INFLUENCES ON THE M&E APPROACH

Many factors influence the design of a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach. These include the purpose for which M&E is carried out, the focus of the project or programme, the nature of the implementing organisation, the available resources, and demands from external agencies. This is why M&E approaches need to be carefully tailored to the needs of each individual intervention.

At some stage most development interventions – whether a large, multi-country programme run by an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) or a small project based in a remote village – will need to decide how, when and where to carry out monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This means developing an M&E approach.

(i) An M&E approach is sometimes called an M&E system, framework or plan. The terminology is not used consistently within social development, and there is no commonly understood distinction between the different terms used.

It is almost always easier to make key decisions about an M&E approach during the planning stage of a project or programme, as there are more options available. For example, halfway through a project or programme it may be too late to develop a baseline that will enable change to be compared with a starting point.

Factors that influence the M&E approach

➔ Non-negotiables, such as donor or government requirements

➔ The purpose for which M&E is carried out

➔ The kind of work being implemented

➔ The complexity of the project or programme

➔ The extent of participation required

➔ The nature of the organisation implementing the project or programme

➔ The available resources for M&E

However, whether an M&E approach is developed at the planning stage or afterwards, several key factors may influence the way in which M&E is designed. In this paper, these have been grouped into seven areas. They are outlined in the box above, and are described in more detail below.

Factors that influence the M&E approach

Non-negotiables

Whilst it might be nice to have the freedom to develop an M&E approach from a blank sheet of paper, in reality there are almost always different stakeholders to satisfy. These can potentially be divided into two groups: external and internal stakeholders. *External stakeholders* often include powerful institutions such as donors and governments. They might also include project or programme partners. *Internal stakeholders*, especially within larger organisations, might include trustees, head offices, regional offices and country offices, as well as departments, such as marketing or fundraising departments.

All these different actors and stakeholders may have expectations concerning an M&E approach, and may make demands that need to be addressed. The nature of the demands varies. Some of the more common requirements are to:

- develop a specific planning tool (such as a logical framework);
- define objectives within broader donor, government or organisational strategic objectives;
- capture specific indicators;
- use specific tools or methodologies for data collection and analysis;
- develop case studies around different themes or subjects;
- facilitate external reviews and/or evaluations; and
- produce reports at specified times and/or according to fixed formats.

Demands from external and internal stakeholders are likely to have a significant effect on how M&E is conducted during a project or programme. In some cases, those designing an M&E approach can find that there is virtually no room for manoeuvre, and the M&E approach is almost completely defined by the different demands (see case study on the following page).

The purpose for which M&E is carried out

Sometimes, an M&E approach is designed for one main purpose. At other times, M&E may be designed to serve multiple purposes. In either case it is always important to ensure that organisations are clear about how they intend to use M&E information before designing an M&E approach. An M&E approach designed to enable basic project or programme management will not necessarily be the same as one primarily designed to demonstrate accountability to governments or donors. Equally, an M&E approach designed to learn and improve will not be the same as one designed more to support marketing or fundraising.

The main purpose for which M&E is carried out always influences a range of decisions. These include how plans are developed, who develops objectives and indicators and how, the type of tools used to collect and analyse information, the extent of learning and sharing of M&E findings, and even how much money and time is spent on M&E.

The kind of work being implemented

M&E approaches usually depend heavily on the nature of the project or programme being implemented. In some sectors of work there are industry-standard indicators. For example, projects involving health or water and sanitation (WATSAN) may want (or be required) to adopt industry-standard indicators. In some sectors of work there are also standardised methodologies for data collection and analysis. These include Household Economy Analysis for livelihoods projects, and Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys for work in the field of HIV & AIDS.

The strategies used to promote change also have a very significant influence on the M&E approach. For example, the type of M&E methods used to assess service delivery projects are very different from those designed to assess capacity strengthening, policy influencing or community mobilisation work. Each type of strategy includes its own unique methods for collecting, analysing and using information, and these are often radically different from one another.

Many civil society organisations (CSOs) are engaged in running pilot or innovation projects or programmes, which are designed to find out if a new model or way of working is effective. Clearly, significant investment in M&E is required if a project or programme needs to learn enough to make informed decisions about how or whether to replicate work on a wider scale. By contrast, a project involving tried and trusted solutions – such as distributing mosquito nets to reduce the spread of malaria – may not need or want to invest nearly as much in M&E.

