MEASUREMENT AND ASSESSMENT

Some changes can be measured accurately and objectively. However, change within social development is often complex, and cannot always be measured easily. Commonly, CSOs need to rely on assessments of change instead. This involves analysing information from different sources in order to make an evidence-based judgement. Where even this is not possible, CSOs can use illustrations of change instead.

Within monitoring and evaluation (M&E) people often talk about measuring results, and refer to measurable objectives, or sometimes to measurable indicators. However, it is not always clear what the term *measurement* actually means. This paper considers measurement along with two related terms – *assessment* and *illustration*.

Measurement

Some things can be measured objectively. For example, outputs (deliverables) such as training conducted, wells built or children vaccinated can all be counted. Many outcomes (changes) can also be measured. For example, increases in crop yields, changes in the weight of children, and improvements in the quality of water sources can all be measured accurately provided a CSO has the appropriate resources, knowledge and equipment. Change in these areas can be stated as a matter of fact, without depending on interpretation, or examination of conflicting evidence.

When considering measurability, however, it is also important to consider different aspects of change.

▪ It is sometimes possible to measure certain aspects of a change but not others. For example, it may be straightforward to measure how often community representatives meet with local government officials, but difficult to measure objectively whether those meetings are resulting in better relations. Or it might be easy to measure how many people attended a training event, but harder to measure whether they learned anything useful.

▪ Even if a change can be accurately measured, it may be challenging to measure contribution. This is because changes are often influenced by many different agencies, as well as shifts in the wider political or socio-economic environment. For example, it is easy to state whether a policy has changed, or a topic is being discussed in Parliament. But it may be much harder to measure whether and/or how a CSO contributed to that change.

▪ CSOs often need to make a judgement on the significance or sustainability of a change. For example, it may be possible to measure how many women have gained employment in the formal sector through a livelihoods programme. But the value of this change might still be open to interpretation. Some people may see it as a good thing, others may be more sceptical.

If it is possible to measure a change accurately and objectively then it is usually the best form of evidence. This is because it is replicable – meaning that anyone using the same tools and methods should come up with the same measurements. However, it is always important to remember that some aspects of change may be measurable, whilst others are not.

Assessment

Where measurement is not possible, CSOs tend to rely on assessments of change instead. Assessment is a weaker word than measurement. It usually involves collecting evidence concerning a change (or contribution to a change), balancing arguments around whether, or how far, change has happened, and then reaching a considered judgement, based on the available evidence. Assessment is used instead of measurement in many situations.

▪ Sometimes it may be theoretically possible to measure a change, but a CSO does not have the resources or expertise. For example, it is always theoretically possible to measure the quality of water in a well or pond. But if a CSO does not have the right equipment to do so, or if it is too expensive, the CSO might instead have to rely on interviews with villagers to seek their opinions on whether the water quality has improved.

▪ Change in some areas of work is inherently difficult to measure. For example, in areas such as governance, conflict resolution or empowerment it is often difficult to identify simple, objective indicators that are capable of accurately measuring change. In such cases, CSOs often collect evidence through different methods and approaches, and then make a reasoned judgement based on that evidence.

▪ In some sectors of work (e.g. governance or climate change) there may potentially be many different agencies involved in a programme, and interventions may be spread across years if not decades. In these circumstances it can be very hard to measure individual contribution to change. Instead, CSOs tend to gather different forms of evidence and then analyse

that evidence in order to arrive at a considered assessment of contribution.

▪ Within social development, people often have different views about what constitutes success. Sometimes this means balancing different viewpoints not only about whether a change has happened, but also about whether it is a positive change or not. Often, CSOs need to make an assessment about the value of a change, even if the change itself is not in dispute.

Overall, the difficulty of measurement tends to increase as programmes become larger and more complex. In straightforward, timebound, service delivery projects it is often possible to measure change accurately. But as the size and complexity of a development intervention increases, so does the difficulty of finding cheap, effective ways of accurately measuring change. In larger, more complex programmes, CSOs inevitably fall back on making assessments of change instead.

Illustration

Sometimes it may not be possible or practical to measure change, nor to make a reasonable overall assessment. In these situations, CSOs often choose to illustrate change instead. Commonly, this means developing some case studies or stories of change that show how development interventions are affecting, or have affected, different stakeholders. This is done for two major purposes.

The first is to communicate change to different audiences. For example, a large survey of a population might measure changes in girls' enrolment or attendance in schools following a gender awareness programme. A few case studies or stories of change could then be developed to illustrate some of the changes the programme has brought about in girls' lives. These kind of case studies are normally done to help communicate in-depth change to different audiences, and are often used for fundraising, marketing or awareness-raising purposes. They may also be used to generate case studies that can feed into advocacy campaigns.

The second purpose is to provide a selection of changes that can be used to report against a broad framing indicator or domain of change. These are used when it is difficult to precisely predict the changes resulting from a piece of work. They tend to define an area (or domain) in which change is expected to occur. Examples could include *"changes in the lifestyles of women following an empowerment project"* or *"changes in the way people with disabilities are perceived in the community"*. These kinds of indicators are not usually designed to measure change or make an overall assessment. Instead, they are used to capture and bring together different examples (illustrations) of change under a common theme.

Sometimes, CSOs measure or assess change at one level, and then use the information to illustrate change at a

Case study: FCS in Tanzania

The Foundation for Civil Society (FCS) is an independent, Tanzanian, non-profit organisation that provides grants and capacity building services to CSOs in Tanzania in order to enhance their effectiveness in enabling engagement of citizens in development processes. One of the things FCS does is support communities to engage better with local government. In some cases, FCS and supported CSOs are able to measure changes in engagement at community level. More often, they make assessments of change based on different forms of evidence.

However, across Tanzania there are thousands of communities. It would be prohibitively expensive for FCS to undertake a giant study to show whether there has been an overall recognisable change across Tanzania, and to isolate its own contribution to change from that of other organisations working in the same sector or changes in the external socio-economic and political environment. Instead, FCS develops properly researched and validated case studies providing assessments of change (and FCS's own contribution to that change) at the local level, and then brings these up to the organisational level to illustrate the kind of changes it is influencing across Tanzania as a whole.

In this way, measured or assessed changes at local levels are brought up to the country level, where they are then used to illustrate change.

higher level. For example, a CSO could measure or assess changes in relations between communities and local politicians within a local project or programme. This would present an accurate picture of the kind of change that is happening within that locality. The resulting analyses could then be used to learn within the locality and/or report to the project or programme donors.

If the CSO does this in several places it could then write the results up into a series of case studies, and use them to illustrate change at a higher level (see case study above). This approach is commonly used where CSOs have quite ambitious global-, regional- or country-level objectives, such as improving relations between government and civil society, but do not have the resources to effectively measure or assess change at those levels, nor the ability to isolate their own contribution from that of others.

Summary

CSOs regularly talk about measuring change. But this may be neither possible nor appropriate given the complex nature of their work. Often, CSOs need to rely on assessments instead. This involves analysing information from different sources in order to make an evidence-based judgement. Sometimes even this is not possible, and CSOs need to fall back on providing illustrations of change. Whilst there are exceptions, a general rule is that the larger and more complex the programme, the more a CSO has to rely on illustration and assessment rather than objective measurement.

Further reading and resources

Other papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with two related topics. One deals with attribution and contribution, and the other focuses on uncertainty within M&E. These can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

▶ **Attribution and contribution**

▶ **Dealing with uncertainty**

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