Monitoring, evaluation and learning

A toolkit for small NGOs

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About the author

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This is part of a series of five toolkits for small charities released as part of the INTRAC programme "Strengthening Small Organisations with Big Ambitions".

Here you can access all of the toolkits including more accessible mobile-friendly versions

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Section 01: Introduction

We are all familiar with the Term Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) and have all engaged in MEL at some time during our day to day work e.g. reporting to donors, senior managers or clients. This toolkit offers managers and staff of small NGOs a set of tools aimed at helping them make Monitoring Evaluation and Learning an integral part of their work. How much an NGO is able to do themselves will depend on who is employed and what their skills are. If an NGO is managed fully by volunteers it may be necessary to seek advice from M&E specialists when designing an MEL system or using tools. This tool kit is aimed at organisations that have some understanding of MEL but need further support in how to use the tools.

Different organisations require different MEL tools and this toolkit sets out the different phases in project/programme work to help them to determine which tools are appropriate at the different stages of a MEL system.

Monitoring and Evaluation is first and foremost about measuring change: what has changed as a result of the work we are doing. Learning is about how we use the information collected from our Monitoring and Evaluation and use it to inform and improve our work. Through Monitoring and Evaluation processes, we track the change our work has had on the lives of the people we are working for and should highlight to what extent the change has influenced our decision making. It is an important part of both improving our work and allowing us to celebrate how we have influenced positive change.

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1.1 What is Monitoring?

Systematic, regular collection of data on specified indicators during the lifetime of an intervention. It provides managers and the main stakeholders with information about progress against planned activities, budgets and objectives (i.e. Is the intervention doing what it said it would do - efficiently, to adequate quality?).

Monitoring is what we do on a day-to-day basis to help us manage our work and is mostly an internal process which we do for and by ourselves. Monitoring is linked to good planning. It helps us regularly assess whether the proposed objectives are being achieved, unintended changes are observed, and whether the work is on track. It also helps us identify problems and strengths that can be built on, and adapt the work to changing environments.

1.1.1 Why do we Monitor?

There are many reasons for monitoring. The main ones are:

- Measurement of change; both within our organisations and in the lives of our clients
- Accountability (upwards) to governments, donors, supporters, and organisation leaders and (downwards to supported groups such as partner NGOs, CBOs and targeted beneficiaries.
- Control and supervision - we monitor to ensure people carry out planned activities and/ or achieve expected outcomes
- Learning - we find out what works and what doesn't, and we also identify best (or worst) practice.
- Providing evidence for advocacy – we can generate evidence that can be used when carrying out lobbying or campaigning work.
- Public relations and fundraising – we are able to document anecdotal stories acquired through MEL processes.
- Resource allocation - we base funding and/or other resource decisions on the success or otherwise of the project or programme.

1.2 What is Evaluation?

The systematic assessment of the results (outcomes, impact) of an ongoing or completed project or programme at a specific point in time (usually mid-term and at project end). An evaluation often examines the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, impact and sustainability of an intervention. Evaluations are often completed by people outside the organisation who are perceived to be better able to provide an objective view.

1.2.1 Why do we Evaluate?

Evaluation is, like monitoring, an important management tool. It helps us to:

- Review our performance
- Make informed decisions
- Learn from experience
- Account for our actions
- Support accountability and learning at country level by providing stakeholders with the necessary information to assess the performance of the different activities and to learn and agree on ways of improving performance.

The timing of an evaluation can depend on a number of factors: as part of the funding cycle linked with the donor requirement that an evaluation be carried out prior to the release of further funds; or perhaps when a major challenge arises which was not anticipated and we therefore need to reflect objectively on the implications of the project/programme continuing.

Evaluation needs to be planned for and embedded within the management of a project or programme. It will be most effective if monitoring is regularly carried out and information is continuously collected and analysed.

1.3 What do we mean by a learning organisation?

A learning organisation is one that creates an environment which produces honest, accurate, high quality M&E information and where learning from mistakes as well as successes is valued and celebrated. This depends on the organisational values and ethos ie the character of the organisation.

> "The social process by which we develop knowledge, skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understanding and self-awareness."
>
> (Bruce Britton 2005, "Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity", INTRAC Praxis paper n. 3 , p55).

1.3.1 What do we need to do to create a learning organisation?

Bruce Britton identifies eight elements that an organisation needs to do in order for it to learn effectively (Bruce Britton: The Learning NGO, INTRAC Occasional Paper).

1. Create a learning culture
2. Gather internal experience
3. Access external learning
4. Have a communication system that allows information to circulate
5. Have mechanisms for drawing conclusions and identifying lessons
6. Develop an organisational memory
7. Integrate learning into strategy and policy
8. Apply the learning!

Section 02: Purpose of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

2.1 Defining the purpose of what we are doing MEL for

Before developing any MEL process or system we need to clarify the purpose; the following list highlights the most common reasons for undertaking MEL:

- Accountability (upwards to the donor or head office)
- Accountability (downwards to our clients)
- Control and supervision (of staff and volunteers)
- Learning from our work
- Improving our performance
- Project or programme management
- Providing evidence for advocacy
- Public relations and fundraising
- Resource allocation
- Measuring impact

In reality, most NGOs undertake monitoring and evaluation for many of the purposes listed above. How much emphasis is placed on each purpose will depend on many factors, such as the influence of different stakeholders, what the donor requires, the interests of individuals involved and what the NGO is trying to achieve. It will also be necessary to explore whether you have attributed to a change or contributed to that change to help decide what the purpose of your exercise will be.

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2.2 Attribution and Contribution

Attribution refers to an accurate measurement of how much an organisation was fully responsible for the change process brought about because of their intervention.

e.g. The organisation was the only cause of the change brought about in the target population. *An example of this would be if children's hunger levels dropped because the project provided lunch time meals every day.*

Contribution on the other hand is when a number of organisations or entities have all had some influence in bringing about change.

Many organisations will not have the capacity or resources to perform statistical studies or provide counterfactuals to identify their contribution. Therefore it may be better and more effective to provide a case study that shows a plausible link between their project and any changes that have occurred, exploring different stakeholders' views of how the change came about.

These participatory methods tend to rely on qualitative data collection, such as interviews, focus-group discussions and observations. A note of caution however is that they are seen by some as less rigorous than other methods of assessing contribution, and may be particularly subject to bias. For example communities may tell an organisation what they think it wants to hear and may over-emphasise the role of an organisation in contributing to change (White and Phillips 2012).

