DEVELOPING A PLAN

Most projects and programmes develop a written plan at the start. Plans often 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, also affect how M&E is carried out later on. Throughout a project or programme, information acquired through M&E can be used to regularly adjust and update plans.

A project or programme plan is usually a written document that sets out the activities a project or programme intends to carry out, what it is hoped will change as a result, and why those changes are important. Plans may be developed for many purposes, such as:

- acquiring project/programme approval or funding;
- guiding implementation over the project/programme lifetime; or
- enabling managers to supervise or control work.

Plans may be developed as stand-alone pieces of work, or they might fit within wider geographical, sector or organisational plans. They may be written according to the needs of an implementing agency or they may be developed under headings dictated by external agencies, such as governments or donors. They may be designed to satisfy internal management needs or largely written for an external audience.

For small civil society organisations (CSOs) without external funders, planning may be an informal 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 or programme cycle management procedures that dictate how plans are developed and refined. In either case the process through which plans are developed is likely to have a significant influence over future M&E work. This is for two main reasons.

First, some of the key decisions on how to conduct M&E are taken at the planning stage. For example, objectives and indicators are often defined during planning, either before a project or programme begins or near to its start. Decisions on whether and/or how to conduct a baseline also need to be taken near to the start of a project or programme.

Second, the way in which plans are developed is likely to affect M&E later on. For example, many CSOs encourage supported communities or groups to engage in planning processes. This often involves them helping to identify problems, suggest solutions, develop objectives and indicators, and identify the methods used to collect information. In these circumstances, they would expect to be involved in the collection and analysis of M&E information once implementation starts.

The content of a plan

There are many different kinds of plans. However, there are often common elements contained within programme or project plans. Some of these are described in the box below, and in more detail on the following page.

Contents of a typical project or programme plan

- ➔ The background and context of the project/programme
- ➔ The main geographic areas or sectors covered by the project/programme
- ➔ A description of the main target groups it is hoped will benefit
- ➔ The proposed goals, objectives and indicators
- ➔ Key working approaches or tactics
- ➔ Key activities to be carried out
- ➔ Details of important partners, allies or targets
- ➔ The human and financial resources required
- ➔ Key risks and assumptions
- ➔ A brief description of how the project/programme will be monitored and evaluated
- ➔ A detailed budget

It is important to remember that most plans are at some stage disrupted by changing situations. A plan is a necessary document that should guide the implementation of a development intervention. However, it is only a guide, and plans should regularly be reviewed in the light of emerging evidence or changing contexts. A normal project or programme would be expected to review and update its plan many times over its lifetime.

M&E plays an essential role in providing the information necessary to identify whether and/or how plans need to be adjusted over the period of a project or programme. It does this by:

- constantly checking that activities are being implemented as planned;
- assessing whether or not any desired changes are beginning to happen;
- identifying unexpected changes caused by the project/programme; and
- monitoring what is happening in the external environment.

Common Elements of a Project or Programme Plan

Background and context: A description of the main problem, challenge or opportunity a project or programme hopes to address, and the political, economic and social context in which it will operate. Sometimes it may be useful to include a summary of findings from previously undertaken situational or context analysis work, and any key lessons learned during previous phases of the project/programme, or other similar interventions.

The main geographic areas or sectors: A description of the geographic locations or sectors covered by the project or programme, and the reason for why they have been selected.

Target groups: A description of the key target group(s) that it is hoped will benefit from the project or programme, and the reason they have been chosen. Sometimes, it is also useful to highlight important sub-groups such as women, girls, people living with disabilities, or indigenous peoples.

Goal, objectives and indicators: The objectives are the specific, timebound changes that the project or programme intends to bring about within its scheduled timeframe. The goal is often a wider aim which is not necessarily timebound. Many other projects or programmes might contribute to the same goal. Indicators designed to assess progress against objectives may be defined at the planning stage, although they are often adjusted later on.

Key working approaches and tactics: The key working approaches employed to contribute to the goal and objectives described above. This could include relevant strategies, and a description of how working approaches might evolve over the period of the project/programme. This section could also include a brief description of an exit strategy, if appropriate. It might also describe how the project or programme intends to address any cross-cutting issues such as gender, disability or climate change.

Key activities: An overview of key deliverables, and a description of key activities that will be undertaken over the course of the project/programme.

Partners, allies and targets: A description of the main partners or organisations that will work together on the project or programme (if relevant), or with which the project/programme hopes to collaborate. This section could also cover organisations that might be the target of advocacy work, or whose support needs to be gained.

