Setting up the M&E System

Section 4. Setting Up the M&E System

This Section is useful for:

- *Managers* – to help them ensure that staff, partners and consultants are carrying out their M&E jobs effectively;

- *M&E staff* – during start-up, to know how to create and initiate an operational plan for a comprehensive M&E system and procedures; and, during implementation, to know how to support partners and consultants in fulfilling their M&E responsibilities;

- *Consultants* – when designing the M&E component – to ensure that it is comprehensive enough and has sufficient resources, capacities and inbuilt flexibility – and also when reviewing and updating the M&E system;

- *IFAD and cooperating institution staff* – to ensure that all key aspects of the M&E system are in place.

Key Messages

- M&E needs to be understood as an integrated reflection and communication system within the project that must be planned, managed and resourced – it is not simply a statistical task or an external obligation. An M&E system requires:

  1. Designing and set-up;

  2. Gathering and managing information;

  3. Reflecting critically (on experience and information) to improve action;

  4. Communicating and reporting results.

- For the M&E system to function, you must have adequate resources and put in place the necessary conditions and capacities. This often involves capacity-building.

- A well-functioning M&E system helps guide the intervention strategy and ensure effective operations for all key stakeholders. It is one part of the overall management of the project.

- Each stage of the project cycle requires certain key M&E tasks to be carried out by specific stakeholders.

- A detailed M&E plan is developed during project start-up and needs to be documented clearly and shared with those who are to implement it.

- The M&E system will itself need to be monitored and updated regularly during the life of the project.

4.1 Overview of Setting Up the M&E System

4.1.1 Seeing M&E as a System

A well-functioning M&E system manages to integrate the more formal, data-oriented side commonly associated with the task of M&E together with informal monitoring and communication, such as field staff sharing impressions of farmer experiments with their manager over morning coffee. If you can see M&E in this way – as an integrated system of reflection and communication supporting project implementation – then you can plan for and manage it over the entire life of the project. However, M&E is often seen as a statistical task or a tedious external obligation of little relevance to those implementing the project. It is also common to see projects separating the monitoring function from the evaluation function. In such cases, the higher-level, impact-related assessments are sub-contracted and the project focuses only on tracking short-term activities, thus limiting opportunities to learn if they are having a strategic input.

Seeing M&E as an integrated support to those involved in project implementation requires:

- creating M&E processes that lead to clear and regular learning for all those involved in project strategy and operations (see Box 4-1);

- understanding the links between M&E and management functions;

- using existing processes of learning, communication and decision-making among stakeholders as the basis for project-oriented M&E;

- putting in place the necessary conditions and capacities for M&E to be carried out.

Box 4-1. Planned components of the M&E system in WUPAP (Nepal)

In Nepal, the WUPAP programme has identified a wide range of activities it must integrate into its monitoring and evaluation system. This includes standard work plan practices and project-specific innovations:

- critical events agenda	- stakeholder workshops	- participatory context analysis
- work planning and budgeting	- political situation monitoring	- progress and performance monitoring
- financial monitoring and auditing	- primary stakeholder surveys	- participatory impact monitoring
- process monitoring	- external evaluations	

Figure 4-1 illustrates the M&E system and how it links to other key elements of a project. For M&E to be effective, four core tasks need to be fulfilled:
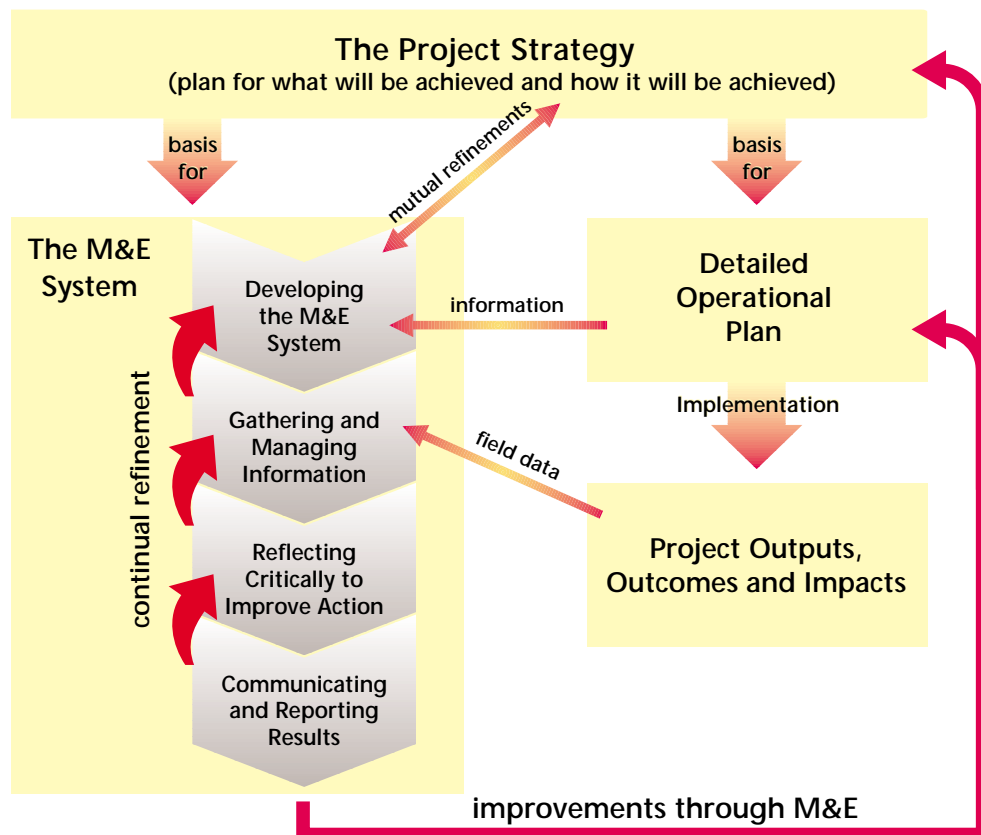
1. Designing and setting up the system;

