

M&E SYSTEMS FOR CAPACITY STRENGTHENING



M&E systems or approaches for capacity strengthening work need to be developed on a case-by-case basis. A good provider, working alongside a partner in a participatory way, often carries out good monitoring as part of the capacity strengthening process. When more than a few partners are involved it may be necessary to take a more systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

No monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system or approach is suitable for capacity strengthening work in all circumstances. This is partly because capacity strengthening initiatives vary widely. It is also because the nature of capacity strengthening work means that M&E processes need to be discussed and agreed between providers and partners.

The type of M&E required depends to a large extent on the scale of a capacity strengthening intervention. This paper deals with situations where CSOs provide support to a single partner, or to a limited number of partners. Another paper in this section of the M&E Universe deals with capacity strengthening programmes involving large numbers of partners.

Monitoring and evaluating a single capacity strengthening intervention

If capacity support to an individual partner is well designed and implemented, it should usually be easy to monitor and evaluate a single intervention. Indeed, in some cases, if capacity strengthening providers are doing their jobs properly, there may be no need for a formal M&E system at all. This is because a good provider should be aware of the needs of the partner, its sources of support, how it is responding to different methods of support, what is changing within the organisation, and what needs to change further.

In essence, a good capacity strengthening provider, working alongside a partner in a participatory way, should be undertaking regular monitoring as part of the capacity strengthening process. Providers often work with a limited number of staff within a partner organisation. This means that most people know what is happening through their ongoing involvement in the process. In these circumstances, a formal M&E system may add little or no value.

Of course, if capacity strengthening is not done well, or if capacity strengthening processes do not serve the needs of M&E, then additional M&E processes may be needed. For example, many capacity strengthening initiatives involve the generation of a formal strategy and/or action plan. In these cases there is little point in developing an additional plan for the sake of M&E. However, if a plan is not developed as part of the capacity strengthening process –

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.

either because providers and partners do not see the need, or through oversight – then one may need to be developed for M&E purposes.

The aim, whenever possible, should be to develop an approach that serves the needs of both capacity strengthening and M&E work, avoiding any unnecessary duplication, minimising additional workloads, and supporting the capacity strengthening process. In reality, this means that an M&E system or approach usually needs to be developed after a capacity strengthening intervention has been fully planned, and not beforehand.

The table on the following page lists some of the common components of an M&E system, and describes how capacity strengthening and M&E processes may be aligned, and where they may differ.

- The first column includes some of the normal steps taken when developing an M&E system for any social development initiative.
- The second column details processes that are normally carried out as part of capacity strengthening work, but that may at the same time provide information that can be used for M&E.
- The third column suggests additional M&E processes that may be required under different circumstances.