Section 03: Planning for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Monitoring Evaluation and Learning all need good planning and at the start of any project or programme it is essential that a plan is properly developed. The plan should include:

- **The rationale and context for the project or programme:** a description of the geographic location, the proposed timing, the target group with a rationale why they were selected. (Pest Analysis and stakeholder analysis)
- **Goals, objectives and indicators:** the goal is the wider aspiration of the project or programme; the objectives describe the changes the project or programme intend to bring about; the indicators identify whether progress has been made against the objectives.
- **Project or Programme design:** a description of key working processes, a clear description of what activities will be undertaken over the project period, including an exit strategy.
- **Key Actors:** This will include main partners, and other actors and their role in the project or programme.
- **Resources:** What resources the project or programme need for implementation, including human resources and financial resources.

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- **Risk assessment:** What are the risks and how will the organisation manage them or assumptions associated with the project or programme
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** this should include any baselines completed, how the project or programme will be monitored, when evaluations will be carried out, reporting schedules and details of how learning will be shared both within and outside the project or programme.
- **Annexes:** including a planning tool such as a logical framework, a detailed budget, a detailed M&E plan, an activity or Gannt chart.

3.1 PEST analysis

Why and when to carry out a PEST Analysis
A PEST (Political, Economic, Social and Technical analysis) should be performed at the initial stages of a proposed intervention or if a change is being considered. This will provide the context needed to develop a well planned programme.

In a PEST analysis, you examine four types of factors:

1. Political factors
2. Economic factors
3. Social factors (i.e. forces within society that shape the way people behave)
4. Technological factors and what is available

PEST: Key strengths and weaknesses

- Useful tool to collate information on the wider environment and how those factors will affect your stakeholders.
- Can prevent unexpected negative effects of the project coming from the environment that had not been taken into account when entering a new area.
- Can be difficult to conduct and may need an external facilitator to assist.

Download a PEST template here

3.2 Stakeholder analysis

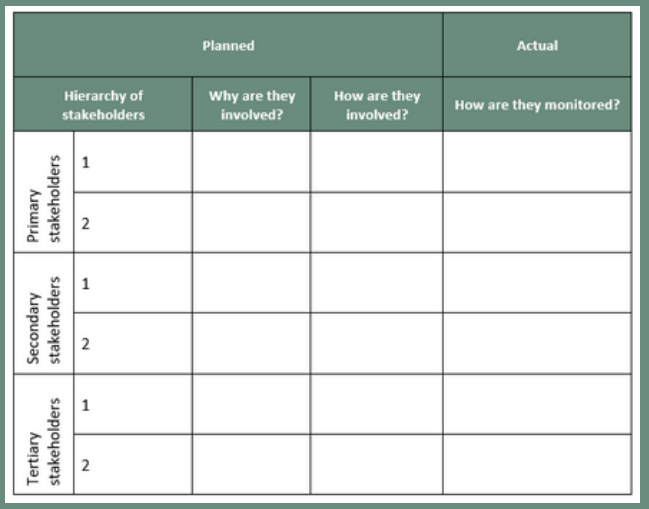
First identify your stakeholders – they will be groups of people, individuals, institutions, enterprises or government bodies that may have a relationship with or impact on your project or programme. There are differences in the roles and responsibilities of the different groups and their participation in decision making.

When to complete a stakeholder analysis

Stakeholders' participation is vital to the successful design and implementation of any project or programme. An analysis of stakeholders should be done at the outset to ensure we fully understand the influence they will have over our work. The analysis will identify and then categorise your stakeholders in a hierarchy of primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders. By categorising stakeholders in this way it becomes easy to see who and how they should be involved and when.

Primary Stakeholders include those whose interests lie at the heart of the project. These are the 'beneficiaries' or the 'target group' and are usually users of services your organisation provides.

Secondary Stakeholders are those with whom an organisation co-operates to reach the primary target group e.g. statutory agencies, voluntary groups, private sector organisations and potential co-funders. These stakeholders provide the main support, and they will usually be project/programme partners.



		Planned			Actual
	Hierarchy of stakeholders		Why are they involved?	How are they involved?	How are they monitored?
Primary stakeholders	1				
	2				
Secondary stakeholders	1				
	2				
Tertiary stakeholders	1				
	2				

Download a stakeholder analysis template.

3.2 Stakeholder analysis (cont.)

T*ertiary Stakeholders* may not be closely involved at the beginning but may be important in the long term eg suppliers, customers, contractors, financial institutions, legislative and policy making bodies, external consultants and trading partners. This category may not apply to some projects, but for on-going initiatives can be an important category as they will support the long-term sustainability of the benefits of a project or programme.

An analysis of how they might be involved can be undertaken and you can ask questions to help you consider how and when to involve particular stakeholders and which have the most to contribute and benefit from their involvement.

1. What are the stakeholders 'expectations' of the project/programme?
2. What benefits are they likely to receive?
3. What resources will the stakeholder commit or not commit?
4. What interests does the stakeholder have which may conflict?
5. How does the stakeholder regard other categories of stakeholders?
6. What other things do stakeholders think should happen or not happen?

Key Strengths and Weaknesses:

- Useful to provide information on the many stakeholders affected by your project.
- Can prevent negative effects of the project coming from stakeholders.
- Easy to do and create a feeling of inclusion for all concerned.

