

RESULTS-BASED MANAGEMENT



Results-based management (RBM) is a performance management strategy that has increasingly been adopted by aid agencies. It has significant implications for strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation. RBM places the measurement of results at the heart of management. There are passionate debates about how useful or appropriate it is within social development.

Results-based management (RBM) has been around for a long time. It has become increasingly popular in the donor community, particularly since the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, where countries from around the world agreed to change the way in which donor and developing countries collaborated. There is no single, agreed definition of RBM, but a typical definition is as follows:

“RBM is a management strategy by which all actors, contributing directly or indirectly to achieving a set of results, ensure that their processes, products and services contribute to the achievement of desired results (outputs, outcomes and higher-level goals or impact). The actors in turn use information and evidence on actual results to inform decision making on the design, resourcing and delivery of programmes and activities as well as for accountability and reporting.” (UNDG, 2011, p2)

RBM consists of several different elements. These are described in the box below (see Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005; Mango, 2014).

Different elements of RBM

1. The identification of clear and measurable objectives.
2. The development of (usually quantitative) indicators to measure progress towards objectives.
3. The setting of milestones and targets associated with objectives and indicators.
4. The establishment of a monitoring system to regularly collect data and compare targets with actual results.
5. The use of evaluations to provide complementary performance information that is not available from monitoring systems.
6. The use of performance information for internal management accountability, learning and decision-making, as well as for reporting to external stakeholders and partners.

Increasingly, RBM has become associated with the use of linear planning tools such as the logical framework (or logframe) and with results chain terminology. A results chain is the sequence of results considered necessary to achieve desired objectives. This begins with inputs, which are used to carry out activities and deliver outputs. In turn,

these are designed to help bring about a set of outcomes that will eventually contribute to the desired impact.

RBM debates

RBM is hugely controversial within the social development context, and there are fierce debates about how appropriate it is in different circumstances. Supporters of RBM argue that it leads to greater accountability between different institutions – something that is seen as an inherently good thing. They also argue that the purpose of RBM is partly to enhance the role of strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation within management processes. Again, this is something most people would agree is a good thing.

Some supporters of RBM acknowledge that the ‘management’ side of RBM has often been overlooked. However, they see this as a failure of application rather than of RBM principles. For example, a United Nations Development Group (UNDG) RBM manual explicitly notes the flexibility needed to change activities and strategies when needed, in collaboration with a range of different stakeholders (UNDG, 2011).

On the other hand, some critics argue that RBM is often applied in a very rigid way, with a focus on the achievement of hard, measurable results. This can lead to several problems, described below and summarised in the box on the following page.

- **A bias towards changes that are easily measurable:** Targets and performance indicators may over-simplify development efforts by assuming that only verifiable and measurable facts are important, and other types of knowledge have less value (Eyben 2013). This may encourage agencies to focus on programmes seeking to bring about simple, measurable change instead of more complex initiatives with goals that are difficult to measure. As former USAID President Andrew Natsios commented:

“Those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable.”
(Van Ogenvalle et. al., 2012, p3).

Challenges of RBM if applied too rigidly

- A bias towards changes that are easily measurable
- Too much focus on short-term results
- Lack of recognition of different viewpoints
- Domination of debates within social development

- **Too much focus on short-term results:** A second potential problem is that RBM may encourage the pursuit of short-term rather than long-term change. In social development some changes take many years to materialise, and may be due to the contributions of multiple organisations. This does not always fit easily with the need to manage by results over short timescales. At worst, organisations may be tempted to manage on the basis of what has been done (which can usually be measured immediately) rather than what has changed.
- **Lack of recognition of different viewpoints:** RBM may not be so appropriate when working in areas where there are different views of what constitutes success. This is because RBM encourages a focus on measurable, unambiguous indicators and targets. By contrast, the reality in many social development programmes is that there are different interpretations of what success looks like.
- **Domination of debates within social development:** Finally, there is an argument that RBM has become too dominant. Some (e.g. Eyben, 2013) argue that whilst there has always been a tension between the need to manage complex processes of social change and the need to demonstrate results, the latter has become too dominant over recent years. In some circumstances, this has led to situations in which the measurement of simplistic indicators and targets has been seen as more important for decision-making than the judgement of key stakeholders involved in a project or programme.

INTRAC's own experiences over the past two decades confirm that many civil society organisations (CSOs) have come under increasing pressure to justify funding through the achievement of measurable results because of the RBM agenda. Large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating complex programmes may find it most difficult to conform to RBM principles, as it can be very difficult to measure results and summarise performance across different locations and sectors. This inevitably affects CSOs further down the funding chain, as demands and expectations are pushed downwards.

But the debate around RBM also reflects a divide between development practitioners wedded to RBM principles and those more in favour of adaptive programming. The latter often prefer monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches designed to address complexity, such as most significant change (MSC), outcome mapping and stories of change, whilst the former prefer approaches based on linear planning tools such as the logical framework, with an emphasis on quantitative indicators, milestones and targets.



Adaptive programming is a type of programming in which practitioners are encouraged to constantly adapt projects and programmes in the light of lessons learned and changes in the external political and socio-economic environment, rather than following a pre-defined path.

Summary

Many debates within the field of M&E are centred around how tools or approaches are applied, rather than their intrinsic value, and RBM is no different. Indeed, the principles on which RBM is based – greater accountability, more harmonisation, taking M&E seriously – are hard to dispute.

However, any system designed to manage by results is harder to apply in situations where change is intangible, difficult to measure, long-term or contested. This is the arena in which CSOs often operate, and it is perhaps not surprising that many (although not all) are suspicious of the RBM agenda.

Ultimately, the measurement of results should always play a part in management. Sometimes, this involves assessments of predicted, measurable change. But management is also about making value judgements about change, identifying unexpected or negative changes, monitoring the external environment, and constantly questioning what else could be done instead of what is being done.

RBM focuses most keenly on just one aspect of management – the identification and measurement of predicted change – and INTRAC believes it is important that this is balanced by other methods and approaches that enable more flexible and nuanced monitoring and evaluation of projects and programmes.

***"To measure whatever can easily be measured is okay as far as it goes
To disregard that which cannot easily be measured is artificial and misleading
To presume that what cannot easily be measured is not very important is dangerous
To say that what cannot easily be measured does not really exist is fatal"***

Source: Adapted from Yankelovich (1972)

Further reading and resources

Other papers in this section deal with logical frameworks and results frameworks that can be used in larger or more complex projects and programmes.



The logical framework



Programmatic results frameworks

Many organisations have developed manuals on Results-Based Management (RBM) and many are freely available on the internet. One such manual is the United Nations Development Group manual (see reference below). A critique of the evidence and results agenda by Rosalind Eyben is available from the Big Push Forward website.

- *Results-Based Management Handbook: Harmonizing RBM concepts and approaches for improved development results at country level*, United Nations Development Group, October 2011. This manual is available from: <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/unsdg-results-based-management-handbook>
- *Uncovering the Politics of 'Evidence' and 'Results': A framing paper for development practitioners*, by Rosalind Eyben, April 2013, is available from <http://bigpushforward.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Uncovering-the-Politics-of-Evidence-and-Results-by-Rosalind-Eyben.pdf>

References

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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.

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