Alignment of capacity strengthening and M&E processes

M&E component	Capacity strengthening processes	Additional M&E processes
<i>Develop a Theory of Change and/or strategy</i>	Providers and partners need to know why capacity strengthening is being done, what it involves, how change is expected to occur, and how changes at individual or organisational level might contribute to any desired wider changes. This should be agreed and articulated at the start of an intervention, and then reviewed on a regular basis. Sometimes, providers and partners choose to develop a formal theory of change or strategy to capture this information. But sometimes it is a more informal or implicit process.	If a theory of change or strategy is not developed through the capacity strengthening process, it might be useful to develop one in case of staff turnover later on, or to provide to a donor or other external stakeholder. This should only involve capturing and documenting what has already been agreed. Sometimes, providers and partners might want to develop a logic model or pathway of change that can show linkages between capacity strengthening activities and wider objectives.
<i>Develop a plan</i>	A good capacity strengthening intervention should be based on a thorough needs assessment. This should focus on the current strengths and weaknesses of the partner, who or what needs to change, and how change might be brought about. Often this is done through some form of organisational or capacity assessment tool. Based on the needs assessment, a capacity strengthening plan and process is then developed, tailored to the partner's needs. The plan should set out who will facilitate the capacity strengthening work, what it will involve, and desired timeframes for change.	If a plan already exists then there is normally no need to develop an additional one for M&E purposes. Sometimes, additional sections can be added to a plan for M&E purposes (e.g. objectives, indicators, milestones, risks and assumptions) if not already covered within the capacity strengthening plan.
<i>Set objectives</i>	Objectives are usually developed as part of a capacity strengthening plan. Objectives may be set at different levels ranging from immediate changes in supported individuals' skills and knowledge, through to enhanced organisational capacity and performance. For some types of capacity strengthening (especially technical capacity strengthening) it might also be possible to set objectives at the level of targeted communities, or wider systemic change.	If objectives are already contained in a theory of change, strategy or plan there should be no need to add additional objectives for M&E purposes. Sometimes, M&E support can help sharpen up the language of objectives to make them easier to assess, or to enable providers and partners to more clearly identify whether, or how far, they have been achieved.
<i>Develop indicators or questions</i>	A capacity strengthening plan may contain indicators or questions, set against objectives. However, these may not be considered particularly valuable as part of the capacity strengthening process, particularly if objectives are already clear. Some methods used for organisational assessment contain in-built indicators and questions. These may be used for ongoing monitoring purposes. Indicators and questions are discussed in the following section of this paper.	In some situations it may be useful to develop indicators or questions (or add to existing ones) especially if needed to comply with the requirements of a donor or other external agency. Sometimes, M&E staff need to develop indicators or questions in order to assess change at the level of targeted communities, or wider changes resulting from a capacity strengthening intervention. Providers and partners usually know what is happening within the partner organisation, but may not automatically know how organisational change is translating into wider change.
<i>Develop a baseline</i>	By the time a capacity strengthening intervention starts, providers and partners should know the partner's history, current status, needs, sources of support and ambitions. This may or may not be written down. Sometimes, baselines are captured through a facilitated organisational capacity assessment or diagnostic exercise.	At the partner level, it may be useful to develop a descriptive baseline, if one has not already been written. It should not normally involve additional data collection or analysis, as this should already have been done as part of the needs assessment process. However, there may be times when additional baseline work is needed: for example, where a capacity strengthening intervention hopes to generate change in targeted populations; or where there is a need to assess individual staff needs prior to, or at the beginning of, training in order to assess change later on.
<i>Identify tools and methods of data collection and analysis</i>	Some tools will almost always be used as part of the capacity strengthening process, such as interviews, group discussions and observation. Other tools may be introduced to assess different components of capacity strengthening work, such	Supplementary M&E tools may be needed if a donor or other stakeholder requires additional information. M&E tools may also be introduced to assess change at the level of targeted populations, if required. For example, a survey may be designed to follow-up on a baseline, to

	as evaluating reactions to training, or assessing changes in attitudes or behaviour following workshops or events. These should be seen as an important part of the capacity strengthening process, providing information that helps support and refine the work.	demonstrate change at community level. A list of M&E tools used for capacity strengthening work is contained in a separate paper within this section of the M&E Universe.
Collect and analyse information regularly	Information should be routinely collected and analysed throughout the capacity strengthening process. Good capacity strengthening requires a constant flow of information, in order to respond to multiple influences. In most cases this will be done through normal processes, and does not need to be formalised.	It might be useful to conduct formal reviews at regular intervals, if not carried out already, and to write up the findings from these reviews. Again, however, this may be done as part of the capacity strengthening process in any case.
Learn and communicate	Most capacity strengthening processes designed to analyse and reflect on progress will enable joint learning to take place, and should assist decision-making. For smaller partners there may be no need to communicate information more widely as staff will already be engaged in the process.	Additional M&E processes may be required in larger partners to communicate results and learning to other stakeholders. These could include donors, host governments, head offices, trustees, board members, or other departments.
Report on progress and change	Reports may be developed by partners as part of the capacity strengthening process. However, in some circumstances these may be informal, and may be little more than minutes or records of meetings. If information needs to be communicated to wider stakeholders then it might be done through presentations or verbal briefings rather than formal reports. Reports may be required from capacity strengthening providers as part of the process.	If capacity strengthening work is externally funded then formal reports on progress will normally be required. These may focus on activities carried out, changes realised, contribution to change, and learning. Progress reports may be developed by providers or partners, depending on the circumstances.
Carry out an evaluation	A formal evaluation may not be required for an individual capacity strengthening initiative. However, providers and partners may want to schedule a formal review that examines the wider objectives of a capacity strengthening initiative. Formal reviews might focus on issues such as how far a partner's capacity has changed in the medium-term; whether this has had an impact on the partner's sustainability, performance or relationships; or whether there have been wider changes, such as changes in the lives of targeted communities.	Additional processes are most likely to be needed in two circumstances. Firstly, if an external evaluation is needed, in which case it will often be designed and implemented by someone who has not been part of the capacity strengthening process. This is often done at the behest of a donor. Secondly, if there is a need to evaluate the wider impacts of capacity strengthening work, such as change within supported communities. In either of these cases an external evaluator might be brought in to provide a more independent viewpoint, although evaluations can also be carried out by internal staff.

