicators useful.
Outcome mapping *(Outcome mapping relies on the development of a series of progress markers at different levels of ambition)*	• % of partners where at least 60% of 'expect to see' markers and 30% of 'like to see' markers are realised • % of outcomes (represented by 'expect to see', 'like to see' and 'love to see' markers) realised	These examples can be used across a portfolio even if every outcome map is individually tailored to different organisations. If the outcome map itself is consistent then specific indicators such as *'% of organisations that have developed gender policies*' can be used.
Tools that generate multiple change cases *(e.g. Most Significant Change (MSC), outcome harvesting, purposefully sampled case studies, etc.)*	• # and description of cases where partners have enhanced capacity to engage with their constituents • # and description of cases where organisations can demonstrate cultural or leadership change	If the methodology for producing stories is transparent and valid, and stories are properly generated, then general indicators such as this can be used and justified. If MSC is used then a 'capacity' domain can be used to aid summarisation.
Surveys / client satisfaction forms *(Surveys administered to partners on a regular basis can generate statistics, and allow a level of downwards accountability)*	• # of agencies that have been asked to contribute to public fora in the past year • Number of trained practitioners applying new skills effectively post-training • # and % of partners that are *'satisfied'* or *'very satisfied'* with support provided	If surveys are applied consistently then almost any question can be used to generate specific indicators. But to be valid the response rate for the surveys must be reasonably high, and responses should not be significantly biased.

While the examples shown above (many of which are taken from real-life programmes) are useful for reporting to donors, they will often reveal an incomplete or misleading picture on their own. Rather than telling the full story, indicators like these tend to show broad trends and anomalies that can then be investigated in greater depth.

For example, a series of organisational assessments could highlight areas of interest that could then be explored in depth – such as areas where a great deal of capacity change is being reported, or areas where things seem to be getting worse not better. Likewise, a set of outcome maps might reveal that very few organisations are achieving 'expect to see' changes but many are seeing change at a higher level. This may then be worth exploring more intensively.

Indeed, many cases have been documented where perceived increases in capacity have led to lower capacity ratings (because of enhanced awareness of an organisation's limitations) and there are also cases where capacity has increased but with no verifiable contribution from a provider. Numbers will tell one side of the story, but it is almost always desirable to perform more in-depth and focused qualitative assessment at targeted points to dig for deeper and more meaningful findings.

Assessing the cumulative effect

When working with individual partners it is sometimes possible to assess the effect capacity change is having on supported communities. The same could, in theory, apply to a programme of work.

If a capacity strengthening provider is providing support to a range of partners working in the same sector or location then it might be possible to show how changes in capacity are having a cumulative wider effect, such as changing perceptions of CSOs in a locality, enhancing livelihoods of targeted populations, or contributing to changes in civil society space. For example, a civil society support fund in Sudan was recently able to demonstrate that its work supporting the capacity of Sudanese CSO partners to proactively engage with local government had had a measurable effect on relations between government and civil society at all levels.

Of course, this is not always true. Some capacity strengthening programmes do not have clear, over-arching goals beyond capacity support. Indeed, many capacity strengthening providers argue that all they can realistically assess is change at partner level. Measuring how changes then ripple out more widely can be highly problematic in terms of the extra investment needed, issues of access to targeted communities or other target groups, and the fact that changes in the lives of targeted populations are subject to many contextual influences other than capacity change within a partner or set of partners.

One potential solution to this problem would be to carry out larger, multi-agency studies to assess cumulative changes resulting from different CSOs' capacity strengthening programmes. For example, it might be possible to assess how far systemic change had happened in the education or health sector in a country, and then identify the contribution of enhanced capacity amongst the CSO sector. Or it might be possible to assess whether CSOs within a country were being better represented within the media, or were perceived to be contributing to better governance.

If these kinds of joint studies could generate improved understanding of change at the macro-level, individual CSOs providing programmatic capacity strengthening support could then carry out their own M&E or research work designed to identify their own distinctive contribution to change. This could then result in better overall understanding of the value of capacity strengthening, and a better evidence base linking capacity strengthening support and improved developmental outcomes. Sadly, too few of these kinds of joint studies have been carried out to-date.

Further reading and resources

Some of the methodologies mentioned in the table on page 3 of this paper can be found by clicking on the links below. A separate paper in this section of the M&E Universe looks at some of the M&E tools used to support capacity strengthening work.

- **Organisational assessment tools**
- **Outcome Mapping**
- **Outcome harvesting**
- **Case studies and stories of change**
- **Most significant change**
- **M&E tools for capacity strengthening**

The paper by Rick James (2009) referenced below is available from the INTRAC website at https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Praxis-Note-49-Dealing-with-the-Dilemmas-in-Monitoring-and-Evaluating-Capacity-Building-Rick-James.pdf. Rick James has also published many other papers and blogs on capacity strengthening, which are also freely available.

An INTRAC paper by Simister and Smith is also available from the INTRAC website at https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Praxis-Paper-23-Monitoring-and-Evaluating-Capacity-Building-is-it-really-that-difficult.pdf. It is called *'Monitoring and Evaluating Capacity Building: Is it really that difficult?'*.

References

- James, R (2009). *Just Do It: Dealing with the dilemmas in monitoring and evaluating capacity building.* INTRAC, UK.

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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.