3.3 Theory of Change (often a donor requirement)

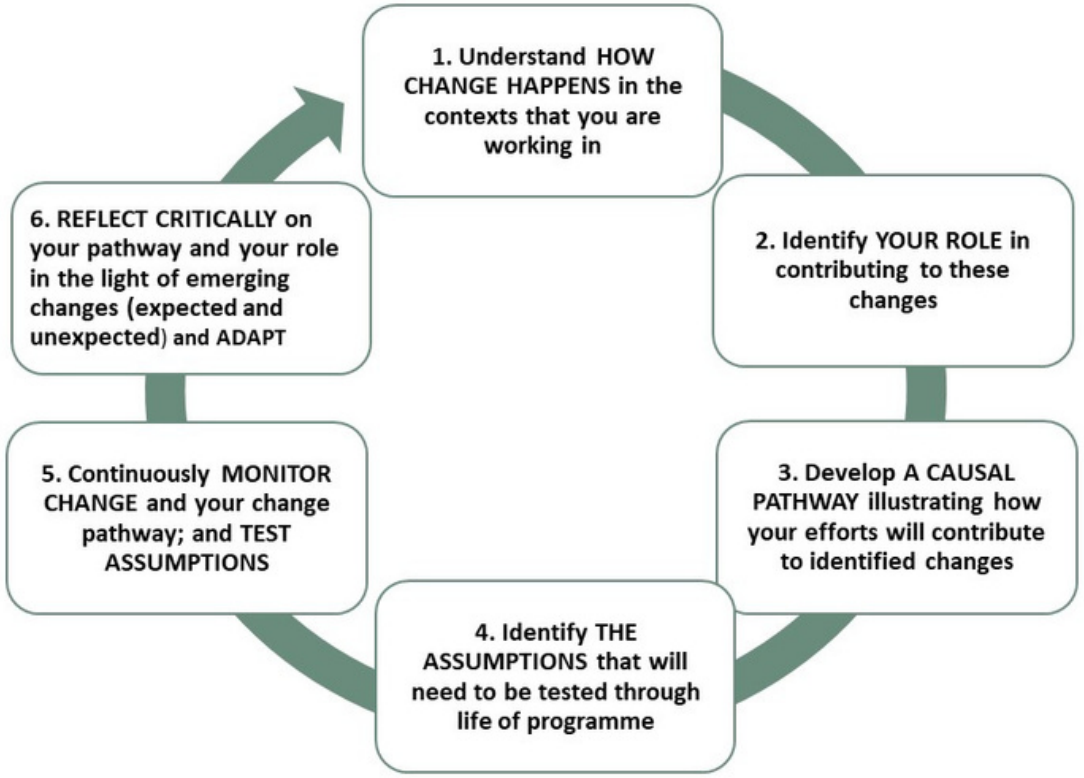
A theory of change is a clearly articulated testable hypothesis about how change will occur and the role of a project, programme or organisation in contributing to achieving change. It is an approach to programme design and planning that focuses on what we think will change, not what we plan to do. While the log frame captures a four step logic – input, output, outcome and impact, in reality the pathways through which change happens often have many more steps. These are often interlinked and can move both forward and backward and even skip steps. Theory of change has been developed to help capture that complexity and allows implementers to be accountable for results but also makes the results more credible because they were predicted to occur in a certain way.

3.3.1 Why use a Theory of Change?

Theory of Change needs the whole organisation or programme and their partners or collaborators to commit to a critical and honest approach to answering difficult questions about how their efforts contribute to influencing change.Theory of Change develops a common understanding amongst all stakeholders of what an organisation or programme is trying to change and how. The Theory of Change approach can:

- Strengthen clarity, effectiveness and focus of programmes
- Provide a framework for monitoring, evaluation and learning
- Help identify strategic partners and conversations around change
- Can be used to communicate work clearly to others
- Supports people to become more active and involved in programmes by explicitly dealing with long-held assumptions.

Theory of Change is a cycle of planning and critical reflection involving six stages:



For further reading on Theory of Change see the M&E universe Theory of change paper.

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3.4 Logical Framework (often a donor requirement)

The Logical framework is the most common planning tool used by small NGOs. It is the tool of choice for most statutory donors for planning and performance assessment. It was originally conceived as a planning tool aimed at supporting the management of small time-bound projects.

3.4.1 When to use the logical framework

The logical framework is used at the planning stage of any project to assist the project implementers to understand the logic of their intervention. Many donors require a logical framework to be developed before they will consider funding a project.

3.4.2 Why use the logical framework?

There are 3 major advantages to using the logical framework approach:

- It ensures that the project planners understand how the activities undertaken in the project relate to helping improve the problem the project is addressing.
- It requires the plan to consider how the progress of the project and its success (or failure) will be demonstrated.
- By listing assumptions, it takes into account external factors, beyond the projects control which may affect its progress.

3.2.4 Who uses the logical framework?

The logical framework should be completed so all stakeholders are involved in its development. It should be regularly revised through participatory reviews. The logical framework can be used by the management team to monitor the progress of the project. It can also be used by an external evaluator as a description of the planned objectives agreed at the beginning of the project.

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3.4.3 How to use the logical framework

The logical framework is based on a simple 4x4 grid that describes what a project or programme needs to do to achieve its goal by outlining a hierarchy of objectives:

- **The Goal/Aim:** The highest-level objective which an intervention is designed to contribute towards achieving.
- **The Outcomes:** The planned or achieved short-term and medium-term changes that occur as a result or consequence of an intervention's outputs.
- **The Outputs**: The tangible products, goods and services (and other immediate results) produced as a result of the activities carried out by an intervention.
- **The Activities:** The collection of tasks to be carried out in order to achieve an output.
- **The Inputs:** The financial, human and material resources needed to carry out activities.

Narrative summary	Objectively verifiable indicators	Means of verification	Assumptions
GOAL			
OBJECTIVES			
OUTPUTS			
ACTIVITIES			
INPUTS			

Download a logframe template here.

3.5 Setting objectives / goals

What is an Objective/Goal
An objective describes a change a project, programme or organisation wants to achieve by a planned development intervention. Objectives can be at multiple levels from broad strategic organisational objectives to very specific project objectives.

Setting good clear objectives makes monitoring and evaluation much easier and more effective. Below are the three main levels of objectives:

- **Goal/Aim or Impact** is the highest-level objective which an intervention is designed to contribute to (these can be positive and/ or negative, lasting changes produced by a development intervention) and could be produced directly or indirectly by the project and be intended or unintended changes (i.e. Did the intervention make a difference? To whom? Were there unintended effects?)
- **Outcomes** are the planned or achieved short-term and medium-term changes that occur as a result or consequence of an intervention's outputs.
- **Outputs** are the tangible products, goods and services (and other immediate results) produced as a result of the activities carried out by an intervention.

Developing objectives at outcome level are the ones that cause most problems. An important reminder is that outcomes need to be linked to the problem you want to address and what you need to do to achieve change (not what you are going to do).

- What is the problem?
- What do we want to change?

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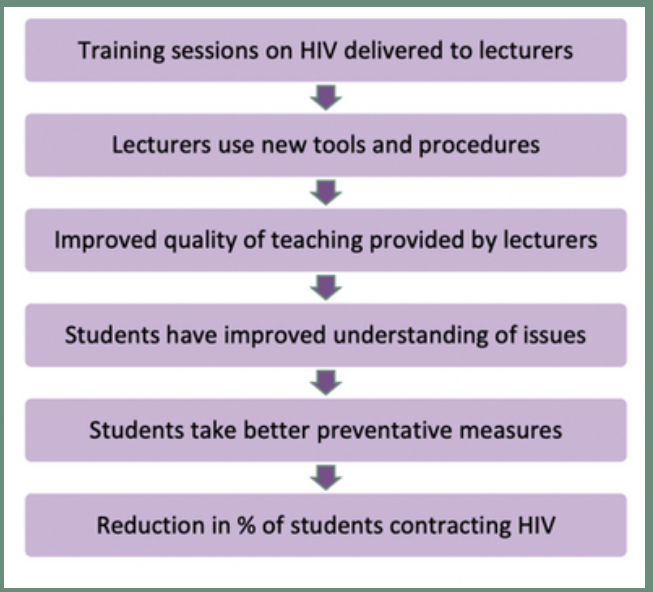
Output or outcome?