2. Gathering and managing information;

3. Reflecting critically to improve action;

4. Communicating and reporting results.

Although Figure 4-1 shows the four tasks as a sequence, in reality they overlap. For example, a project or component manager may be discussing field observations with staff over morning coffee. In this situation, he or she gathers field observations from different people, they reflect on them together, and then share the information with others all at once. On the other hand, the production of the annual progress report will involve a more structured process with separate steps – information gathering during the year, a participatory project review process where the information is discussed and analysed, and writing the report.

4.1.2 Linking M&E to the Overall Project

The figure below illustrates how the M&E system fits within the project. In Section 2, the idea of "managing for impact" was explained in terms of four elements: guiding the project strategy towards achieving impact, ensuring effective operations, creating a learning environment and setting up and using the M&E system. Figure 4-1 focuses on the M&E element and how it links with the two elements, project strategy and operations. The remaining element – learning environment – is the context that influences how a project and its M&E system are implemented.

Figure 4-1. The M&E system and how it links to the project strategy and operations

1. The ***project strategy*** (the plan for ***what*** will be achieved and ***how*** it will be achieved) is the starting point for project implementation and setting up the M&E system (see Section 3).

2. The strategy is the basis for working out the ***project operations*** required to implement activities efficiently and effectively.

3. The completion of project activities leads to a series of actual ***outputs, outcomes and impacts***. Comparing the *actual* outputs, outcomes and impacts with what was *planned* in

the project strategy and understanding the differences in order to identify changes in strategy and operations is a core function of the M&E system.

4. The ***M&E system*** consists of four interlinked parts.

    4a. You start ***setting up the M&E system*** by identifying information needs to guide the project strategy, ensure effective operations and meet external reporting requirements (see Section 5). Then you need to decide how to gather and analyse this information and document a plan for the M&E system. The process of working out how to monitor and evaluate a project inevitably raises questions about the project strategy itself, which can help improve the initial design. Setting up the M&E system with a participatory approach builds stakeholders' understanding about the project and starts creating a learning environment.

    4b. ***Implementing the M&E system means gathering and managing information*** (see Section 6). You can do this through informal as well as more structured approaches. Information comes from tracking which outputs, outcomes and impacts are being achieved and checking project operations (e.g., activity completion, financial manage-ment and resource use). After information gathering and management starts, you will need to solve problems or will have new ideas for improving the initial M&E plan.

    4c. ***Involve project stakeholders in reflecting critically*** (see Section 8). Once information has been collected it needs to be analysed and discussed by project stakeholders. This may happen formally – for example, during the annual project review workshop. Or it may happen informally – for example, by talking with farmers about their ideas during weekly field visits. In these reflections and discussions, you will probably notice information gaps. These can trigger adjustments to the M&E plan to ensure the necessary information is being collected.

    4d. ***The results of M&E need to be communicated*** to the people who need to use it. Only then can you call the M&E system successful (see Section 6). This includes reporting to funding agencies but is much broader. For example, problems experienced by field staff need to be understood by their manager. Project progress and problems must be shared with project participants so you can identify solutions together. Reports to funding agencies need to balance successes and mistakes and, above all, be analytical and action-oriented. Some of those who are to use the information may have been involved in collecting data and/or analysing part of it. However, you need to plan how to inform those who were not involved.