Human and financial resources: A description of the resources that will be required to implement the project or programme. This should include human resources, financial resources and other resources that the project or programme will need in order to be successful, along with an assessment of how they might change over the course of the project or programme.

Risks and assumptions: An outline 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 issues such as child protection, staff security, safeguarding, 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 could include a description of any baseline work required, any specific monitoring processes, details of any scheduled mid-term reviews or evaluations, 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 detailed budget for the project/programme as a whole, or the first part of it
- A logical framework or equivalent planning tool
- A detailed M&E plan
- An activity chart or Gannt chart

Planning tools and methodologies

Many different tools and methodologies can be used to assist project or programme design and planning. Some of them influence how M&E is carried out during implementation, or even prescribe how M&E should be conducted.

A few of the more common tools and methodologies are shown in the table below. However, these are only a selection. There are far more planning tools and methodologies than are covered in the M&E Universe.

"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."

Tool or methodology	Description	Implications for M&E
Context or situational analysis	An analysis and description of the current situation and context surrounding the problem, challenge or opportunity a project or programme hopes to work on. It often focuses on the political, social and economic factors that might affect the main target groups or communities.	Findings from situational analyses are commonly used as baselines. This means that changes later on can be compared with the situation at the start of a project or programme.
Stakeholder and/or power analysis	An analysis of the people, groups or organisations that may influence, or be influenced by, a project or programme. Stakeholder analysis often informs decisions over which groups to inform, consult or control at different stages of a project or programme.	Decisions on who to involve in participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation may be taken during a stakeholder and/or power analysis, based on the findings.
Problem analysis / objectives trees	A problem analysis is normally conducted with different stakeholders, and is designed to achieve consensus. It often ends up with a problem tree. It is quite common to then develop an objectives tree that includes a series of objectives at different levels, with the relationships and linkages between them clearly identified.	An objectives tree will influence how objectives are defined within a project or programme. Indicators may be defined against the objectives, and baselines may be developed showing the status of the objectives and/or indicators at the start of a project or programme.
PLA (Participatory Learning and Action)	PLA, also known as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal), is based around the participation of a broad range of different stakeholders, especially those affected by a project or programme, and includes a large number of participatory tools and techniques.	PLA can be used for M&E purposes as well as participatory planning. Using PLA at the planning stage has huge implications for how a project or programme might be monitored and evaluated later on.
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.	Organisations need to have appropriate monitoring and review processes to quickly identify how situations are evolving. They then need to be able to make changes rapidly in the face of these evolving situations.
Theory of Change	Theory of Change approaches can be used to enable and articulate a broad understanding of how change happens in a particular context, the role of an organisation in bringing about that change, and important assumptions. They often generate a results chain or impact pathway – a set of interlinked, desired changes at different levels.	Projects and programmes often choose to set indicators, or sometimes monitoring questions, directly against the change statements contained in a results chain or impact pathway.
The logical framework	A logical framework contains a set of objectives at different levels, and includes indicators against each objective. It also outlines the tools or methodologies that will be used to collect information on those indicators.	Projects and programmes often base their entire M&E system on the information contained within a logical framework.
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.	Outcome mapping comes with its own set of monitoring practices, based around the logging and recording of changes (outcomes) over the course of a project or programme.

Further reading and resources

The next two papers in this section of the M&E Universe describe the influences that affect the design and implementation of an M&E approach, and how to develop an M&E approach. Two other papers in the **Planning and M&E** section of the M&E Universe cover planning methodologies mentioned in this paper – the logical framework and outcome mapping. To access these papers directly, click on the links below.

Influences on the M&E approach

Developing an M&E approach

The logical framework

Outcome mapping

A useful resource that covers links between planning and M&E, and has extensive notes on planning for M&E, is the *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) project/programme monitoring and evaluation (M&E) guide*. At time of writing, this is available from the IFRC.org website, at https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/IFRC-ME-Guide-8-2011.pdf. Copies of the guide can also be found in many other locations.

INTRAC has produced a concise guide to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), intended specifically for use by small non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Written by Anne Garbutt, the toolkit is one of five produced as part of the Strengthening Small Organisations with Big Ambitions project (2021-22), which aimed to strengthen small UK-based NGOs working in international development. However, it can be used by any small NGO looking to develop their MEL practices. The toolkit is available at https://www.intrac.org/resources/monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-a-toolkit-for-small-ngos/.

Author(s):
INTRAC

INTRAC is a values-based, not-for-profit organisation with a mission to strengthen civil society organisations. Since 1991, 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.