Here are a few examples of the difference between outputs and outcomes.

Output	Outcome
XX people trained • 100 women trained on child nutrition	People practicing desired action • 100 women feeding children varied and nutritious diet
XX Materials / funds distributed to relevant people • 50 savings groups receive $100 initial funding	Increase in income / wealth • Target group have increased income • Increase in practicing desired behaviour • Women effectively practicing savings / increase savings
Infrastructure completed / built • 10 water pumps completed	Infrastructure used • Water pumps effectively managed • 100 people access water from pumps
XX Meetings / events held • 10 meeting held with government leaders	Change in behaviour / policy of government • Government officials increase spending • Government officials change XX law

Developing Objectives
In any project or programme there is likely to be a hierarchy of potential objectives at different levels ranging from outputs or short-term, small-scale changes through to Impact or longer term wider changes. This can cause problems for project or programme planners when setting objectives at the start of a development intervention.

An example taken from the M&E Universe paper on setting objectives illustrates this using a set of objectives derived from an HIV&AIDS awareness-raising project. In this project, training sessions on HIV were given to university lecturers in order to enable them to provide better information to their students. In turn, this was expected to result in better understanding amongst students, and eventually changed behaviour, leading to lower transmission rates.



3.6 Developing Indicators

What is an indicator ?
A quantitative or qualitative variable, related to the objectives of a development intervention, that provides reliable ways of assessing (indicating) whether progress has been made or change has taken place.

Indicators are an important element of any monitoring and evaluation system. We can define an indicator as an observable change or event which tells us that something has happened. It is not proof but a reliable sign that the event or process is actually happening or has happened.

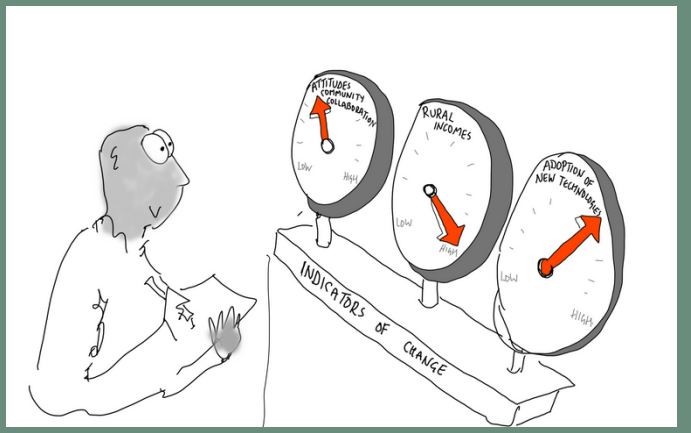
There are two types of indicators :

- Quantitative indicators are reported as numbers, such as units, prices, proportions, rates of change and ratios.
- Qualitative indicators are reported as words, in statements, paragraphs, case studies and reports.

Note that it is not the way in which an indicator is worded that makes it quantitative or qualitative, but the way in which it is reported. If an indicator is reported using a number then it is a quantitative indicator. If it is reported using words then it is qualitative

In addition to quantitative and qualitative indicators, there are also other kinds of indicators.

If you want to understand more on the different types of indicators please refer to the M&E universe paper on indicators.



Until recently, many indicators were developed according to the Quantity, Quality, Time and Place (QQTP) protocol. This meant that an indicator would be defined to be specific about these four elements, as in the example below:

Quantity	Quality	Time	Place
300 midwives	Trained in traditional birthing technicques	By the end of 2016	In Southern Uganda

Although many organisations still define indicators in this way, a new industry standard is emerging, where indicators increasingly appear as neutral statements (e.g. '# of new jobs created', not '50 new jobs created'). These indicators do not contain specific numbers, and should not include words such as 'increase', 'reduction' etc. The intention is to ensure that indicators remain as neutral criteria providing evidence of change, rather than targets to be achieved.

Whether neutral or not, a good indicator is still expected to be specific about time and place. It should be clear which target groups are covered by the indicator and what are the expected timescales for change. In the example above the quantity would be # of midwives.

3.7 Developing an MEL Plan

It is important to develop a formal written MEL plan at the beginning of any programme or project that identifies how the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning will be done. The plan should be linked closely to the strategic plan or project/programme plans. It is important to agree how MEL will be conducted at the planning stage for example how will you set objectives, what indicators will you be measuring, will a baseline be completed and what tools will you use collect the data.

It is also important to agree how plans will be developed as this will affect who gets involved in the monitoring, evaluation and learning processes. For example if you want a participatory MEL system then you will need to involve the communities in planning your MEL and how they will use it. They will need to identify the problems, helping with suggesting solutions and included in developing objectives and indicators. It will also be important to get communities involved in agreeing how the data will be collected particularly if you want them to do the collection and be involved in the analysis of the data collected.

You can download a MEL plan outline here.

Section 04: Data Collection Tools

All monitoring and evaluation activities require data collection at some point; there is a some inconsistency in the terminology used around data collection and this can at times be confusing. There are many data collection methods available so in this section we will look at a core set of basic tools used for data collection around which most methodologies are based. All these tools can be used at any stage of the project or programme from design to impact assessment.

Three key points to remember are a tool is a simple method for data collection, a methodology is a combined set of tools and processes that incorporate the use of multiple tools and processes. A template is a manual or electronic form used to record the data collected.

4.1 Traditional data collection tools

4.1.1: Interviews

Interviews can be carried out with an individual or a group of people and can be structured with a core set of questions or semi-structured also with a set of questions but giving the interviewer the opportunity to ask further questions as required.

Key strengths and weaknesses are:

- The interviewee can give their own account of the experience and its flexible for the interviewer to pursue other lines of enquiry.
- Interviews are time consuming, expensive, interviewer can influence interviewee.

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See also the M&E Universe paper on interviews.