5. Ultimately the ***results from M&E – both the communication processes and the informa-tion - will improve the project strategy and operations.*** Senior management is responsible for seeing to this with the support of M&E staff. Sometimes improvements can be immediate. For example, extension staff may be complaining one day about a vehicle maintenance problem, which the project manager can act on directly. Or there may be a need to change the sequence of certain activities, which the responsible unit manager has the flexibility to do. But sometimes more extensive negotiations may be required between the project director, the supervising ministry, the cooperating institution and IFAD. For example, if a supervision mission notices major problems with an entire project component, such as micro-credit, changes to the loan agreement may be necessary.
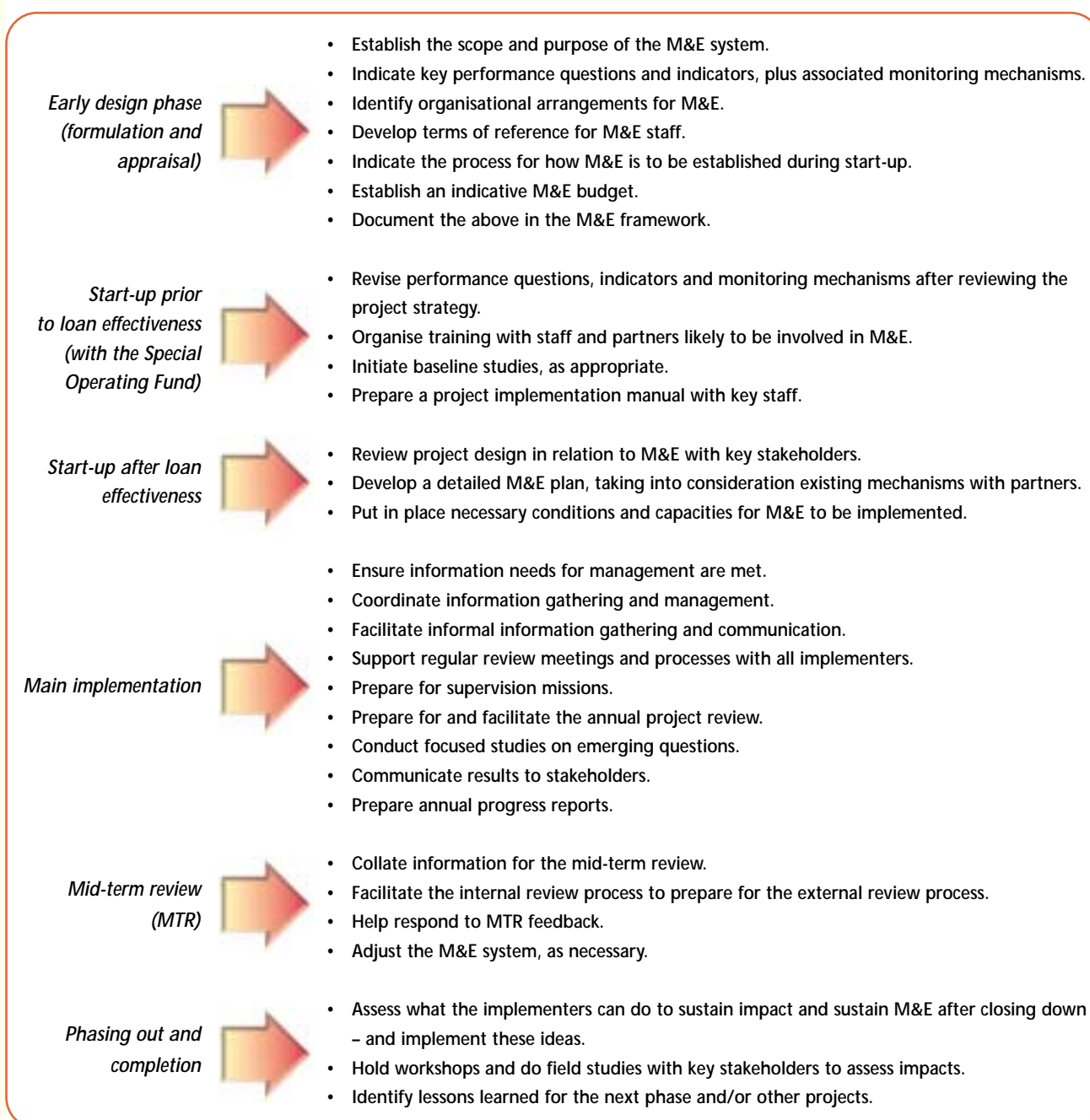
    So for M&E to work as a tool for managing for impact, project management and the M&E staff need to be clear on how to identify, agree upon and follow up on project improve-ments. If this process for guiding change is not in place, even a very good M&E system will not have much value for the project.

4.1.3 Key M&E Tasks during the Project Cycle

Considering M&E as a system helps in understanding the range of M&E tasks that different people will need to undertake during the project cycle. The list below looks formidable indeed. But look closely at it and you will probably recognise that you are already implementing many of the tasks as part of your M&E responsibilities. Furthermore, these tasks are specific for each stage of the project and most of them will be shared among a range of people.

Note that these M&E tasks are not the sole responsibility of M&E staff or an M&E unit, if the project has these. Rather, they should be seen as *functions* for which responsibility is to be shared. This makes it critical to give careful thought to whom to involve in each one. Making the M&E system and processes more participatory means sharing these functions. This, in turn, makes shared learning through M&E possible.

Figure 4-2. Key M&E Tasks

Early design phase (formulation and appraisal)
- Establish the scope and purpose of the M&E system.
- Indicate key performance questions and indicators, plus associated monitoring mechanisms.
- Identify organisational arrangements for M&E.
- Develop terms of reference for M&E staff.
- Indicate the process for how M&E is to be established during start-up.
- Establish an indicative M&E budget.
- Document the above in the M&E framework.

Start-up prior to loan effectiveness (with the Special Operating Fund)
- Revise performance questions, indicators and monitoring mechanisms after reviewing the project strategy.
- Organise training with staff and partners likely to be involved in M&E.
- Initiate baseline studies, as appropriate.
- Prepare a project implementation manual with key staff.

Start-up after loan effectiveness
- Review project design in relation to M&E with key stakeholders.
- Develop a detailed M&E plan, taking into consideration existing mechanisms with partners.
- Put in place necessary conditions and capacities for M&E to be implemented.

Main implementation
- Ensure information needs for management are met.
- Coordinate information gathering and management.
- Facilitate informal information gathering and communication.
- Support regular review meetings and processes with all implementers.
- Prepare for supervision missions.
- Prepare for and facilitate the annual project review.
- Conduct focused studies on emerging questions.
- Communicate results to stakeholders.
- Prepare annual progress reports.

Mid-term review (MTR)
- Collate information for the mid-term review.
- Facilitate the internal review process to prepare for the external review process.
- Help respond to MTR feedback.
- Adjust the M&E system, as necessary.

