

All development interventions are based on some form of design process, and most projects and programmes develop a formal written plan at the start. In many cases plans contain information on how monitoring and evaluation (M&E) will be conducted. The way in which a plan is developed and the content of the plan may vary significantly according to the type of intervention, and will have implications for how M&E is carried out at a later date.

A plan is usually a written document that describes the problems or challenges to be addressed by a project or programme, potential solutions, and what will be done to contribute to desired changes. Plans may be developed at many different levels. These include strategic plans based at organisational, regional, country or sector level; programme or project plans; and operational plans such as annual, quarterly or monthly plans and budgets.

Plans may be developed for a number of different purposes. Some plans are developed to acquire approval or funds from different internal or external stakeholders. Other plans may be developed specifically to guide implementation over the course of a programme or project, or to allow managers to supervise or control work. Plans may be developed as stand-alone pieces of work, or they might have to fit within wider geographical or organisational plans. They may be written according to the needs of an implementing agency or they may have to be developed under headings dictated externally. They might be designed to satisfy internal management needs or largely written for an external audience.

This can present difficulties for an M&E practitioner. Planning and M&E (PME) are very closely related, and ideally plans would always be developed to reflect as accurately as possible the relevant challenges and proposed solutions. Yet with so many different routes towards the development of a plan, and so many different motivations, there are bound to be cases where plans do not truly reflect the reality on the ground - either the nature of the challenge or the ability of an organisation to respond to that challenge. This is one of the key reasons why M&E practitioners should always be involved in planning processes wherever possible.

The process of developing a plan

For small organisations without external funders planning may be an implicit exercise resulting in little more than a few ideas on a piece of paper, or even in the heads of staff members. On the other hand, large organisations may have lengthy and complicated project/programme cycle management procedures that dictate how plans are developed and refined. But in either case the process through which plans are developed is likely to have a profound effect on future M&E work. This is for two main reasons.

Firstly, some of the key decisions on how to conduct M&E are taken at the planning stage (see section below). For example, objectives, indicators and the tools used to collect indicators are often identified at the planning stage, before a project or programme begins or near to its start. Decisions on whether and how to conduct a baseline also need to be taken near to the start of a project or programme, and the needs of final evaluations may have to be considered at an early stage.

Secondly, the way in which plans are developed will have many implications for the ownership of a development intervention, which is likely to affect the ownership of M&E processes later on. For example, if an organisation hopes to develop a participatory M&E system then by implication there needs to be some level of participatory planning. This might involve communities contributing to the identification of problems, the suggestion of solutions, the development of objectives and indicators and the identification of methodologies for collecting information. If the selection of objectives and indicators is not at least partially influenced by communities then it will be much harder later on to persuade them to get involved in the collection or analysis of information.

Equally, where programmes are carried out in collaboration there are implications for how plans are developed. For example, some intermediary non-governmental organisations (NGOs) develop programme plans and then invite partners to comment, whilst others seek to develop plans collaboratively with partners. In the latter case there will be much greater participation within the planning stages, and probably more participation within programme M&E processes as well.

“The decisions you take at the planning stage, and the way in which your plans are developed, are likely to have significant implications for how M&E is conducted. Start as you mean to go on.”

Planning tools and methodologies

There are many different tools and methodologies that may be used for project or programme design. Some of these are used purely for planning, whilst others may also influence how M&E is carried out at a later stage. A comprehensive list would run to many pages, and would be outside the scope of this paper.

However, some of the more common tools and methodologies used in planning, and how they might influence M&E at a later stage, are described below.

- *Context or situational analysis:* This is an analysis and description of the current situation and context surrounding the problem, challenge or opportunity a project or programme hopes to work on. A situational analysis would usually describe a situation in detail, focusing in particular on the primary stakeholders and how they are affected by the different challenges or problems identified. Findings from situational analyses are commonly used in baselines.
- *Visioning:* Visioning is a technique that helps stakeholders imagine and describe what an ideal situation would look like in a number of years time. Visioning is designed to be a starting point to help people think about the end situation, and therefore what immediate changes need to be pursued. It can also be very useful in helping people to collaboratively develop longer-term indicators of change.
- *Stakeholder analysis:* A stakeholder analysis is an analysis of the people, groups or organisations that may influence or be influenced by a project or programme. Stakeholder analysis often leads to decisions over which groups to inform, consult or control at different stages of the project or programme. Decisions on who to involve in planning, M&E may be taken during a stakeholder analysis.
- *SWOT analysis:* SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. A SWOT analysis is used to assess and describe the current situation regarding a project, programme or organisation in terms of its internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. SWOT analysis can be used at the planning stage of a project or programme but can also contribute to learning and decision-making during a project or programme.
- *Problem analysis:* A problem analysis is normally conducted with different stakeholders, and is designed to achieve consensus on detailed aspects of a problem or challenge. It involves identifying different problems and seeking as a group to look for cause-effect relationships. Problem analysis often ends up with a problem tree, which illustrates not only how problems are inter-linked but also what might be the root causes.
- *Objectives trees:* An objectives tree can be developed on its own, or it can be developed following the production of a problem tree through turning the problem statements into objectives statements. An objectives tree results in a series of objectives at different levels, with the relationships and linkages between them clearly identified. An objectives tree may have major implications for how objectives are defined within a project or programme, and how indicators and baselines are developed.
- *PRA/PLA:* PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) used to be called PRA (Participatory Rapid/Rural Appraisal). It is based around the participation of a broad range of different people, especially those affected by a project or programme. It consists of a large number of participatory tools and techniques. PLA/PRA can be used at any stage of a project or programme cycle, although it was originally designed to be used at the appraisal and planning stages. PLA/PRA is designed to gain an in-depth understanding of a community or situation, and is often used for M&E purposes. It is also a philosophy which emphasises the need for outsiders to learn about situations from insiders and encourages a reversal of power relations between communities and outsiders. Using PRA / PLA at the planning stage has huge implications for how a project or programme might be monitored and evaluated at a later stage.
- *Scenario planning:* Scenario planning is a strategic planning method designed to help generate flexible, long-term plans. It involves developing different pictures of how the future might evolve - scenarios - and then considering how a project, programme or organisation might need to change if those scenarios become reality. Scenario planning relies on effective monitoring and review mechanisms in order to be effective. Organisations need the will and the power to make changes rapidly in the face of changing scenarios, and appropriate monitoring and review processes to identify those changes.
- *Outcome Mapping:* Outcome Mapping focuses on changes in the behaviour of the people, groups and organisations influenced by a programme. Like the logical framework, it is a planning methodology that has implications for how monitoring and evaluation is conducted. However, Outcome Mapping is designed to deal with complexity, and is not based around linear models of change. Outcome Mapping comes with its own set of monitoring practices, based around the logging of change over the course of a project or programme.

