3 no-hassle steps towards a practical and effective M&E system

Say "no" to burdensome monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in 3 weeks and boost the management of your project!

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Ready to bid goodbye to haphazard M&E that is challenging to apply?

Hey there! Thanks for downloading this guide.

This guide will outline the critical first 3 steps to take towards creating and implementing an **M&E system** that not only takes a **straightforward yet robust approach** and is **practical to apply** but also **helps boost positive results for people and the planet**.

When you're ready to start building an M&E system that you and your project team can get excited about, keep this guide close by and check off each step (at least one step a week!) as you go.

Let's break the steps down, shall we?

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Step 1 – Establish the project-specific objectives of the M&E system

In this section:

- Why establish objectives for your project's M&E system?
- Tips for establishing project-specific objectives for the M&E system
- Recommended minimum objectives for M&E systems

Step 1 – Establish the project-specific objectives of the M&E system

Why establish objectives for your project's M&E system?

When one speaks of *objectives* in the context of projects aimed at creating positive social impact, the focus is often on the objectives of the project itself. That's excellent and typically appropriate.

But did you know that **the project's M&E system has to have its own objectives**, too? (Objectives that go beyond the generic reasons for doing M&E, of course.)

Why?

- Because **project-specific objectives help guide the features and activities of the M&E system**. If you don't know what purpose the M&E system aims to serve, then it may end up trying to serve too many purposes and losing focus. This lack of focus is often a key factor that makes M&E systems feel, and indeed become, burdensome.

- Explicitly laying out the M&E system's project-specific objectives also **helps give meaning to related efforts and sustain the motivation to undertake them**. In the absence of objectives, the efforts to implement the M&E system are undertaken in a vacuum and deprived of meaning and, unclear about the point of the various M&E activities in which they are engaged, project team members may be uninspired and lose motivation. This deepens the sense that the M&E system is burdensome. It could even lead to consequences such as poor data quality if, for example, only the minimum effort is expended to complete M&E-related tasks or if project team members work in silos (or, worse, at cross-purposes) after having developed their own individual understandings of the M&E system's objectives.

It is, therefore, important that a project's M&E system's objectives be established. This should ideally be done upfront – i.e., during the project design/initial planning stage – and in collaboration with the project team, members of the population that the project will affect, and the project's donors. However, M&E system objectives can be established at any stage of the project cycle. **These objectives should then be documented** and used as a guide in the design of the M&E system and as a point of reference in its implementation.

Step 1 – Establish the project-specific objectives of the M&E system

Tips for establishing project-specific objectives for the M&E system and recommended minimum objectives

In establishing project-specific objectives, **project team members should ask themselves what broad ends they want the project's M&E system to serve**, beyond enabling the measurement and analysis of project activities and results.

Those ends can vary significantly.

- Is it to satisfy the donor? (An understandable but, on its own, inadequate reason for undertaking M&E activities.)
- Is it to add to the evidence base in the project's particular domain(s)?
- Is it to gain legitimacy because everyone else is doing it? (Be honest!)

Then, together with members of the population that the project will affect and the project's donor(s), project teams should **review and distil the M&E system's proposed objectives down to a core set that everyone can agree upon**. The project-specific objectives of the M&E system will be able to be revisited but should generally remain unchanged over the lifespan of the project, given related investments in time and other resources; therefore, the final set of objectives should be selected with care, with a focus on what is most important and appropriate to get out of the M&E system.

To keep things manageable, an M&E system should ideally have no more than three to five project-specific objectives. **I recommend the following three objectives**, at a minimum:
1. to help demonstrate accountability to donors and affected populations [and add project-specific details];
2. to inform project decision-making, helping ensure that the project is steered in a manner that maximizes positive results [add project-specific details];
3. to support credible communications about the project's impact [and add project-specific details].

Over to you! Supported by the guidance provided on the previous page and above, establish or refine your project's M&E system's objectives.

Step 2 – Establish the M&E system's principles

In this section:

- Why establish principles for your project's M&E system?
- Essential core principles for M&E systems designed for projects aimed at (co-)creating positive social impact

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Step 2 – Establish the M&E system's principles

Why establish principles for your project's M&E system?