Phasing out and completion
- Assess what the implementers can do to sustain impact and sustain M&E after closing down – and implement these ideas.
- Hold workshops and do field studies with key stakeholders to assess impacts.
- Identify lessons learned for the next phase and/or other projects.

Each project will need to modify this list to suit its operating conditions. Box 4-2 shows one example of project-specific M&E functions in Guatemala. Another example is from the SAIP project in Bangladesh, where M&E specialists were hired during start-up to work with project management to design and operate the M&E system. The M&E specialists also took responsibility for developing the impact-monitoring methodology and reaching agreement on indicators, with the participation of NGOs and primary stakeholders. Since this project was focusing primarily on participatory development, there was the vital need for a thorough introduction to participatory impact monitoring at an early stage. It was the responsibility of the M&E specialists to draw up and implement a training plan for M&E staff at district and field levels.

Yet another example comes from Benin. At project start-up, the M&E coordinator developed a manual for guiding the project's monitoring and evaluation process. The manual provides formats for recording revenues from income-generation activities, details on collecting data for the indicators, and information on how field extension agents, NGOs and heads of departments should report. The manual is considered to be an evolving process, influenced by the experiences of people using it. So revising it will be a recurring M&E task at later stages.

Box 4-2. M&E functions through which the Cuchumatanes project (Guatemala) learned about and adjusted its work

- Elaborating monthly and half-yearly reports on physical and financial progress, based on an automated monitoring database
- Elaborating monthly progress reports for the national information and planning system of the ministry of agriculture
- Operating the automated monitoring system on the outcomes of activities
- Permanent updating of the primary stakeholders database
- Elaborating standards and rules concerning use of the M&E information (for quality assurance)
- Carrying out annual self-evaluation events
- Carrying out annual participatory evaluation workshops
- Carrying out internal evaluations of the project management unit (PMU)
- Undertaking SWOT (see Annex D) analysis of the project, its components, its internal functioning mechanisms and implementing organisations
- Participating in thematic studies to understand more about the appropriateness of the intervention strategy
- Elaborating the terms of reference and supporting special evaluations on key aspects of the intervention strategy
- Carrying out emergent evaluations on critical aspects that arise
- Carrying out unplanned, occasional evaluations on an as-needed basis
- Participating in ongoing operational fieldwork activities

4.1.4 Responding to Unplanned Needs and Requests for Information

So far, M&E has been discussed as if it were a process that can be planned entirely ahead of time. However, most project M&E units will often receive sudden demands from the project manager, ministries, steering committees and funding agencies to provide a report on a specific issue, or some other type of information.

When developing the budget, include a budget line for unplanned costs, say a 10% contingency allocation. Leading corporate research organisations typically save part of the research budget and time for projects that do not fit into the established categories. Sometimes up to 25% of the research budget is left open to ideas that do not fit into existing categories. Alternatively, you can top off specific budget lines with resources for unplanned activities. For example, you can add two weeks per year for consultants to deal with focused evaluations or monitoring questions that might be requested during the year. Also plan in extra time for key staff to deal with unplanned M&E-related requests. Three days per month, for example, may seem like a lot. But, in practice, even more days are quite commonly required.

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[1] Perrin, B. 2001. How to — and How Not to — Evaluate Innovation. *Evaluation* 8(1).

In Cuchumatanes, Guatemala, the M&E unit carries out what it calls "emergent evaluations", which the project director requests when more information is required about certain activities. The M&E unit produces "alert reports" that highlight the need for extra information. Some additional thematic evaluations or research studies are contracted out. Among the emergent evaluations thus far, were case studies about organisational issues, an evaluation of the communal banks programme and an evaluation of environmental impact.

During project design, include a category in the appraisal report such as "sudden opportunities" or "M&E contingency" and identify the upper budget and time limit for unplanned M&E activities. If managers keep track of the time and money spent on unplanned M&E activities and see that the limit has almost been reached, then they can more easily explain to those requesting additional reports or information why it is not possible to respond to all demands.

4.2 Key Steps in Setting Up the M&E System

The six steps involved in designing an M&E system are:

1. Establishing the purpose and scope – why do we need M&E and how comprehensive should our M&E system be?

2. Identifying performance questions, information needs and indicators – what do we need to know to monitor and evaluate the project in order to manage it well?

3. Planning information gathering and organisation – how will the required information be gathered and organised?

4. Planning critical reflection processes and events – how will we make sense of the information gathered and use it to make improvements?

5. Planning for quality communication and reporting – how and to whom do we want to communicate what in terms of our project activities and processes?

6. Planning for the necessary conditions and capacities – what is needed to ensure our M&E system actually works?

A good appraisal report will include an indicative M&E framework that provides enough detail about these questions to enable budgeting and allocation of technical expertise, give funding agencies an overview of how M&E will be undertaken, and guide project and partner staff during start-up. But this will only be indicative and needs to be adjusted and detailed further during the start-up phase (see Box 4-3).

Box 4-3. Design of M&E in the project appraisal of a rural microenterprise development project in Colombia

In the appraisal report for the PADEMER project, the M&E system was outlined as follows, painting an ideal situation and giving the details required to make it operational at start-up.