4.1.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Facilitated discussions held with small groups of 6-12 people based around a short list of guiding questions, to explore in-depth information. FGDs are aimed at including people who may not be willing to speak alone or in larger meetings.

Key strengths and weaknesses are:

- Allow interaction between participants to be explored and a useful way of identifying hierarchical influences including gender differences.
- FGDs are time consuming, need to be sensitive to mixing hierarchical levels and cannot be used to make generalisations.

4.1.3 Observation

Observations can be direct (external observer watches and records) or participatory(the observer becomes part of the setting for a period of time). Observations can also be carried out as a participatory exercise where the clients are involved in the observation exercise.

Key strengths and weaknesses are:

- Provides descriptive information on the context and observed change.
- Dependency on the observers ability to observe and record accurately.

See also the M&E Universe papers on focus group discussions and observation.

4.1.4 Questionnaires/Surveys

Questionnaires designed to collect information from many people in a consistent way, often a printed form, where responses can then be coded consistently.

Key strengths and weaknesses are:

- Small NGOs should consider the cost verses the benefit of doing surveys at baseline, mid term and end line.
- It can be difficulty to get people to respond and clarity of responses often rely on clarity of the questions which are often asked by untrained local volunteers.
- You can however reach a wide sample of people anonymously and data compilation and comparisons can be easier.

4.1.5 Case Studies

A case study is a way of setting out results in a story that can be descriptive or explanatory providing in-depth information on a topic that has often been acquired through an interview or observation.

Key strengths and weaknesses are:

- Explanatory power when focus is on institutions, processes, programmes, decisions taken or events. They can also deal with a variety of evidence the come from documents, interviews or observation.
- Time consuming, may not be generalisable, difficult to do and can need specialist research and writing skills to complete them.

See also the M&E Universe papers on focus group discussions and observation.

4.1.6 Media Monitoring

Media monitoring encompasses a range of processes for tracking the appearance in the media of matters of interest (e.g. child labour issues). This is typically outsourced to an agency and increasingly employs electronic search technology.

Key strengths and Weaknesses are:

- Useful for tracking change related to advocacy efforts which is unpredictable.
- Cost implications if outsourced - only useful if high levels of analysis are applied.

4.1.7 Examining existing data

Existing data is available in National and local Government statistics, other organisations project reports, existing MEL data in other projects and published literature.

Key strengths and weaknesses are:

- Already available and requires little effort to collect.
- Reliability of the data can be questionable and the data is often out of date.

See also the M&E Universe paper on secondary data sources.

4.2 Questions guiding data collection

Deciding on which tools or methods to use can be more of an art than a science. Below is a short list of guiding questions to help decision-making.

What is the purpose of your Monitoring or Evaluation process?
What information do you need to answer your M&E question? Are you looking at Impact, Outcome or Output level?

Who are the intended users of the data that will be generated?
Will the methods/tools you select allow gathering of information that can be analysed and presented in a way that will be seen as credible by stakeholders?

What type of information do you need?
Do you want representative standardised information that could be comparable across locations? Do you want to examine the diversity or range of experiences, or tell a story of the change that has been brought about?

Who will you collect the data from?
Where and how can respondents be reached? How big is the target population? What is culturally and linguistically appropriate? Does the data already exist? Are they predominantly male or female? Depending on the context, some methods may make it easier for less confident people of either sex to participate effectively, for example, focus groups, interviewers of the same sex.

Notes

Who is collecting the data?
In some areas, for example, security issues or long distances to be travelled may make it more difficult for women or a person confined to a wheelchair to conduct interviews or focus groups.

How will you analyse the data?
What skills do you have available to you to do the analysis?

What resources are available (time, money, travel expenses, supplies)
What resources do you have? When are the results needed? What are your own (in-house) skills? Which methods can you afford to manage?

How intrusive will your selected method be?
Will certain tools disrupt the programme, or be seen as intrusive by your respondents? Is the data you need sensitive?

Think about the strengths and weaknesses of different methods and tools Review the trade-offs and compromises you have made and then decide what is/are the most appropriate tools or methods for your M&E needs.

Finally, remember to **double check the different decisions you have made** to make sure that the method or tool selected meets the overall purpose of the M&E exercise.

Notes

4.3 Use the 5 Ws to help decide which tools to use

- What information are you looking for? Is it quantitative/ qualitative? Is it sensitive? Is it about changes in knowledge, attitudes, practice?
- Who has that information? Women, children, excluded or vulnerable groups? Where is it? Is it easy to collect?
- When – can it only be collected or gained at certain times? What timeframes/deadlines are you working towards?
- Why are you using a certain tool? Is it the most appropriate/cost and time effective?

Don't confuse the technology e.g. paper, video, internet with the method – choose the method first (e.g. interview), then consider the best technology (or multiple technologies) to implement it.

Notes

4.4 Principles of remote data collection

Before collecting any data it is useful to stop and think and time/money are not wasted – principles:

- Keep things as simple as possible
- Plan the process before you start (data collection, collection and analysis)
- Make sure data is valid, reliable and credible.
- Think about the ethical issues
- Take data protection into account
- Switch from in person to phone interviews
- Collect photos directly from the community
- Change from focus groups to individual interviews
- Change budget from MEL visits to buying tablets or other technology

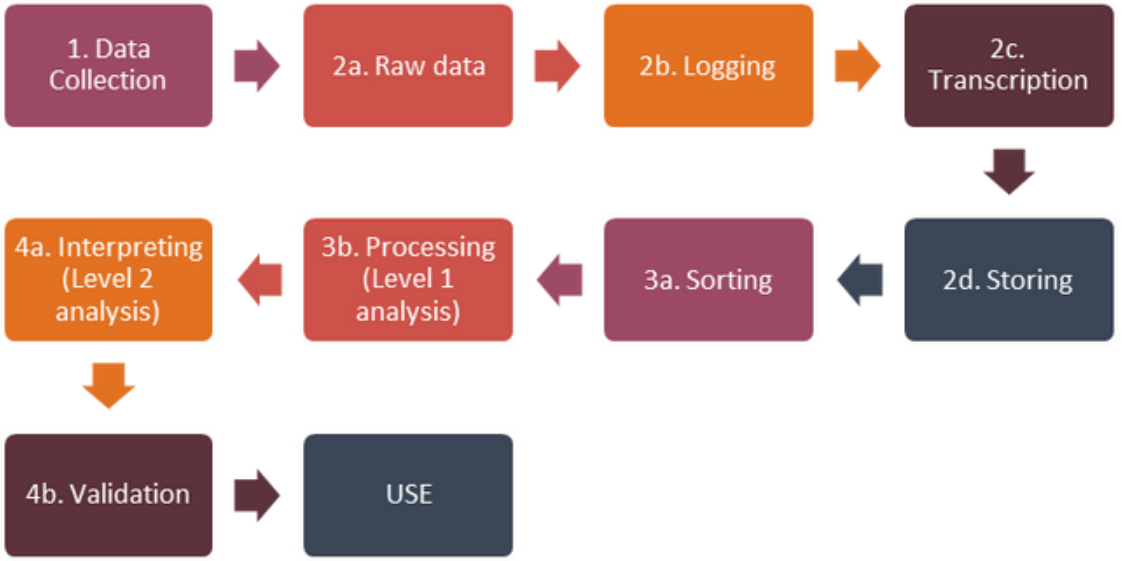
"If you collect information just because you think it might be useful for the future there is a very good chance it will never be used."