In humanitarian projects or programmes, an additional dimension is the timeframe in which support is provided. Humanitarian crises include sudden, natural disasters, such as floods or hurricanes, collapses in communities' livelihoods caused by droughts or famine, and violent conflicts. Humanitarian action can involve emergency relief work in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. However, it can also involve long-term work on recovery. Frequently, aid agencies provide support throughout a humanitarian crisis; the support evolving as the needs of the affected communities evolves. However, there are big differences between the kind of M&E needed in the emergency phase of a humanitarian crisis and M&E during recovery work.

The complexity of the project or programme

Some projects use tried and tested solutions to achieve their aims. For example, a project designed to support malnourished children might employ a feeding centre. Or a project designed to improve access to clean drinking water might involve water purification. In these circumstances it can generally be assumed that if the project is properly implemented then the desired changes should occur. The task of M&E is mainly to ensure that activities are carried out as planned and to appropriate standards.

However, some projects and programmes are carried out in relatively new fields of work, such as peacebuilding or conflict management, where the links between activities and desired changes may be unproven. Or projects or programmes may operate in difficult or rapidly changing environments. In both circumstances it can be very hard to predict whether or how planned activities will translate into desired changes. M&E approaches therefore need to be designed to continually assess the impact that a project or programme is having on its intended target groups, as well as what is changing in the surrounding political, social or economic environment. This enables findings to be fed back into programming to ensure that work can be adapted on an ongoing basis. This type of M&E is much harder and more expensive than the kind of M&E associated with simpler projects, where cause and effect is more straightforward.

The extent of participation required

From the point of view of CSOs, there are three main reasons to facilitate participatory M&E.

- The first is to generate better-quality information. Representatives of targeted groups or communities are often in the best place to ask relevant questions, identify changes in their local communities and contexts, and know how they are being affected by projects or programmes.
- The second reason is to empower supported groups or communities. This means they, rather than external people, lead the development process, develop their skills, and make their own decisions on issues that affect them.
- The third reason is to uphold the rights of supported groups or communities to be involved in decisions that affect them.

If participatory M&E is carried out for either the second or third reason, it is because CSOs believe it is the right thing to do, irrespective of whether or not it makes M&E easier or better. CSOs that follow a human rights-based approach to development, or are involved in community mobilisation, are more likely to engage targeted groups or communities fully in both planning and M&E processes. This is because they believe it is the ethical thing to do. For them, the involvement of targeted groups or communities in planning and M&E is non-negotiable. This is likely to have significant implications for how both planning and M&E approaches are designed.

The nature of the organisation implementing the project or programme

Clearly, the needs of a large, international NGO working across multiple sectors and countries are very different from the needs of a small organisation working without a donor in a single village (where there may in fact be no need for a formal M&E system at all). In general, the larger and more hierarchical the organisation, the more need for formalised planning and M&E approaches that assist internal communications, as well as supporting learning, accountability and project/programme management.

Another important factor is the ethos or culture of an organisation. Some organisations are very open to self-questioning – constantly asking themselves whether they are doing the right thing, whether they are making a difference, and what else they might be doing to bring about change. Such organisations are perhaps more likely to devote significant time and resources to M&E and learning than organisations that see themselves primarily as agencies contracted to deliver services for donors or governments.

The available resources for M&E

The level of resources available will perhaps have the biggest influence over the design of an M&E approach. It includes the capacity of staff to design or carry out M&E tasks, the number of staff available, and the time they have to devote to M&E. It also includes the amount of money available to facilitate external reviews or evaluations, or to buy-in M&E expertise from outside an organisation. Organisations with few resources may only be able to develop minimal M&E approaches. By contrast, organisations with significant resources will have many more options, and should be able to develop more comprehensive and sophisticated M&E approaches.

Summary

Many factors influence the design and delivery of an M&E approach. Some of these arise from within an organisation, whilst others are external. The influencing factors set boundaries on what can or cannot be achieved through M&E. And clearly, there are many potential combinations of factors. INTRAC believes that this means it is pointless searching for magic bullets or 'off-the-peg' M&E systems that will serve all organisations' M&E needs. Instead, M&E approaches need to be carefully tailored to the needs of each relevant project, programme or organisation on a case-by-case basis.

Ultimately, many CSOs need to draw a balance between developing planning, monitoring and evaluation approaches that serve their own needs, and trying to meet the needs of donors, governments and head offices. This is never an impossible exercise, but does often require careful navigation. One of the main purposes of INTRAC's M&E Universe is to support M&E practitioners' efforts in this area by describing the range of available options. But it is also important to recognise that developing an effective M&E approach is not always an easy task, and there is often a large gap between theory and practice.

Further reading and resources

Further papers in this section deal with the development of an M&E approach, and the development of M&E plans that describe how an M&E approach will work. To access these papers directly, click on the links below.

▶ **Developing an M&E approach**   ▶ **M&E plans**

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.