The national technical coordination unit (NTCU) of the project should integrate both the monitoring and evaluation functions within the framework of the national evaluation system. The NTCU will be responsible for formulating the annual work plans and budgets (AWPBs), systematising information on project progress to guarantee timely decision-making by management and preparing relevant reports. T he monitoring unit (MU) should ensure timely provision of information for management decisions. Among the unit's human and other resources are the M&E head, administrative support and the necessary office and computer equipment, plus a budget to cover consultation costs for specific studies. The MU should ensure that the collection, processing and analysis of information on project progress be available to management, serving its aims. Both the MU and the evaluation unit will undertake valuation activities on progress, their respective responsibilities to be defined. The proposed activities for the MU are: elaborating weekly progress reports with data on project progress and formulating indicators for project monitoring in line with the implementation plan.

Below, you will find the tasks for each step in taking the outline of an M&E system from an appraisal report and designing the details that make it operational (see Table 4-1). More detailed explanations for each step can be found in Sections 5 through 8.

Table 4-1. Tasks needed when detailing the M&E plan based on a project appraisal report

M&E Design Steps	Outputs in Project Appraisal Report (the M&E Framework)	Tasks during Project Start-up to Develop a Detailed M&E Plan
1. Establish the purpose and scope	Broadly defined purpose and scope of M&E in the project context	• Review the purpose and scope with key stakeholders.
2. Identify performance questions, indicators and information needs	List of indicative key questions and indicators for the goal, purpose and output levels	• Assess the information needs and interests of all key stakeholders. • Precisely define all questions, indicators and information needs for all levels of the objective hierarchy. • Check each bit of information for relevance and end-use.
3. Plan information gathering and organising	Generally described information gathering and organising methods to enable resource allocation	• Plan information gathering and organising in detail (who will do use which method to gather/synthesise what information, how often and when, where, with whom, with what expected information product). • Check the technical and resource feasibility of information needs, indicators and methods. • Develop formats for data collection and synthesis.
4. Plan for communication and reporting	Broad description of key audiences and types of information that should be communicated to them to enable resource allocation	• Make a precise list of all the audiences, what information they need, when they need it and in which format. • Define what is to be done with the information – simply send it, provide a discussion for analysis, seek relevant feedback for verification, etc. • Make a comprehensive schedule for information production, showing who is to do what by when in order to have the information ready on time.
5. Plan critical reflection processes and events	General outline of key processes and events	• Precisely detail which methods/approaches are to be used, with which stakeholder groups and for what purpose. • Identify who is responsible for which reflective events. • Make a schedule that integrates all the key events and reporting/decision-making moments.
6. Plan for the necessary conditions and capacities	Indicative staffing levels and types, clear description of organisational structure of M&E, indicative budget	• Come to a precise definition of: the number of M&E staff, their responsibilities and their linkages, incentives needed to make M&E work, organisational relationships between key M&E stakeholders, the type of information management system to be established and a detailed budget.

Careful thought is needed regarding whom to include when detailing the M&E system. In the first years of the PADEMER project, Colombia, for example, the monitoring unit designed the M&E system. One part of this process included a workshop to define the principle indicators. Participants included: the national technical coordination unit, the implementing NGOs, the Mixed Corporation for Micro-Enterprise Development and members of the management committee (ministries of agriculture and economic development and the national planning department).

The more diverse stakeholders you can include in the process, the more all-round clarity you will eventually have as to what is needed from whom and when. But this will take more time – participation inevitably does!

4.2.1 Purpose and Scope of the M&E System

Clear definition of the purpose and scope of the intended M&E system helps when deciding on issues such as budget levels, number of indicators to track, type of communication needed and so forth. The appraisal report will include a brief M&E purpose statement (see Box 4-4), but you will need to revisit this question at start-up with representatives of implementing partners and primary stakeholders.

Whenever you are unclear about a decision on whether to monitor more or less or whether to choose one methodological option or another, you can return to the stated M&E purpose for guidance. Specifying the purpose also helps to make clear what can be expected of the M&E system, as it forces you to think about the nature of the project and the implications for information needed to manage it well.

Box 4-4. Examples of an M&E purpose statement

The core purposes of the M&E system for the SWA Rural Development Project in Armenia are to provide the information needed for impact-oriented project management and to involve key stakeholders in learning how to improve project implementation. The M&E system will provide regular reports on project progress to the different stakeholder groups in a format appropriate for their needs.

The WUPAP programme in Nepal outlines the main purpose of the participatory M&E (PM&E) element and of the management information system (MIS). "Objective of the PM&E is to support the programme management to ensure compliance with the programme's strategy and approach, to improve responsiveness, efficiency and effectiveness by providing constant feedback from the beneficiaries, programme staff and other stakeholders, and to contribute to the learning of all stakeholders by promoting policy dialogue. Objective of the MIS is to support the programme management in effective decision-making and to improve responsiveness to programme stakeholders by collecting, processing and providing reliable and timely information."

For a project that focuses on building primary stakeholders' capacity for project management, the M&E purpose statement could be: "The core purpose of the M&E system is to strengthen the capacity of primary stakeholders to manage the resources over which they have decision-making power. The M&E system will provide information on service-provider quality and project progress to the primary stakeholders, furnishing analysis to identify concrete improvements. The system will also provide regular reports on project progress to funding agencies and responsible ministries."

When formulating the purpose at appraisal or revisiting it during start-up, ask yourself the following question:

•   What are the main reasons to set up and implement M&E, for us – as implementing partners and primary stakeholders – and for other key stakeholders?