In general, principles communicate core values and guide behavior. When applied to an M&E system, **principles provide the ideal*** **that should be strived for in the design and implementation of the M&E activities**. Specifically, they guide the activities that will be undertaken to achieve the M&E system's project-specific objectives (see Step 1), ensuring "a coherent approach to the conduct of M&E for the project" (1).

In the context of the M&E system, **the principles can be seen as a promise of sorts that the M&E activities will abide by and thus the essential characteristics that they will display**. They should help discern which M&E activities have merit and which do not. "This lends the M&E system – both at set-up and during implementation – more predictable and readily accessible to the rest of the project team and to other stakeholders." (1) If faced with an M&E activity, proposed or actual, that contradicts one of the principles, the project team and the project's stakeholders would be able to identify it as a red flag that the activity is likely flawed.

Like the project-specific M&E system objectives, the principles of the M&E system are **ideally generated collectively** – or, if drafted separately by the M&E specialist, then at least reviewed and not objected to by the broader project team, people affected by the project, and the project's donor(s).

All this helps **bring clarity and transparency to the M&E function** and gives **recourse to project team members and affected populations** should they feel that an M&E activity crosses a line. It also helps **reduce the sense of burden** that the M&E system activities may convey, given that everyone has agreed not only on the system's objectives (see Step 1) but also on how those objectives will be achieved.

Examples of a few essential M&E principles are provided on the pages that follow. Then it's **over to you** to establish principles for your project's M&E system. Be sure to keep a record of your project's M&E system's principles, whether you use the ones provided on the upcoming pages or not.

*Note use of the word "ideal". As an ideal, not every single principle will be perfectly attained by every single M&E activity and abiding by one principle may mean needing to compromise on another. However, taken as a whole, the M&E system should abide by the established principles.

(1) Shejavali, K. (2021, April 13). Essential principles of an M&E system. LinkedIn Pulse. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/essential-principles-me-system-kandi-shejavali.

Step 2 – Establish the M&E system's principles

Essential principles for M&E systems designed for projects aimed at (co-)creating positive social impact (1 of 2)*

A social impact project's M&E system should include at least the following six principles to help ensure that it is well-grounded, as comprehensive and rigorous as is feasible, and pragmatic – all while producing the most important information to those who need it, when they need it.

1. Theory of Change at the core

A theory of change (ToC) maps out what an intervention will do to produce certain outputs that will lead to certain outcomes (though often not directly) that ultimately contribute to the desired impacts (again, often not directly) in relation to the problem identified at the outset. Since the ToC provides this clarity on the objectives of the program and aids its design, it makes sense that the ToC should also form the basis for the system that measures and analyses whether those results have been attained. This necessitates that the ToC – in appropriately robust form – be at the core of the M&E system.

2. Meaningful broad participation

In the design and implementation of the M&E system, it is essential to obtain the input of not only of the internal project team and of the donor – which is usually assumed – but also of a wider group of stakeholders, notably the community that the intervention is designed to support. For this participation to be meaningful, the format of the sessions should ensure free expression of the widest possible diversity of affected persons. This implies sensitivity to cultural norms and flexibility to adapt to these so that the project's design and the measures used to track its results are shaped by the community.

3. Alignment and integration of M&E and project nature and implementation modalities

The close link between M&E and implementation is not limited to the conceptual level of the ToC. In a very practical sense, this integration calls for the M&E function to be aligned with the nature of the project and for project/sectoral and M&E teams to work closely together at all levels and stages of the project, with M&E processes and tools aligned and integrated to the greatest extent possible with those of implementation across the project cycle.

*This sub-section is adapted from: Shejavali, K. (2021, April 13). Essential principles of an M&E system. LinkedIn Pulse. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/essential-principles-me-system-kandi-shejavali.

Step 2 – Establish the M&E system's principles

Essential principles for M&E systems designed for projects aimed at (co-)creating positive social impact (2 of 2)*

4. Alignment with existing frameworks and operational policies and practices
Wherever feasible and appropriate, the M&E function – and the project as a whole – should make use of and align itself with frameworks, institutional arrangements, and platforms that already exist locally. This limits the imposition of additional layers of processes and procedures that may be unnecessarily complicated, cumbersome, and time-consuming.