As can be seen from the table above, all the information needs of a capacity strengthening provider and partner can sometimes be served through the capacity strengthening process itself. However, there are times when additional M&E processes are required. Two key messages for CSOs engaged in capacity strengthening work are as follows.

- Do not automatically assume that a single capacity strengthening intervention requires a formal M&E system. Sometimes it doesn't.
- If additional, formal M&E processes are needed then design them to be carried out alongside capacity strengthening support processes wherever possible.

Indicators and questions

Within social development there is sometimes an assumption that indicators need to be developed for all interventions. In capacity strengthening work, indicators

can sometimes be useful. However, they can also be time-consuming to develop and collect, and are not always the most appropriate option. Other options are described below.

- **Specific objectives:** Many capacity strengthening objectives do not need to be clarified further through indicators, because providers and partners should know whether they have been achieved or not. For instance, if an objective is to ensure '*regular meetings between leadership and staff, with open and honest exchange of views*' then there may be little value in clarifying further through an indicator. Those most closely involved will know whether this is happening or not.
- **Quantitative indicators:** These are most useful when assessing measurable activities (such as the number of people trained, or the number of joint meetings held) or when the type of change resulting from a capacity strengthening activity can be accurately predicted. For

example, if one of the objectives of capacity strengthening is to diversify funding then it is relatively easy to develop indicators such as ‘amount of funding received’ or ‘number and type of funders’.

- **Qualitative indicators:** Qualitative indicators are more useful when there is a range of potential changes that cannot easily be predicted beforehand. For example, an indicator such as ‘enhanced involvement of programme staff in management decision-making’ is capable of capturing a range of different ways that programme staff can be involved in decision-making, even if the exact nature of those changes cannot be accurately predicted beforehand.
- **Progress markers:** Outcome mapping is increasingly being used to monitor capacity strengthening interventions. Outcome mapping relies on the development of a set of progress markers that identify tangible, behavioural changes in people affected by an intervention. Progress markers often range from those that providers and partners ‘expect’ to see as a result of a capacity strengthening intervention, to those they would ‘like’ or ‘love’ to see. This is described more fully in the paper on ‘M&E tools for capacity strengthening’.

- **Statements:** Some tools used to assess organisational capacity consist of models using a set of statements, which are rated or assessed using standard scales. A statement might be ‘the organisation always consults its primary stakeholders when planning an intervention’ or ‘the organisation regularly conducts audits of its finances’. These kinds of statements are then assessed at regular intervals, usually through joint discussions, and the results are used to monitor progress and make decisions.
- **Questions:** These provide the most flexibility. Questions may focus on what changed (e.g. ‘how well do partner staff feel they are consulted in decision-making’). Or they may focus on process issues (e.g. ‘which methods of capacity strengthening proved most effective over the past period’).