With a shared understanding of the overall purpose, the next step is to clarify the scope of the M&E system. "Scope" relates to the extent and degree of sophistication of the system. M&E systems can be highly sophisticated, requiring considerable expertise in qualitative and quantitative research methods and extensive information management. They can also be very simple systems that rely largely on discussions with stakeholders and do not try to gather large amounts of data.

These different systems will not yield the same results. Each has specific advantages and disadvantages, such as degree of precision and capacity required and labour and cost involved. The sophistication of the M&E system that is appropriate to your situation will depend on your M&E purpose, available resources and M&E expertise. Define the scope of the M&E system by asking:

•   What level of funding is potentially available?

•   What level of participation in M&E by primary stakeholders and partner organisations is desirable and feasible?

- How detailed does the M&E information have to be, either in terms of quantitative or qualitative data?

- What sort of baseline study is desirable and feasible?

- What are the current M&E capacities among primary stakeholders and partner organisations, and how will this affect the desired levels of M&E?

4.2.2 Performance Questions, Information Needs and Indicators

The most common approach when setting up project M&E is for the M&E coordinator to take each objective and start listing quantitative indicators in the second column of the logframe matrix. This often creates problems. The problems arise not from the quantitative indicators but from the process of jumping directly from objectives to indicators. Many objectives are complex so cannot be summarised in terms of one or a few indicators. Also, while it might be possible for quantitative information to be found that shows *if* objectives are being met, it does not necessarily explain *why* and if this can be attributed to the project. Therefore, multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative information are critical to explain what is happening and to look closely at relationships between different pieces of information, rather than single indicators.

Working with performance questions (see Box 4-5) to guide indicator analysis will give you a more integrated and meaningful picture of overall project achievements. Answering these questions requires descriptive analysis and quantitative information. Starting by identifying performance questions makes it easier to recognise which specific indicators are really necessary. Sometimes a performance question can be answered directly with a simple quantitative indicator. However, very often the question can only be answered with a range of qualitative and quantitative information.

Box 4-5. Examples of performance questions

Performance questions are not just about *what* has been achieved. They also ask *why* there is success or failure and *what has been learned* to improve future action. Examples of performance questions include:

- How has the purchasing power of target households changed as compared to non-target groups? What external factors have influenced any changes?
- To what extent are target households better able to meet their housing, education and health needs than non-target households?
- How have the diversity, production and productivity of agriculture in the target area changed as a result of project activities and as a result of external factors?

Performance questions are needed for each level in the objective hierarchy but also for the project as a whole. For example, you will most probably want to ask some questions about the process of project implementation, such as the quality of relationships between certain target groups and implementing NGOs. Or maybe, "How do project partners feel that the project management unit can improve to enable them to carry out their responsibilities?" You will also want to keep track of unanticipated impacts – for example, "Have any of the project innovations been adopted by people in neighbouring districts who are not the main target group?"

Remember that information needs will shift over time, so performance questions will need revision. In projects set up based on the idea of performance questions, the project appraisal report includes a list of indicative performance questions and indicators. After revising the objective hierarchy with key stakeholders at start-up, you can refine these indicative questions together to fit any revisions made to the project strategy.

For most projects, performance questions will not (yet) exist. To develop good performance questions, you first need to be very clear about the project aims. So the process of finding performance questions with stakeholders will help you further refine the project design together.

In IFAD-supported projects, identifying performance questions and selecting indicators increasingly involves the intended primary stakeholders. The process of participatory performance questions and indicator identification is quite different from one that limits itself to the project team. This issue and others about performance questions and indicators are discussed in more detail in Section 5.

4.2.3 Information Gathering and Organising

Many appraisal reports include a long list of indicators. Yet often little thought is given to the practical implications of gathering the required information, not to mention how it will be used to manage for impact. During start-up, a critical task for all implementing partners is to assess what information can realistically be collected, given available human and financial resources.

For each information need or indicator, you must establish how the information will be collected and organised. For example, monitoring *progress* on irrigation infrastructure development may require that primary stakeholders and project staff check what infrastructure has actually been constructed and if it is working properly. This is relatively straightforward. However, monitoring the *impact* of the irrigation development – for example, in terms of changes in household income – requires a different method. One method you could consider is household surveys. This is a fairly time-consuming and expensive monitoring activity and one that does not make primary stakeholder participation easy. A different option might be village-led surveys and open discussions with impact flow diagrams (see Annex D) about how daily life has changed as a result of irrigation. Another example might be monitoring the implementation of an experimental microenterprise development fund. For this, you might choose to hold regular meetings or workshops with the implementing partners and entrepreneurs.

Not only will each indicator require choosing a different method, but for each indicator or information need you will usually present several options. Annex D describes many monitoring and information gathering methods – qualitative and quantitative and individual versus group-based. They range from simple record-keeping forms to agronomic assessments of yield changes, household surveys and participatory workshops. For example, instead of a detailed and extensive household survey on child immunisation, you could hold a focus group meeting with mothers to discuss the extent of immunisation, opinions on how this service is being provided, etc. Each method has specific advantages and disadvantages in terms of cost, reliability of data, skill needed, ability to quantify results and richness of information generated.

Particularly critical at the moment of method selection is knowing who will be involved in collecting, compiling and analysing. The more that the intended users of the methods can be involved in selecting or developing the methods, the more chance there is that they will understand them and use them correctly. If methods are selected by someone not using them, then training users in the methods will be essential.