5. Rigorous yet practical and relatively straightforward-to-apply
Leading from the point made above, good practice in M&E supports the idea of a measurement system that is rigorous yet practical and simple to apply. Better than a perfect M&E system with all the fancy bells and whistles but that cannot easily and effectively be implemented, is a "good enough" M&E system that is user-friendly, balancing rigor with ease- and appropriateness-of-use. Sometimes this may mean intentionally simplifying processes and accommodating modifications (e.g., from international M&E practice or from standard indicators) for pragmatic purposes, while remaining fit for the relevant purpose.

6. Provides timely evidence to fulfil the core objectives for M&E
It goes without saying that for evidence elicited by an M&E system to be useful it needs to be delivered in time to serve its purpose (and the following are common purposes of M&E-generated evidence: to track and assess performance; to report meaningfully on progress; to flag potential implementation bottlenecks; to distill lessons learned and feed them back into the implementation process; and/or to effectively communicate results).

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Step 3 – Develop a robust theory of change (ToC)

In this section:

- What is a ToC?
- Why develop a ToC?
- Tips for developing a robust ToC (or what makes a ToC robust?)

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Step 3 – Develop a robust ToC

What is a ToC?

In Step 2 of this guide, you saw that having a ToC at the core of a project's M&E system is an essential principle of the system. Step 3 involves developing that ToC.

But first, it may be worth further outlining what a ToC is:

- A project's theory of change (ToC) is a **helpful way to represent the nature of the project and its anticipated results**.
- A ToC **maps out the road between the identification of the problem that a project aims to address all the way through to the project's population-level effects**. In other words, it traces the path from the situation to be addressed to activities that aimed at resolving that situation to the results, at different levels, of those activities.

In addition to being explained by means of narrative, ToCs are often represented diagrammatically, taking on various creative forms. However, regardless of form, the ToC always reflects the following levels: inputs; activities; outputs; outcomes (intermediate and longer term); and impact.

Why develop a ToC?

The purpose of the ToC is **to assist planners, implementers, and decision-makers think systematically about the objectives of a project and how it will achieve those objectives**, i.e., what needs to be done as well as the resources required to implement it.

In this sense, the theory of change helps **clarify the internal logic of project and helps stakeholders focus on its intended results**.

It also **aids in monitoring and evaluating interventions** by helping identify what has to be monitored and evaluated.

Step 3 – Develop a robust ToC

Tips for developing a robust ToC (or what makes a ToC robust?*)

To develop a ToC that can be described as robust, consider the below criteria that the ToC should meet.

The ToC must be:

- **comprehensive, comprehensible, and well-defined** – the 'who?', 'what?', 'where?', 'when?', 'how?' questions should all be clearly answered, but without over-complicating the ToC (be sure to include the problem statement, which is often left out of ToCs and guides for ToCs);
- **meaningful and supported** – to and by the project team, the affected populations, and other stakeholders (e.g., enablers of the project and its results);
- **achievable/plausible** – the project has the necessary resources to carry out the specified activities;
- **credible** – coherent model based on relevant research and experience that stakeholders and the general public are likely to believe; and
- **testable** – the ToC should reflect testable hypotheses, and its elements should be able to be measured or observed.

A ToC must meet all the above criteria in order to be considered robust.

Over to you! Develop your project's robust ToC according to the guidance provided in this section, and then share it with all stakeholders. Ensure to save a copy to the M&E records.

*Adapted from: NCVO Knowhow, 2020, and Harries, 2014.

That's all for now!

If you accessed this guide via its official link, the **follow-on steps towards a practical and effective M&E system will be sent directly to your email inbox**. So be on the look-out for those!

In case you did not access this guide via its official link, you can do so and benefit from follow-on tips by clicking here.

For the separate "Basics of M&E: A cheat sheet for beginners" pdf guide, click here.

For more M&E tips from RM3 Consulting, check out our blog here, where you can also sign up to receive updates via email.

Thank you for your interest in conducting awesome M&E and, most of all, thank you for your commitment to (co-)creating positive social impact and for being open to the immense promise that M&E holds **to maximize the wellbeing of people and the planet**!

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