The content of a plan

All plans differ, but there are often common elements that are contained in a strategic, programme or project plan. Some of these elements are contained in the box below.

Project or Programme Plan

Background and overview: The rationale and context for the project or programme. This can include: a summary of the findings from any previously undertaken situational analysis work; a summary of any key lessons learned during previous phases of the project/programme or other relevant work; a description of the geographic locations or sectors covered by the project or programme; the proposed timing and duration of the project/programme; and a description of the key target group(s) that it is hoped will benefit, together with a rationale for why they have been selected.

Goal, objectives and indicators: The objectives describe the specific, timebound changes that the project/programme intends to bring about within its scheduled timeframe. The goal may be a wider aspiration which is not necessarily timebound, and to which many organisations might contribute. Indicators may be defined against the project/programme objectives.

Project/programme design: The key working approaches employed to achieve the goal and objectives described above. This section could include relevant strategies and a description of key working approaches, and a description of how these might evolve over the period of the project/programme. It might also include a list of key deliverables, a description of key activities that will be undertaken over the course of the project/programme, and a brief description of the exit strategy if appropriate. In some cases a project or programme might also wish to describe how it is addressing organisational cross-cutting issues such as gender, disability or the environment.

Partners and stakeholders: A description of the main partners or organisations that will work on the project or programme, or with which the project/programme hopes to collaborate, together with any other key actors, and their role within the project or programme. This could include organisations that might be the target of policy influencing work, or whose support needs to be gained. In a larger programme, this section might also contain details of smaller projects run by individual partners.

Resources: A description of the resources that will be required to implement the project or programme. This will include human resources, financial resources and other support needs, along with an assessment of how these might change over the course of the project or programme. Other kinds of organisational implications might also be included in this section.

Risk assessment and management: The identification of the main risks and assumptions associated with the project or programme and how these will be managed. This section might also include notes on protection, staff security and any risks associated with partnerships with different groups.

Monitoring and evaluation: A brief description of how the project or programme will be monitored and evaluated over its lifetime. This should include a summary description of any baseline work conducted, any specific monitoring processes, details of any scheduled mid-term reviews, evaluations or impact assessments, key external reporting schedules, and details of how learning will be shared both within and outside the project or programme.

Annexes: A project or programme plan might also contain annexes containing more detailed information. This could include some of the following:

- A logical framework or equivalent planning tool
- A detailed budget for the project/programme as a whole, or the first part of it
- A detailed M&E plan, including an indicator matrix specifying who is responsible for collecting indicators against the main objectives, how they intend to collect them, and when
- An activity chart or Gantt chart outlining detailed activities to be carried out

Reviewing plans

Perhaps the most important thing when developing a plan is to recognise that almost all plans are at some stage blown off course by changing situations. A plan is a necessary document that should guide the implementation of a development intervention, but it is only a guide, and should not be allowed to dictate events. A good M&E system will seek to test the assumptions behind a plan and constantly review the plan in the light of evolving circumstances. A normal project or programme would be expected to review and update its plan many times over the course of its work.

Further reading

The next two papers in this series look at the influences that affect the design and implementation of M&E approaches, and the development of M&E approaches and plans.

Resources

Some other useful resources that cover a range of different planning tools and methodologies, some of which have been mentioned in this paper, are as follows:

- [Tools for Development: A handbook for those engaged in development activity](#), version 15 (2003). Published by the UK Department for International Development and available online.
- Gujit I. and Woodhill J. [A Guide for Project M&E](#). International Fund for Agricultural Development. Available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic.
- A series of *practical tools for international development* can be found at www.tools4dev.org.
- Gosling L. and Edwards M. (2003), *Toolkits: A practical guide to planning, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment*, 2nd edition. Save the Children, London. This book is available through the Save the Children website.

For this reason it is best to ensure a written plan is as short and simple as possible, whilst imparting the necessary information. This includes:

- being clear about the key messages;
- being honest about what it is a project or programme hopes to do or achieve;
- being clear and consistent in the use of language; and
- ensuring that staff joining the project or programme at a later date are able to adapt and change the plan as required.

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INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, INTRAC has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on monitoring and evaluation. Our approach to M&E is practical and founded on core principles. We encourage appropriate M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts, and we work with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs.

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