One of the ways in which an M&E system or approach can enhance the capacity strengthening process is to develop and promote a set of broad questions, used to review progress on a regular basis. The table below, for example, contains a small selection of questions, adapted from a much wider set of questions developed by Framework (2016).

A sample of monitoring questions for capacity strengthening

Area of capacity strengthening	Potential monitoring questions
Capacity strengthening plan and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the plan and process reflect needs identified in the original diagnosis? ▪ Are the objectives clear? ▪ Are the priorities clear? ▪ Are the plans and process sufficiently realistic and appropriate to the partner’s level of ‘maturity’ and context? ▪ Is the timescale and phasing of activities proving to be realistic? ▪ Is the plan and process ‘owned’ and understood adequately in the partner organisation? ▪ Does the plan identify connections between different activities? ▪ What else is happening in the organisation and external context that may impact on the original plans and process? ▪ How could the plan and process be improved? ▪ To what extent does the partner really own the need for change?
Use of inputs and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are the resources being used in the way that was intended? If not, why not? ▪ Are all possible sources of support being accessed? ▪ Is the budget proving to be sufficient for the planned work? ▪ Is the staffing of the work proving to be sufficient and appropriate? ▪ Have champions and sponsors for the capacity strengthening work been identified?
Implementation of activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What activities have been carried out in this past period, and with whom? ▪ Were all the planned activities carried out? If not, why not? ▪ Are any of the planned activities no longer relevant/needed? If not, why not? ▪ How well-organised and well-implemented were the activities? How could they be improved? ▪ What were the implementation challenges and how were these overcome? ▪ Have any new support needs been identified in this period? ▪ Is everyone involved in the process who needs to be? Are they clear about the part they are playing? ▪ Is external support still needed?
Short-term changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are the expected numbers of individuals making use of the capacity strengthening products/process? ▪ Are the users or participants the appropriate people to be involved? If not, how can engagement be increased? ▪ What are the participants/users saying about their experience of involvement with the products/process? ▪ What changes are happening in the behaviour and performance of individuals? Is this what was hoped for? ▪ What else is being observed in the partner that is an effect of the capacity strengthening work?
Longer-term change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the emerging longer-term organisational changes? ▪ Are these changes that were hoped for? If not, what more needs to be done? ▪ How are the longer-term changes contributing (or not) to the improved quality and effectiveness of programme work? ▪ What other (unexpected, unintended) longer term organisational changes are happening? How can these be built on?

These types of questions can be very valuable because they help capacity strengthening providers and partners think about not only what is happening (which they should know anyway through being part of the process) but also what is not happening, and why. The full tool is listed in the further reading and resources section at the end of this paper.

Working with a limited number of partners

As stated above, in most cases it is not hard to monitor and evaluate a capacity strengthening intervention with a single partner. There are exceptions – for example when capacity strengthening is intended to feed directly into work with large numbers of targeted individuals or communities. But in many capacity strengthening interventions, provider and partner staff are closely involved, and as a result should know what is happening.

It becomes a bit more complicated when a capacity strengthening programme involves more than one partner. However, if there are only a limited number of partners (perhaps less than 10) the M&E approach described in previous sections will normally be sufficient. In each individual case, capacity strengthening providers will (or should) have a close relationship with the partner, and information will be used on an ongoing basis to help support capacity strengthening efforts. M&E can still be facilitated through participatory methods, with each provider and partner choosing their own methods and approaches that best suit their own needs.