Notes

Section 05: Analysing Data

Once the MEL data has been gathered it can then be analysed and turned into evidence about progress and impact that can be reported, shared and used for both accountability and learning purposes.

The process below demonstrates that good data analysis requires a methodical approach with several very clear steps.



Each step needs to reflect the nature of the data collected.

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5.1 Create a raw data bank

To record all the different sources of data. This might include completed questionnaires, items of literature, notes from focus group discussions and interviews, media cuttings, observations from field work, notes from team meetings or meetings with stakeholders, and visuals.

5.2 Logging data

Each piece of information should be catalogued using a numbering and coding system. Use a table to keep a record of all surveys, interviews, meetings or focus groups. Make sure there is a record of when meetings or interviews took place, who was invited, who attended, who facilitated and who took notes. For documents, use a referencing system or electronic library to keep track of the sources, what they relate to, and where to find them. Any films or recordings should be downloaded and carefully catalogued including details such as respondent name(s), date, time and place.

5.3 Transcription and translation

The rough notes from interviews, focus groups and fieldwork need to be typed up; and transcribed and translated if necessary. The value of writing up everything is that data are then easier to handle, understand, copy and store. However, transcription and translation is resource-intensive (time and cost). Note that when writing up focus groups, observations about who said what, and how people of different gender and identity groups behaved and interacted should be included.

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5.4 Storing data

You will need a clear system for storing the data in paper or electronic formats, and that responsibility for the raw data is assigned. Raw data may be required for further analysis at a later date, or for verifying claims. Having a clear system is particularly important if the people who were responsible for collecting the data leave an organisation or change roles. Sensitive data, including personal information on interviewees, should be password-protected or encrypted. Make sure all electronic data is backed up.

5.5 Sorting data

The first thing you need to do is to get to know the data by reading (over and over again if necessary) and breaking it down into different components. There are different ways that data can be broken down:

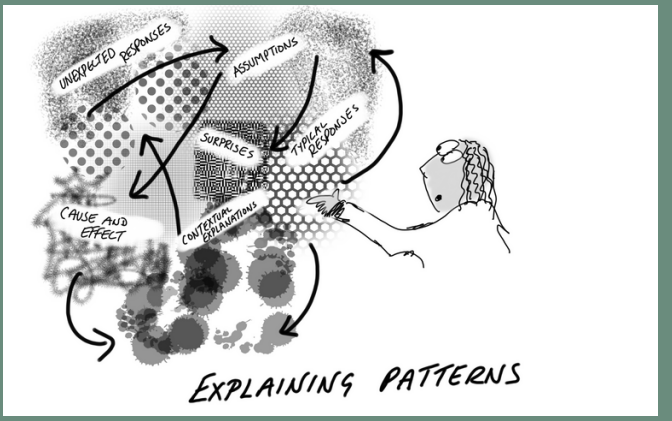
1. By type: quantitative (numerical information, responses to closed questions, pre-coded data), qualitative (words, statements, responses to open questions, narratives and stories from interviews), content (literature and other documents and texts).
2. By theme or area of interest, for example around evaluation questions, key lines of enquiry or indicators.
3. By respondent groups.

5.6 Processing the data (level 1)

Quantitative data: The analysis of quantitative data permits the ability to generate a broad picture around the research questions, to establish some basic patterns using percentages, averages and measures of spread. It also allows you to spot trends and interesting points for deeper analysis and outliers or unexpected findings. To draw some associations between different variables, e.g. X% of men of a certain age said Y about women participating in public life and to create visual representations of the data in the form of charts, graphs and figures.

Qualitative data: Qualitative data requires sense to be made of (often) a large volume of texts. These could be short responses to open questions in a survey, but each statement will be different because the respondent has used their own words. Or they might be transcripts from a two-hour focus group or interview. The analysis of qualitative data permits the following:

- To interpret the meanings of statements from respondents
- To draw out themes from multiple responses to open-ended questions
- To establish patterns across different types of texts
- To draw out statistical data from qualitative data, i.e. establish the percentage of people who mentioned a particular issue in response to an open-ended question
- To identify and explore single anecdotes that are worthy of further interrogation
- To identify stories that can provide rich depth to your reports or other outputs



5.7 Interpreting the data (level 2)

Evidence is generated by interpreting the patterns and trends in the data. This is done by putting the different bits of data back together again in order to make and substantiate claims. Essentially this step is about working out what it all means.

Explaining patterns: start by identifying patterns, associations and relationships between different clusters of data. What is the range of responses to key questions, e.g. how many people agreed or disagreed? What were the typical responses, i.e. those that came up most frequently? How strongly did respondents feel about the topic? Is there anything surprising or unexpected that challenges assumptions? What are the underlying, contextual explanations for the patterns? Can any cause and effect be identified? This can be approached from two different directions:

- Starting with the key lines of enquiry/questions/indicators: what is the relevant question or indicator that these data relate to? What is the answer that they provide? Do the data confirm expectations or are they saying something completely different?
- Starting with the data: What do the data seem to be saying, and does that answer any of the questions? This approach is less structured and allows the data to tell the story, which may be a different story to the one anticipated.

Triangulation: this involves putting together different pieces of evidence to justify claims about an issue or question, using different sources to show similar ideas, concerns and opinions. Pieces of data which contradict other pieces need to be handled with care. This might involve deeper exploration to tease out the contradictions, or it may just require a clear note/explanation in the report for future reference and study.

5.8 Internal Validation

This is a reflection step. It is a moment for stepping back and challenging the evidence drawn out of the data, the assumptions being made and the learning. It is also an opportunity to share preliminary findings and reflections with others and to get their feedback, as well as to draw out lessons for future reference.

