DEVELOPING AN M&E APPROACH

Developing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach for a simple project or small programme can be a straightforward task. It is usually possible to follow a limited number of common steps. For more complex development interventions, the process of developing an M&E approach needs to be tailored to each individual programme. This is usually a much harder task.

It is impossible to do any kind of social development work without carrying out at least some monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This includes reflecting on what a project or programme is doing, how well it is doing it, and what is changing as a result. Project and programme staff also spend a lot of time assessing changes in the operating environment – what is happening around them – and thinking about what could be done differently.

Activities such as visiting partners, talking to project participants in the field, making notes following 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 often identical to basic management tasks. Sometimes, that is all that is required, and there is no need to develop a more formal M&E approach.

An M&E approach is sometimes called an M&E system, framework or plan. The terminology is not consistently used within social development.

However, for larger projects and programmes, and for most work receiving external funding, a more formal M&E approach is normally needed. The task of developing that approach is often allocated to an individual or a small team. But a wider range of stakeholders may need to be engaged in consultation, design, refinement or piloting. Stakeholders could include different departments within an organisation, as well as partners and/or targeted groups or communities.

Decisions on who should be involved at the design stage are important, particularly for projects and programmes involving multiple stakeholders. The best technical M&E approach in the world is unlikely to be successful unless there is a high level of wider buy-in and ownership.

A key decision is when to develop an M&E approach. It is usually best to consider M&E at the earliest stage possible. However, it is not normally possible to finalise an M&E approach until project or programme plans are clear, and the 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 consider a few key questions.

- ***Who will M&E be 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? Or is it for a combination of all of them? 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 may have different interests and priorities. 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 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By contrast, a rural woman might define success according to whether her life has got easier or not.
- ***How will M&E be carried out?*** Answers to this question will shape the more technical aspects of M&E, such as the identification of objectives and indicators, the selection of M&E tools and methodologies, and the development of baselines.

Other factors that might influence the design of an M&E approach are covered in more detail in a separate M&E Universe paper *Influences on the M&E approach*. They include:

- non-negotiables (such as reports demanded by donors or governments);
- the type of work being implemented, and the strategies used to bring about change;
- the nature of the organisation implementing the project or programme; and
- the resources available to carry out M&E.

Developing a straightforward M&E approach

If a project or programme is relatively simple, well-established guidelines can be used to help design an M&E approach. These are described on the following page. A project or programme may not need to implement all the different steps. However, it should at least consider whether each step is necessary.

Common Steps in Developing an M&E Approach

Step 1: Identify the purpose	The first step is to identify the main purpose(s) of the M&E approach (or system or framework). Purposes might include basic project or programme management; demonstrating accountability to donors, supporters or targeted groups; enabling formal learning in order to improve performance; or supporting marketing and fundraising.
Step 2: Identify who participates	It is important to decide who will be involved in M&E and how. Decisions may be based on whether their involvement would result in better M&E, whether it would be useful for them, or whether they have the right to be involved. Stakeholders may be involved at the M&E design stage, and/or later on in data collection, analysis and decision-making.
Step 3: Set objectives	Objectives are often defined at different levels. This includes the activities to be carried out, 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 a project or programme has done what it planned to, and whether (or how far) the desired changes have taken place. Indicators are normally reported in terms of numbers (statistics, graphs, tables, etc.) or words (narratives, stories, explanations). Sometimes, M&E questions can be developed as well.
Step 5: Identify tools	Data collection tools are used to collect and analyse information in a formal way. Many different M&E tools are available. However, most are similar, and are based on direct measurement, interview, observation or use of secondary sources. Tools may be selected to report on specific indicators, as well as to identify unexpected or negative changes.
Step 6: Consider analysis	The next step in the design process is to establish how analysis will be carried out. Formal analysis may be a simple exercise, such as sitting down with a group of stakeholders and discussing progress based on M&E data. In some cases, however, statistical analysis or complex qualitative analysis may be required. This should be established at the start.
Step 7: Ensure data use	M&E data can be used for many purposes. Sometimes, mechanisms are needed to ensure that these purposes are met. Examples could include regular accountability reports for donors, stakeholder review meetings to jointly learn and recommend changes, or newsletters for staff and/or supporters. These mechanisms help translate data and analysis into use.
Step 8: Plan an evaluation	Many projects and programmes hold formal reviews or evaluations in the middle or at the end. These are often facilitated by external people who can give an unbiased opinion of what has changed because of a project or programme, and what work has gone well or badly. Evaluations are most effective when planned right from the start of a project or programme.
Step 9: Carry out a baseline	Baselines are carried out near to the start of a project or programme. They are designed to establish a starting point so that change can be compared later on. They often focus on the objectives and/or indicators developed earlier in the process (see steps 3&4). Baselines can range from a few interviews and observations through to exercises involving large surveys.
Step 10: Support the system	A supportive framework often needs to be developed to ensure that the right information gets to the right people at the right time. This may involve designing training in M&E processes for project/programme staff or targeted groups, developing data storage mechanisms, or producing guidelines for data management.

