RESOURCES FOR M&E

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems enable projects, programmes or organisations to define, select, collect, analyse and use information for a variety of purposes. To function properly an M&E system needs to be adequately resourced. Resources can be divided into three broad areas: finance, personnel and time. It is especially important to consider the time spent on M&E when running a participatory M&E system.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems enable projects, programmes or organisations to define, select, collect, analyse and use information for a variety of purposes. To function properly an M&E system needs to be adequately resourced. In order to establish the level of resources required it is useful to divide M&E work into two broad areas.

▪ Firstly, there are things a project, programme or organisation *has* to do. This includes M&E required for basic project or programme management, and any M&E required for accountability to donors or internal stakeholders, such as boards, trustees or senior management. This work is non-negotiable. Therefore, the only decision to make is the level of resources required to make sure the work is carried out to an acceptable standard.

▪ Secondly, there are things a project, programme or organisation *wants* to do. This might include M&E designed to generate learning in order to improve future performance, or demonstrate accountability downwards to partners and communities. In this case it is important to carefully balance the costs and benefits of an M&E system. This means making sure that resources devoted to M&E are appropriate, and could not be better spent elsewhere.

For the purposes of this paper, resources can be divided into three broad areas: finance, personnel and time.

Finance

Good M&E often costs money. The amount of money available for M&E significantly influences how an M&E system is designed and implemented. The costs of running an M&E system include (see Gosling and Edwards 1995):

• paying staff to collect, record, translate and analyse data;
• payments to staff responsible for training, support and supervision;
• payments to staff responsible for maintaining and/or modifying the system;
• payments to any external consultants required;
• administrative costs for items such as report forms, tablets, mobile phones or computers; and
• larger capital costs for premises, transport, accommodation, etc.

Some CSOs have designated budgets to cover M&E. Others do not, and include M&E costs in wider budgets. Indeed, it can sometimes be difficult to agree what an M&E cost is. Although it is relatively easy to cost a major exercise, such as a review, M&E workshop, evaluation or baseline survey, it is not always that straightforward.

This is because there is often a large degree of overlap between management and monitoring. Both require the regular collection and analysis of information on a day-to-day basis in order to effectively track resources and deliver activities and outputs. Many monitoring activities – such as visiting projects in the field, talking to beneficiaries, implementing complaints mechanisms, etc. – are indistinguishable from good management practices. Therefore, it is not always easy to decide what counts as an M&E cost, and what should instead be costed under project or programme management.

In addition, M&E costs are often hidden. For example, management information systems necessary for storing and processing M&E information may be included in organisational development budgets; goods such as computers or vehicles may be included in capital costs as they are used for multiple purposes; the salaries of staff who spend part of their time on M&E may be covered under project management budgets; and workshops or conferences that devote some of their time to M&E may be covered under general training budgets. This means it can be difficult to decide how much money is actually being devoted to M&E within a project or programme.

An often-quoted rule is that a project or programme should spend around 5-10% of its budget on M&E. However, this figure can vary enormously between different organisations. For example, a recent study of over 90 projects run by NGOs showed a range from 0% to 25% (ITAD 2014). In part, this may be because of the difficulty of deciding when to allocate costs to M&E, as described above. However, there are other reasons why costs vary.

▪ If a CSO is delivering services according to a tried and trusted formula it may need to spend a smaller portion of its budget on M&E – just enough to make sure that projects are on track, and delivering what they are supposed to deliver. On the other hand, if a CSO is implementing innovative or pilot work it may want to spend a much larger portion of its budget - perhaps up to 30 or 40% - in order to establish whether it is worth

upscaling or replicating the work elsewhere, and, if so, what changes need to be made.

- CSOs using M&E primarily for accountability to donors or governments may find that M&E systems can be run relatively cheaply. CSOs wishing to learn in order to improve performance, demonstrate accountability to service users, or engage in participatory M&E may find they need to devote far more resources to M&E.

- In some cases, CSOs may need to budget for unexpected costs, particularly when working in uncertain or complex environments. This is in case there is a sudden and urgent need to carry out M&E work in order to find out more about an issue. In these circumstances, the amount of money spent on M&E depends on how a project or programme progresses.

Clearly, it is not always easy to set or follow simple rules when allocating budgets for M&E. However, it is always important to ensure that an M&E system has sufficient funding to serve its core functions. If funds are insufficient then either more funding needs to be sought, or the ambition of the M&E system needs to be lowered.

Personnel

In any M&E system it is important to have sufficient personnel to carry out necessary tasks. At the bare minimum this involves data collection. It usually also includes other tasks, such as analysis, reporting, learning and data management. Within projects and programmes run by CSOs, M&E work is usually either carried out by project / programme managers, who spend some of their time on M&E, or, if the project or programme is large enough, by dedicated M&E staff. More rarely, M&E might be contracted out to a separate group, such as a research institute or consultancy service.

As well as the physical availability of staff, their capacity to carry out M&E tasks needs to be considered. This is important because it dictates what kind of M&E system can be implemented. It is essential to match the ambition of an M&E system to existing M&E capacity. Where intermediary NGOs work through partners it is also vital to understand the capacity of staff within those partner organisations.