Internal validation: spaces should be created for reflection amongst those collecting and analysing the data. It is particularly important to reflect on the quality of the data, including issues such as: researcher influence over the process; how data are being interpreted; contextual factors that might have affected the data but have not been taken into account; ensuring that generalisations are not being made that are not justified; and ensuring that alternative explanations are considered for the findings.

Thinking through the quality of the evidence is a part of preparing to write up the findings, and a way of preparing to respond to any criticisms of the data and claims.

The most straightforward way to deal with any anomalies in the data or evidence is to provide a very clear explanation of the methods used, the choices made, and how those choices may have affected the results. However, the raw data may need to be revisited or additional data may need to be collected to fill in gaps. In some instances, the data may just not be useable.

5.9 External Validation

External validation: the main challenges and criticisms of data and evidence are that they are not considered to be independent, credible, valid or objective. This is where keeping a very clear record of choices and actions throughout the M&E process or exercise becomes extremely important, providing a justification of what was done and how. It is therefore also good practice to build in an external validation process to:

- Share initial findings, key learning and ideas for action with other key stakeholders and get their feedback. This is an opportunity to check the accuracy of the findings, to test them and to check how they are being portrayed. This process is also about ensuring that stakeholders are involved in the analysis and can share in the learning process. This can be done through validation meetings or workshops, and through reporting initial findings in written forms.
- Take on board comments and ideas. Consider how to deal with any criticisms about the methods, problems with the findings, or gaps in the data. And finally document this process.

Section 06: Learning from the MEL data

Learning does not just happen. In order to nurture learning in an organisation we need to provide staff with:

- Incentives for learning
- Resources for learning
- Opportunities for learning (planned events AND informal 'water cooler' moments)

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Read Praxis Paper No. 3: "Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means, and Oppottunity" by Bruce Britton (2005)

6.1 How to encourage learning

However good the MEL system looks on paper, it is the motivation, commitment and understanding of the people using it that will make it succeed or fail. If poor quality or false information is fed into the MEL system, poor quality or false information will come out at the other end, however good the report looks.

An organisation needs to create an environment which produces honest, accurate, high quality MEL information and where learning from mistakes as well as successes is valued and celebrated.

In order for team members to share lessons learned from the MEL data they will need some basic competencies in reflective practice .

6.2 Competencies individuals need for reflective practice

These will, of course, depend on the individual's role in the organisation and the nature of the work but some generic competences can be identified in order to share learning effectively :

- Understanding their role and how it fits in to the wider organisation.
- Basic facilitation skills as well as inter-personal communication skills.
- Ability to analyse the outputs from monitoring and use these to identify trends or problems that require action.
- Ability to work in teams and take different roles in the team as required as well as being good at networking and relationship building.
- Understand how people learn and open to learning opportunities.

6.3 Characteristics of a learning organisation

An organisation which wants to become a learning organisation they should be able to demonstrate the following characteristics:

1. Learning is a legitimate activity and seen as an integral part of each individual's work responsibilities not to be done in their own time.
2. Learning is encouraged and supported and managers take responsibility to ensure that their colleagues are encouraged to contribute to the development of the organisation's practice and policy.
3. Learning is given adequate resources including time and funding.
4. Learning is rewarded. Mechanisms for rewarding, valuing and acknowledging organisational learning are in place.
5. The organisation aims to overcome its internal barriers to learning. Strategies for addressing internal barriers to learning, based on a systematic analysis, are devised and made clear to all members of the organisation.

6.4 How to become a stronger learning organisation

The following points will help any organisation and its partners to become stronger learning organisations:

- Identify barriers to learning and develop ways of overcoming them.
- Build learning goals into plans at all levels: individual, project, programme and strategic.
- Demonstrate the value of investing in organisational learning by monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and impact of organisational learning initiatives.
- Develop systems for acknowledging and rewarding learning.
- Develop mechanisms for establishing collective responsibility for results.
- Introduce a range of methods such as mentoring, coaching, action-learning and communities of practice.
- Create the 'space' for learning.
- Build learning into existing systems and procedures.
- Build learning requirements into project design, monitoring and evaluation.
- Build time and resources for reflection and learning into project and programme proposals.
- Use a system of annual meetings on 'what have we learned from evaluations?'
- Use thematic learning reviews.
- Involve staff/partners alongside external consultants in review and evaluation teams.

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Section 07: Evaluations

7.1 Introduction to Evaluations

An evaluation is the systematic assessment of the results (outcomes, impact) of an ongoing or completed project or programme at a specific point in time (usually mid-term and at project end). Often examining the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, impact and sustainability of an intervention. Many organisations are expected to do evaluations for their donors which is why we have added this section to the tool kit.

There are many types of evaluations including: Process; Formative; Summative; Developmental; Real-time; Utilisation Focussed; Impact etc. In this section we will focus on exploring the stages and processes that need to be included in any evaluation chosen.

In the INTRAC M&E Universe, you will find a paper on evaluation in general, and one of types of evaluations, which includes links to short papers on each of the different types.

There is also other information available online about all of these – a useful website for this is Better Evaluation.

The UK Evaluation Society (UKES) has also developed useful guidelines for good practice in evaluation, including for evaluators, commissioners, self-evaluation and evaluation participants.

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7.2 Stages in an evaluation

This section is aimed at helping NGO leaders to Manage an evaluation rather than do the evaluation themselves.

7.2.1 Agree purpose and scope

The first stage in any evaluation is to agree the purpose and scope of what is going to be evaluated which you will need to discuss with different stakeholders including donors, partners and project staff and be clear about who will be using the findings and make decisions based on the findings. The purpose may include: to improve the performance of a project or programme; to generate lessons for future programmes; o account for the resources that have been used and decide on a new phase; to inform policy decisions

7.2.2 Decide on type of evaluation

The second stage is to decide on the type of evaluation to complete - the links to different papers given in the introduction to this section will help you decide.

7.2.3 Identify who will be involved

The third stage is to identify who will be involved at which stage. For example, who decides the purpose of the evaluation and what type of evaluation will be used may be very different to who decides on how the analysis will be completed.

7.2.4 Developing terms of reference (TORs)

Stage four involves developing a terms of reference which includes an outline of the purpose, who will be involved, what will be evaluated and when the evaluation will take place.

You can download an editable sample ToR outline here.