Gathering data is one thing. But each bit of information also needs to be collated, perhaps summarised and certainly analysed by the right people. This will need to be planned in detail at start-up. Project field staff are often only involved as data collectors and primary stakeholders only as data providers. Seeing monitoring as a learning process implies that analysis and agreeing on actions are undertaken with all levels in the project hierarchy and with partners. As a general rule, data collection and analysis should be undertaken with those to

whom the data, analysis and decisions pertain and, therefore, at the relevant level. Field staff would, for example, need to understand about project reach within the administrative division for which they are responsible, while the project director needs to analyse project reach for the entire project area.

See Section 6 for practical aspects of information gathering and management.

4.2.4 Critical Reflection Processes and Events

How can people be involved in making sense of the data generated by M&E processes and in assessing the implications for the project strategy and operations? This aspect of M&E receives no attention in the logframe matrix and is rarely given the attention it needs during project design.

The M&E section in the appraisal report may have outlined the main critical reflection processes and events. But this is rare. Usually during start-up, you need to plan such processes in detail (what will be the focus, who will participate, will they be facilitated or self-managed, how will one process feed into others, etc.) and schedule when they will occur (see Table 4-2). Section 8 deals with critical reflection in detail. Figure 2-3 in Section 2 shows some common reflection events that occur during the life of most projects and how they complement each other.

Table 4-2. Example of Critical Reflection Schedule for a project

Note: This is a project-centric list. Primary stakeholders will have their own schedule of events, as will each of the implementing partners. The art of participatory M&E is to link these different schedules for shared learning.			
Critical Reflection Processes or Events	*Purpose and Description*	*Whom to Involve*	*Timing*
Participatory review of project strategy	Update the situation analysis, revise problems/visions, adjust objective hierachy and assumptions	Representatives of intended primary stakeholders, staff of participant organisation, all project staff, facilitator	Three-day workshop at start-up
Development of M&E plan with stakeholders	Assess different information needs, take stock of who is already doing what, agree on priority information areas, refine questions/indicators, decide on methods, agree on responsibilities	Representatives of intended primary stakeholders, staff of participant organisation, all project staff, facilitator	Four or five full-day meetings during the first six months of the project
Quarterly progress reviews by PMU staff	Discussion of key successes and problems	Senior staff of PMU and partner organisation	One-day meeting every three months
Field visits	Firsthand look at what is happening in the field, informal chats about how activities are being implemented	Field staff, supervisors of field staff, project director	Weekly visit for field staff, monthly for the project director
Annual project review	Summary of key successes and problems, ideas for changing project activities/outputs and assumptions, review of implications for the project logframe, identification of lessons learned about project implementation, M&E system adjustment	Representatives of intended primary stakeholders, staff of implementing partners, all project staff, facilitator	Once a year
Periodic review workshops of key project components	Focused discussion about the strategy and operations of key components to adjust the objective hierarchy, solve problems and identify lessons learned	Key stakeholders of the project component: intended primary stakeholders, implementing partners, field and senior project staff	Once a year in the first two years; after that, once every two years
Preparation for supervision missions	Explain the mission purpose, agree on what the project and stakeholders would like to get out of the mission, identify who needs to prepare what before the mission, organise the logistics	Small group of primary stakeholder representatives, senior staff of the participant organisation, senior project staff	One month prior to the supervision mission

Critical reflection can occur formally and informally. Formally, it can be facilitated during project meetings, workshops with partners and primary stakeholders or as part of external evaluations. Informally, it can occur in ongoing discussions between project stakeholders. There are endless examples of how reflection can be encouraged. For example, in Cuchumatanes, Guatemala, individual learning was encouraged by having core M&E staff participate in ongoing field activities. This gave them a clearer understanding of project operations: the relationships and how primary stakeholder generally accept and view operations. In Tropisec, Nicaragua, the extension agent of the implementing partner meets up with grassroots organisations to analyse current progress and results and to identify possible actions and resource requirements for the coming period. As part of their annual work programme within the project, all technical project staff are expected to share at least one significant learning experience with colleagues.

4.2.5 Communication and Reporting

The appraisal report will usually specify the expected reporting schedule, indicating who should receive a report and when. Often these will be reports for the funding agencies for accountability reasons. However, you also need to communicate M&E findings to many other stakeholders and for different reasons. For example, implications for policy must be shared with government officials, use of funds can be shared with partners and primary stakeholders, and documented lessons learned about the project strategy should be distributed to other projects.

During start-up, develop a detailed idea of your communication strategy. Include not only formal reports but also communication efforts that seek feedback about interim findings, and discuss what actions are needed.

- With representatives of all key stakeholders, develop a precise list of all the audiences, what information they need, when they need it and in which format.

- Spend some time discussing why each of these audiences needs information. To seek feedback for verification? As input for discussions of the implications for project strategy and operations? To clarify their responsibilities? For accountability? To influence and gain more support for field activities?

- Schedule clearly the production of information needs, showing who is to do what by when in order to have the information ready on time.

- Organise the events during which the information is to be communicated and discussed.

Section 6 discusses principles of communication and ways to seek feedback. Annex D includes methods you might find helpful to facilitate communication.

