Developing an M&E Approach

INTRAC

Developing a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) approach for a simple project or small programme can be a fairly straightforward task. In these cases it is often possible to follow generic steps to develop a workable M&E system. But as programmes become more complex, and work becomes more complicated, it becomes increasingly important to tailor M&E approaches to the particular programme, organisation, sector and type of work.

It is virtually impossible to do any kind of development work without carrying out at least some M&E. This includes thinking and reflecting on what a project or programme is doing and what is changing as a result. Staff may also spend a great deal of time looking at the external environment - what is happening around them - and thinking about what else could be done or what could be done differently. Visiting partners, talking to staff or beneficiaries in the field, recording conversations, observing the behaviours of different stakeholders or even reading local newspapers can all be seen as types of informal M&E. These kinds of activities are indistinguishable from basic management tasks. Sometimes, that is all that is required and there is no need to develop a more formal or more complex M&E approach.

However, for larger projects and programmes, and for most work receiving external funding, a more formal approach to M&E will normally be needed. The first question to ask is who will develop that approach? It will usually be the task of an individual or a small team to facilitate the process. However, a wider range of stakeholders may need to be engaged in consultations, refinement or piloting. These could include different departments within an organisation, as well as partners and/or beneficiaries.

Decisions made at this stage are extremely important, particularly for larger projects and programmes, or those involving multiple stakeholders. The best technical M&E approach in the world is unlikely to be successful unless there is at least some level of wider buy-in and ownership. This might mean stakeholders simply being kept informed, or it might mean involving them in the design of the M&E approach itself.

Another question concerns when to develop an M&E approach. It is usually best to consider M&E at the earliest stage possible. However, for obvious reasons it is not normally possible to finalise an M&E approach until project or programme plans are clear and work has been approved. Even then, plans may be subject to continuous change, and M&E approaches may need to be revised many times over the lifetime of a project or programme.

Guiding questions

Before designing an M&E approach, it is useful to address a few key questions. These will help inform the development of the M&E approach.

- *Who* is this being done for? Is it for the team implementing the project or programme? Is it for higher management? Is it for donors? Is it for those intended to benefit from the project or programme? These questions will affect the design of the M&E approach, and may inform who should be involved in that design.

- *What* will be monitored or evaluated? Different stakeholders will have different interests and priorities in terms of the information they need from M&E. They may also have different criteria for what success looks like. For example, at one end of the spectrum a government funder may define success in terms of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – at the other end of the scale a rural woman might define success in terms of whether her life has got physically easier or not.

- *How* will the monitoring and evaluation be carried out? What resources are available in terms of time, money, people and expertise? Are there required procedures or processes that must be adhered to? These questions will shape the more technical areas of M&E – developing objectives and indicators, adopting different tools and methodologies, developing baselines, etc.

Other factors that might influence the design of an M&E approach are covered in the separate paper *Influences on the M&E approach*.

Developing a straightforward M&E approach

If a project or programme is relatively simple, and if M&E needs are likely to be straightforward, there are well-established guidelines that can be used to help design an M&E approach. These are covered on the following page.

Note that a project or programme may not need to implement all the different steps. However, it should at least consider whether or not each step needs to be implemented, and come to some conclusions.

Step 1: Identify the purpose	The first step is to identify the main purpose(s) of the M&E approach or system. This could include basic project or programme management. It might involve accountability to donors, supporters or beneficiaries. It might be to enhance formal learning and improve performance. Or it might be for marketing or fundraising.
Step 2: Identify who participates	Identify at the start who will be involved in M&E and at what level. Decisions on who to involve may be based on whether their involvement would result in better information, whether it would be useful for them, or whether they have the right to be involved. Participation may range from design to involvement in data collection, analysis and decision-making.
Step 3 Set objectives	Objectives should be set at different levels. This includes the products or services intended to be delivered, the initial hoped for changes that will be directly influenced by the project or programme, and the longer-term changes to which the project or programme seeks to contribute.
Step 4: Develop indicators	The indicators are the evidence which will help establish whether or not a project or programme has done what it planned to, and whether (or how far) the desired changes are taking place. Indicators are normally reported in terms of numbers (statistics, graphs or tables) or words (narratives, stories or explanations).
Step 5: Identify tools	Tools of data collection are used to help collect and analyse information in a formal way. There is a large array of tools available. However, most are similar, and are based on direct measurement, interview, observation or use of secondary sources. Tools may be linked formally to indicators, but might also be used to identify unexpected or negative changes.
Step 6: Consider analysis	The next step in the design process is to establish how analysis will happen. Formal analysis may be a simple exercise such as sitting down with a group of stakeholders and discussing what information actually means. In some cases, statistical analysis or complex qualitative analysis may be required, and this should be established at the start.
Step 7: Establish data use	Analyses can be used to adjust activities, change plans, inform future projects or programmes, share learning more widely and produce reports for different stakeholders. Data use is based on the needs of key stakeholders. A well-designed M&E approach will address at an early stage the mechanisms (including reports) to ensure that these different needs will be met.
Step 8: Plan an evaluation	Sometimes it will be useful (or necessary) to take stock of a project or programme in the middle or at the end. A formal review or evaluation is often facilitated by outside people who can give an unbiased opinion of what has changed to date and what has gone well or badly. Evaluations may be most effective when planned right from the start of a project or programme.
Step 9: Carry out a baseline	Baselines are carried out at (or near) the start of a project or programme, and are designed to establish a starting point so change can be compared at a later stage. Baselines can range from simple exercises to large and complex baseline surveys.
Step 10: Support the system	More complex projects and programmes may need a supportive framework to ensure that the right information gets to the right people at the right time. This may include facilitating training, developing information flows and feedback loops, or developing data storage systems. It might also involve working to establish a culture conducive to carrying out effective M&E.