More advanced M&E approaches

Sometimes, M&E work is not so straightforward. Many projects or programmes operate in difficult environments, or implement strategies that cannot easily be monitored through conventional methods. Generally, the more complex a project, programme or organisation, the more the M&E approach needs to be tailored to specific requirements. For example:

- Change in some sectors of work is very difficult to measure, and there may be different views about what success looks like. In areas such as governance, conflict resolution, capacity strengthening and empowerment it is often difficult to find simple indicators to assess performance. In these circumstances, indicators, the tools through which they are collected, and the way in which M&E data is analysed may need to be more sophisticated.
- Some types of work require M&E approaches that are not primarily based around the identification and collection of pre-defined indicators. For example, organisations involved in advocacy work often use M&E methodologies designed to capture emergent change.
- Baselines can be very useful for comparing the original situation in a project or programme with change at a later date. However, in some situations it may be hard to predict exactly what change will look like at the start of the project or programme. Baselines therefore become less useful, and M&E approaches which do not rely on baselines may need to be used instead.

In these situations, designing an M&E approach may become a more difficult exercise. Yet the task should still be relatively straightforward to manage, and the process described on the previous page can still be used as broad guidance.

M&E approaches in large programmes and organisations

By contrast, M&E approaches designed to support large, complex programmes or the work of entire organisations are never straightforward. There are many differences between these M&E approaches and ones designed for simple projects and programmes. Some of them are described below.

> This section of the paper introduces some issues that are amongst the most advanced topics in the M&E Universe. It is not intended for people who are new to monitoring and evaluation, and provides some introductory thoughts only. Readers interested in complex M&E approaches are directed towards the **M&E systems** section of the M&E Universe.

- In a complex programme, the task of M&E design may be less to identify specific objectives, indicators and tools, and more to provide different options and standards for others to follow. For example, guidelines for defining indicators may be produced. Or a list of potential indicators may be developed so that different parts of a programme can pick and choose which ones to use.
- As programmes become larger, it becomes necessary to rely more on systems and processes for sharing data, knowledge and learning, and less on personal contacts and relationships. This may mean having to develop databases or sophisticated management information systems.
- Learning becomes more difficult to facilitate in large programmes. Formal procedures may be needed to prevent the loss of institutional memory, and ensure that lessons learned in one part of a programme can be shared with others.
- Aggregation and summarisation become more important issues as programmes seek to summarise change across a range of projects in different sectors and locations.
- In large programmes spread across many different countries, M&E needs to be supported at multiple levels. Projects, partners, programmes, countries and regions need to operate their own M&E approaches that nonetheless engage with each other to create an overall M&E approach or framework.
- M&E resources need to be deployed strategically. This means focusing M&E resources on those areas that are most important, rather than spreading resources equally across an entire programme.
- The larger a programme or organisation, the greater the need for supporting processes. These include training, induction and motivation for staff. Programmes may also need to instil a vision or culture that is conducive to effective data collection, analysis and use. The role of an organisation's leadership in developing that culture is often critical.

When developing an M&E approach for large, complex programmes or across entire organisations, considerable expertise may be required. Whilst the experience of other programmes and organisations may be useful, those tasked with designing the M&E approach will frequently need to develop their own solutions in response to the specific needs of their programme or organisation. An understanding of basic planning and M&E (PME) 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.

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

Further reading and resources

Two other introductory papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with influences on the M&E approach and the development of M&E plans. Readers interested in further information on M&E approaches are directed to the section on **M&E Systems**, specifically the papers on *Project M&E systems* and *Overview of complex M&E systems*.

Many other papers within the INTRAC M&E Universe deal with some of the different elements of an M&E approach mentioned in this paper. These include papers in the **Planning and M&E** section on subjects such as setting objectives, indicators and baselines. Another paper in the **Data Collection** section describes some of the basic tools used to collect M&E data. All of these papers can be accessed directly by clicking on the links below.

Influences on the M&E approach

M&E plans

Project M&E systems

Overview of complex M&E systems

Setting objectives

Indicators

Baselines

Basic tools for data collection

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/.

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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.