7.2.5 Selecting the evaluation team

Stage five focuses on selecting the evaluation team who could be external MEL specialists, internal teams or a mixture of the two which can be more effective, particularly if working with different languages or cultural barriers.

7.2.6 Designing the evaluation

Stage six involves designing the evaluation based on the Terms of Reference and a review of project documents.

7.2.7 Developing a plan

Develop an evaluation plan which will include the evaluation team and the person identified by the organisation to manage the evaluation. Including:

- Who will be interviewed or observed
- How the evaluation will be conducted
- What methodologies for data collection will be used
- What process will be used to analyse the data
- A report format and any other dissemination plans
- A schedule of activities and a budget

7.2.8 Implementation

Stage eight is the implementation phase of the evaluation - collection of data using a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, the initial analysis of the data, identification of initial findings and recommendations and preparation of an initial draft report.

7.2.9 Presentation of initial findings

Stage nine is the presentation of the initial findings to a range of stakeholders in different ways. These could include a feedback and verification workshop with the participants who were involved in the evaluation, a learning workshop for the project staff and finally a report for the client or donors.

7.3. Good practice in evaluations

A good evaluation report needs to answer the four universal M&E questions:

- Has the project done what it said it would do?
- Has it done it well?
- What difference has it made?
- Has it done the right things?

- Identify who will use the evaluation findings before you start.
- Make sure senior managers are committed to the evaluation.
- Design dissemination strategies that include more than a report.
- Think about evaluation methods before collecting baseline data.

7.4 Questions to ask when managing evaluations

- What is the purpose of the evaluation (and is everyone clear on this)?
- Who has requested the evaluation?
- What data should be gathered and how?
- Who should be involved?
- Any key events to consider (staff availability, events, deadlines etc)
- How will the results of the evaluation be used? (who will be responsible?)

7.5 Tips for Managers who manage evaluations

- Have an Inception meeting with evaluators
- Ask for an Inception Report
- Have Regular engagement between the evaluation team and yourself during the evaluation
- Have an organisation point of contact from the project/ organisation
- Have an Evaluation Reference Group of key staff (and stakeholders) for key steps (Purpose, ToR, inception, key outputs)

Section 08: Reporting

8.1 Introduction

When producing reports for an external audience (i.e. for people who are not working within your project or programme, and perhaps not even within your own country), you need to provide enough information for other people to be able to make a considered opinion about the changes resulting from your work, and about any lessons learned. Here is a comprehensive list of the areas you should consider when reporting change.

8.2 Areas to be considered when reporting change

- Has there been change? Has anything changed since the project started? Are the changes positive or negative? Are there changes that were expected but have not happened? Are there any unexpected changes?
- How significant was the change? Some changes are relatively minor, whilst others can be life-changing. Explain the significance of the change.
- How many people were affected by the change? Sometimes changes are reported which have affected many people. At other times, you might be reporting a case study based on just one or two people
- Which target groups were affected by the change? Change does not normally happen equally across all stakeholders. Some may benefit more than others. A report should be clear about which particular target groups were involved in the change.

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- What was the impact on sub-categories or groups? A report should emphasise any differences between different target groups, if known. For example, some changes might affect boys more than girls, or affect people with disabilities only. Simply reporting on a general change across a large number of different groups might hide significant differences.
- Was the change intended or not? This can be an extremely valuable source of learning. Sometimes the most profound changes are those that were unplanned. Describing changes of this kind can provide valuable lessons to feed back into planning cycles.
- Is the change likely to be sustainable? Some changes might be long-lasting while others might be relatively short-lived. It can be useful to report how sustainable any change is likely to be and the risks or assumptions that might influence this.
- What made the change happen? What is your assessment of how the change came about? What were the key processes leading to it? This is important to report so that others can learn e.g. how to replicate the work (or avoid mistakes in the case of negative changes). Reporting on the key processes that led to a change also helps to substantiate any claim that the change was as a result of the project.
- How will the change result in positive changes in people's lives? Sometimes the implication of change is unclear to outsiders. For example, you might report that villagers have become more active in lobbying local government. Within your project the implications may be clear. But for an outsider you might need to spell out why you consider this an important change, and what you hope the ultimate long-term result (or impact) will be.

- How do changes compare to baseline (if any)? If you report that 75% of people in a location now have access to better health care, this could be considered as an extremely important change. On the other hand, the situation might be worse than last year! Wherever possible, a report describing change should detail the original situation so that people can understand how large or important the changes are. This applies to both quantitative and qualitative changes.
- How do changes compare to what was hoped for, or considered realistic? Equally, if you report that 15 health committees have now been formed in an area, the implication is that this is a positive change. However, if you planned to facilitate 100 such groups, this casts a different light on the information. It is therefore often useful to describe what was originally planned, so that people reading your report can see immediately the scale of any change relative to your expectations.
- What evidence do you have for your change? This is arguably the most important aspect to report when describing any change or changes. There is a world of difference between describing the findings of a professionally-conducted, large-scale research study, and reporting findings based on a conversation with a couple of villagers. The description of evidence does not have to be substantial. It is enough to make an introductory statement such as "the findings of focus-group studies in three villages suggested that … " or "anecdotal evidence suggests that … " or "independent research by government bodies has found that …". This will allow the reader to make up his/her own mind about the value of your evidence.

- There is no reason at all why anecdotal evidence of change should not be described in a report. Provided it is clear that the change reported is not based on rigorous data collection and analysis methodologies, impressions of change can still be useful. The danger comes when anecdotal evidence is reported as if it were a firm conclusion based on rigorous evidence, instead of a tentative conclusion which needs to be further investigated if it is to be properly validated.
- With what degree of confidence can you state the change? MEL systems often encourage people to be very definite in their opinions. For example, a logical framework encourages people to say whether a change has happened or not. However, in many cases, you may have some evidence that a change has occurred, but you may not be sure. In other cases, you might be sure that change has occurred, but not sure how far your project contributed towards it. In these cases, it is usually better to state the change anyway, and to add some qualifying statements that make it clear how confident you are that change has occurred. If you think there are other possible explanations for why change has happened, it is often useful to state this as well. Again, anyone reading your report can make up his/her own mind provided they have the necessary information on which to base an opinion.

8.3 What to include in the report

Try not to confuse reporting activities carried out during the project and changes that have been identified during the same period. The list above is aimed at preparing a report that identifies changes, not for reporting activities or outputs.

All the toolkits produced for the "Strengthening Small Organisations With Big Ambitions" programme are available here.

We hope you have found this toolkit useful. By completing this short survey, you can let us know what you think and help guide our future publications.