Developing a more complex M&E approach

Inevitably there will be times when work is not so simple, and the M&E approach will need to be more complex as a result. Generally, the more complex a project, programme or organisation, the more the M&E approach needs to be tailored to particular needs. This can occur in individual projects or programmes. For example:

- Work in some areas is inherently difficult to measure, and there may be contested views about what constitutes success. In areas such as governance, conflict resolution and empowerment it may be difficult to find individual indicators that will allow performance to be assessed. In such cases the indicators, the tools through which they are collected, and the type of analysis may need to be much more sophisticated.

- In other kinds of work there may be industry-standard tools or methodologies that can be (or need to be) applied. For example, organisations involved in livelihoods programmes may be expected to use Household Economic Analysis surveys, whilst people working on HIV&AIDS programmes will be expected to understand the use of Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys. In these cases the selection of the tool will often come before the selection of the indicator - in other words a decision will be made to use a particular tool, and the indicators will be derived from that tool afterwards.

- Some types of work require methodologies that are not based so much around the identification and collection of indicators. For example, work involving capacity building or advocacy sometimes requires different ways of monitoring or evaluating change that are not necessarily based around pre-defined indicators.

- There may be times when demands from donors or other external or internal stakeholders mean a project or programme has little choice over which indicators to capture, what tools to use, or even how to analyse data. Equally there may be demands for particular kinds of evaluations which might take the scope of decision-making away from the project or programme itself.

When developing an M&E approach for a complex programme involving many stakeholders, or when developing an M&E approach for an organisational, country or sector strategy, the differences become even more marked.

- An M&E approach may involve developing broader frameworks within which setting objectives and indicators, carrying out baselines, conducting evaluations etc. will be carried out. In such cases the job of M&E design may be less to identify specific indicators and tools, for example, and more to provide different options and standards for others to develop them.

- There are likely to be many different teams or organisations involved in M&E at different levels, and the M&E approach will need to be very clear about which groups are responsible for which particular aspects of planning and M&E.

- As the complexity of a programme or organisation increases, knowledge management becomes more of an issue. It becomes necessary to rely more on systems and processes for sharing data and knowledge, and less on personal contacts and relationships. This may involve the development of sophisticated databases or management information systems (MIS).

- Learning may become more difficult to facilitate at programmatic level. It may be necessary to develop formal procedures to ensure that institutional memory is not lost, and that lessons learned in one part of a complex programme or organisation can be shared, or retrieved when required by others.

- Aggregation and summarisation may become more of an issue as programmes and organisations seek to summarise change across a range of different development interventions.

- M&E approaches will need to pay much more attention to the different levels within a programme or organisation. Projects, partners, programmes, sectors and countries need to be able to operate independent M&E approaches that nonetheless engage with each other to create an overall M&E framework.

- It will become increasingly important for M&E resources to be deployed strategically. This means directing a portion of M&E resources at those areas that are of most importance to a programme or organisation, rather than spreading resources equally across the whole programme.

- Above all, the more complex a programme or organisation the greater the need for supporting processes. These include training, induction and motivation for staff, as well as efforts to ensure there are sufficient budgets in place to ensure effective M&E at different levels. Increasing efforts may also be needed to instil a vision or culture within a planning and M&E framework that is conducive to effective data collection, analysis and use. Here the role of an organisation's leadership in supporting or facilitating complex planning, monitoring and evaluation processes is likely to be critical.

In such cases, M&E may not be simple at all, and considerable experience and skill may be needed to design, develop and manage an M&E approach.

"A complex programme or organisation is not just a large project. And it cannot be treated as such for M&E purposes."

Whilst the experience of other programmes and organisations may be useful, those tasked with designing an M&E approach in complex cases will frequently need to develop their own independent solutions in response to their own particular needs. An understanding of basic planning and M&E principles and procedures will obviously be necessary. But it will not be sufficient on its own, and the ability to adapt and innovate will be crucial.

Further reading and resources

Two other relevant papers in this series deal with *Influences on the M&E approach* and the development of *M&E plans.* These will be available from INTRAC website.

Two papers that cover some of the elements of an M&E plan or framework are a document written by Nigel Simister for INTRAC on *Developing M&E Systems in Complex Organisations* and a short document produced by Rick Davies entitled *What Should be Found in an M&E Framework / Plan?*

- Simister, N. *Developing M&E Systems for Complex Organisations: A methodology*, October 2009. INTRAC, UK.
- Davies, R. *What Should be Found in an M&E Framework/Plan?*, second Draft. Tuesday, 01 April 2008. Monitoring and Evaluation News.

Author: Nigel Simister, INTRAC Associate.

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.

We want your feedback:
Did you like what you read? Do you have any suggestions for our upcoming issues? Let us know!
Tweet us @intrac_uk, share your thoughts on our Facebook page (facebook.com/Intrac) or send us an email.

INTRAC Central Asia
107 Kievskaya (3rd Floor)
Bishkek 720001
Kyrgyz Republic
Tel: + 996 312 611402
icap@intrac.kg

INTRAC
Oxbridge Court,
Osney Mead, Oxford
OX2 0ES, United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851
info@intrac.org