Often there is a mismatch between what a CSO wants to achieve through an M&E system and the existing staff capacity. In these cases there are a number of possible actions that can be taken (see IFRC 2011).

- Staff capacity can be developed through formal or informal training. Formal training might include courses or workshops on M&E-related subjects, and can be facilitated by internal CSO staff or external facilitators. Informal training could include on-the-job guidance and feedback, and might also include peer-support and mentoring. Physical resources such as manuals or online-guides can also be used to enhance capacity.

- Sometimes, M&E support can be provided from within an organisation, programme or project. For instance,

an M&E unit within an organisation might provide ongoing help and assistance to programmes and projects run by that organisation, or by its partners. Or there may be significant M&E experience elsewhere within an organisation that can be utilised.

- Outside consultants can be employed. This may be to carry out a specific task, such as a baseline study or evaluation. But consultants might also be employed to support ongoing M&E tasks.

Sometimes, however, it is not possible to do any of these things. It may be hard to find staff of the required quality who are prepared to work in a remote area or for a limited salary. And there may be a limit to how far the capacity of existing staff can be developed. In these cases, as described above in the section on finances, CSOs, and those funding them, may need to accept a lower level of ambition for the M&E system.

Within projects and programmes it is also important to have someone with overall, designated responsibility for an M&E system. An M&E system does not run itself, and needs to be regularly maintained. This means making adjustments where necessary, and seeking to ensure that the system remains relevant. Overall responsibility could lie with a dedicated M&E staff member, a project or programme manager, a team or working group, or even an external, independent or semi-independent M&E unit. This person or team should be responsible for the overall maintenance of the M&E system, and should coordinate with other individuals and groups as required.

Time

Along with finance and personnel, the third resource element is *time*. If people carrying out M&E tasks within a wider system are designated M&E staff than the time they spend on M&E is non-negotiable. It is what they are paid to do, and why an organisation employs them. If, however, staff are expected to combine M&E responsibility with other tasks then time becomes more of an issue.

Project and programme staff are usually expected to balance and perform multiple tasks. Time spent on M&E is time that cannot be spent elsewhere. If M&E tasks are necessary for project / programme management then CSO staff normally find the time. But M&E is often carried out for other purposes, such as supplying information to donors or head offices. In these cases, CSO staff may see M&E as less important than other, more urgent, tasks.

This means that it is important not just to consider the financial and personnel resources available to a project or programme, but also to consider the proportion of time that should be spent on M&E. Again, this is partly about matching the ambition of an M&E system to the available resources. For example, most CSOs say they want their staff to learn from M&E work in order to contribute to improved performance. But unless the CSO enables staff time for sharing and discussing learning it is unlikely to happen.

Participatory M&E

If a CSO implements its own projects or programmes then it can assess the level of resources needed within those interventions, and make plans accordingly. If working through partners, it may need to consider the resources required by its partners, including their staff capacity to carry out M&E tasks.

Some CSOs encourage full beneficiary involvement in planning, monitoring and evaluation. This is often done to build up local capacity in order to ensure the sustainability of a project or programme. Participatory M&E places extra demands on an M&E system. For instance, it may be necessary to train, manage and supervise community members. Or extra costs may be incurred in hiring skilled

facilitators to enable participatory M&E. Extra resources therefore need to be considered.

It is even more important that the resources of supported communities or beneficiaries are considered. Although they are not usually paid, community members may have to devote significant time to M&E activities. This may be time that could be spent productively elsewhere. Therefore, it is important to balance the costs to the community with the potential rewards. This is especially important if M&E is treated as an extractive exercise that uses community members to generate data, rather than a truly participatory exercise that empowers them to take more control over their own lives.

Further reading and resources

Other papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with two other subjects relating to resources: 'the supporting environment for M&E' and 'data and knowledge management'. There is a dedicated paper on participatory M&E in the 'M&E debates' section of the M&E Universe.

▶ **The supporting environment for M&E**

▶ **Data and knowledge management**

▶ **Project M&E systems**

▶ **Participatory M&E**
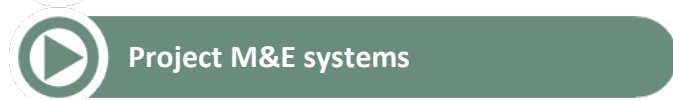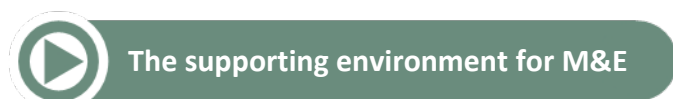
A guidebook produced by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (see IFRC (2011), referenced below) includes sections on human resources, capacity building and M&E budgets, and contains a lot of useful information.

References

- Gosling, L and Edwards, M (1995). *Toolkits: A Practical Guide to Assessment, Monitoring, Review and Evaluation*. Save the Children Development Manual No.5, London.
- IFRC (2011). *Project/programme Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Guide. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*. Geneva, 2011.
- ITAD (2014). *Investing in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: Issues for NGOs to consider*. ITAD, in association with NEF Consulting. Jennifer Chapman (ed.), March 2014.

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INTRAC

INTRAC is a specialist capacity building institution for organisations involved in international relief and development. Since 1992, 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.