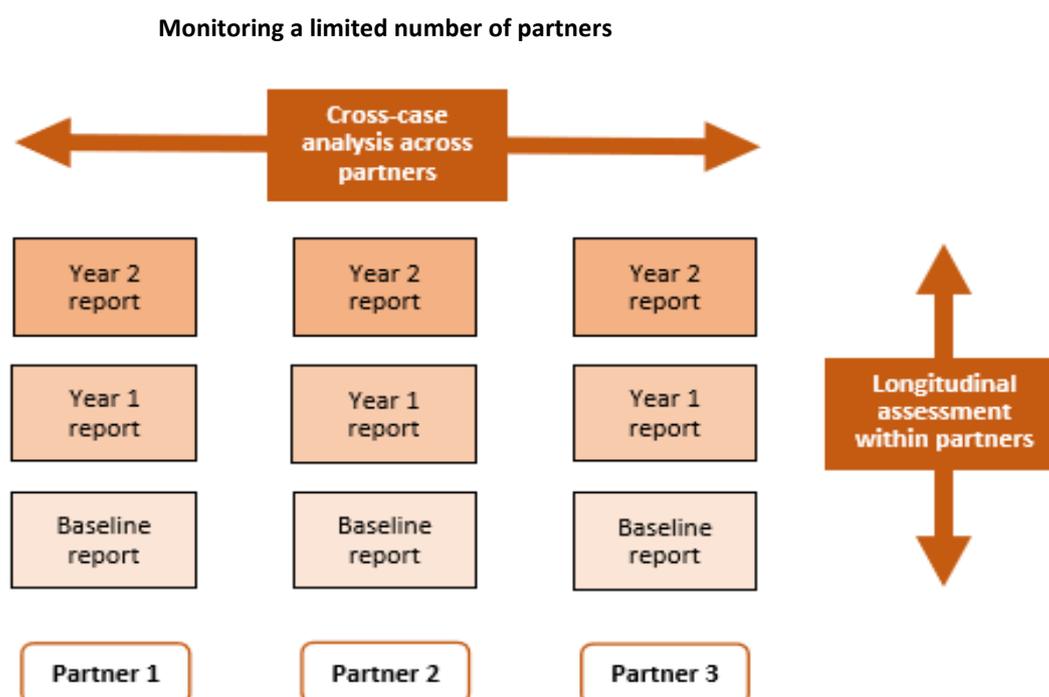
When working with multiple partners it may be useful to include some additional M&E processes, designed to facilitate cross-case analysis. The diagram below shows one way in which this can be done. Each provider and partner

monitors and evaluates their own capacity strengthening intervention together in their own way. A short, narrative (written) baseline report is produced, and progress reports are then produced on a regular basis (the diagram suggests annually, but the period could be much shorter if desired). In most cases, the baseline and progress reports would be developed by reviewing existing information, with no additional data collection or analysis necessary. A consistent format could be used for baseline and progress reports.

This would enable two things. CSOs providing capacity strengthening support, together with partners, could use the reports to help analyse change over time within individual partners. This is known as ‘in-case analysis’. At the same time, ‘cross-case analysis’ (see diagram) could be conducted across the different partners. This could, for example, enable providers to compare different situations at baseline, or contrast progress across partners at regular intervals.

This kind of system could also be used to help produce reports for donors if required. In some situations, the system could be expanded to perhaps capture some of the wider changes resulting from a set of capacity strengthening interventions. However, this would depend on how the programme was set up, and whether there were any overarching objectives.

Whilst this system might work for a small number of partners, it would generate a lot of qualitative data, and eventually it would become unwieldy. When a capacity strengthening programme involves more than a few partners it becomes necessary to take a more systematic approach to M&E. This is a much harder thing to do, and is covered in a separate paper.



Further reading and resources

The next paper in this series deals with the monitoring and evaluation of capacity strengthening portfolios (a capacity strengthening programme involving a large number of partners). A further paper looks at some of the tools used to monitor and evaluate capacity strengthening work. Other papers in the M&E Universe deal with organisational assessment tools and baselines. These papers can be accessed by clicking on the links below.



The tool referenced in this paper developed by Brenda Lipson and Bruce Britton for Framework, containing a series of monitoring and evaluation questions at each stage of the capacity strengthening process, can be accessed at <http://www.framework.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Grids-for-pme-in-template.pdf>.

References

- Framework (2016). *Monitoring & Evaluating Capacity Building: A practical tool*. Framework

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