4.2.6 Necessary Conditions and Capacities

In the appraisal report, you will find an indicative budget for M&E and a description of how M&E should or could be organised. But getting the M&E system working also means thinking of appropriate incentives, ensuring you have the right and enough human capacity at hand, and thinking about ways of storing and sharing information. The necessary conditions and capacities for the M&E system to function were introduced in Section 2. They are dealt with in detail in Section 7. Table 4-3 lists key questions that need answers when detailing M&E to make it operational.

Discuss appropriate organisational structures for M&E at start-up. This is critical to the success – or failure – of M&E. It is the moment when negotiations need to reach decisions about each of the partners' responsibilities and information requirements.

IFAD-supported projects often have one of two basic organisational arrangements for M&E:

1. M&E is coordinated by an M&E coordinator or unit within the project management unit (and supplemented by external M&E contracts) to facilitate management's quick use of information;

2. M&E is carried out by a separate M&E group – for example, subcontracted to a research institute or located within a government department – aiming to provide more objectivity and independent analysis.

Overall, experiences from many projects suggest that M&E is much more effective when those implementing M&E are part of project operations and decision-makers. This can be supplemented in important ways by more external M&E support. And other innovations are emerging that place M&E firmly in the hands of primary stakeholders or field teams (see Box 4-6).

Table 4-3. Questions to guide the detailed planning of M&E conditions and capacities

Conditions and Capacities	Questions to Guide Detailed Planning
Human capacity for M&E	• What are the existing M&E capacities with project partners? • What training will be necessary? • What consultancy support will be required?
Incentives for implementing M&E	• Are M&E responsibilities included in job descriptions and terms of reference? • How will reflection and learning among staff, partners and the intended primary stakeholders be encouraged?
Organisational structures	• Will there be an M&E unit or will M&E be spread among all parties? If there is a unit, how many people will it have and where will it be located, under whose authority? • How closely connected will M&E staff be with project management?
Management information systems (MIS)	• What information must be stored and accessible, when, how and for whom? • What level of computerisation is required and appropriate? • What expertise will be required to set up the information management system?
Financial resources	• Is there a separate M&E budget and have sufficient resources been allocated? • Has the staffing allocation for the project taken into account time for all relevant staff to undertake M&E activities?

Box 4-6. Participatory M&E generates attitude and culture of self-evaluation and empowerment in community-based organisations

The participatory evaluation method used by one of the implementing agencies in Prochalate, El Salvador, focuses on generating an attitude and culture of self-evaluation and the empowerment of the community-based organisation (CBO) field teams. With this system, it is possible to avoid preconceptions and vested opinions while reinforcing the idea of evaluation for improvement instead of for judgement. The approach has four steps: self-evaluation, cross-evaluation in the field, plenary workshop (with the two teams together) and a final summing-up.

• During the *self-evaluation*, each team evaluates its working plan at the middle and end of the year, looking at i) the proposed objectives, ii) the reached and unachieved objectives, and iii) improvements needed.
• The *cross-evaluation* consists of a team in the field facilitating the participatory evaluation of another team. This implies field visits to observe technical aspects, as well as a review workshop. Workshops are carried out with the primary stakeholders of another team to evaluate the quality of work done by the implementing agency, rather than focusing on the extension agents. This facilitates and guarantees the neutrality and freedom of the stakeholders when giving their opinions. It also avoids intimidation due to the presence of the extension agent. This generates a professional ethic and encourages constructive criticism.
• In the *plenary workshop*, each team presents its own evaluation and the evaluation made by the other team.
• The process ends with a final *summing-up* in which the results of the self-evaluation workshop are compared with the results found by the other team.

Once most of the detailed M&E plan has been completed, you can take a fresh look at the M&E budget. Box 4-7 provides a list of likely M&E costs. How you cost M&E depends on whether you allocate resources to specific M&E activities or whether you include M&E in generic categories, such as "staff training", "participatory workshops", etc. Details on budgeting for M&E are discussed in Section 7.

Box 4-7. Possible M&E costs to consider in the budget (see Section 7 for more details)

- *Staff time*, such as: planning, implementing and improving all the M&E processes; report writing and analysis; capturing and documenting lessons learned; facilitating community-based M&E processes
- *Consultants/Technical assistance* (fees, travel expenses), such as: developing a detailed M&E plan; establishing management information systems; facilitating review workshops, training and capacity-building; checking of audits
- *Evaluation events* (venue costs, travel and accommodation, materials, per diems, course fees), such as: M&E planning workshops, annual community review workshops, specific monitoring activities, focused evaluations on important topics
- *Materials and equipment*, such as: technical equipment for monitoring; computer and network hardware and software; dial-up networking charges; network maintenance contract
- *Publication and documentation*, such as: printing documents and distribution; display boards; materials

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4.3 Documenting the M&E Plan

Projects have three core documents that serve to guide M&E:

1. The M&E framework in the project appraisal report (see Section 3 and Section 4.2, Table 4-1, for a discussion);

2. The project implementation manual;

3. The M&E plan or manual.

4.3.1 M&E in the Project Implementation Manual

Most projects allocate time and resources to develop what is known as a "project implementation (or procedures) manual". This is a set of guidelines with information about financial accounting procedures, procurement procedures, guidelines for staff travel, guidelines for the use of vehicles and other equipment, and other details necessary for the smooth operation of the project.

The detailed M&E plan may be part of the project implementation manual, an annex to it or a separate document. Irrespective of where it can be found, the implementation guidelines and M&E guidelines must be closely linked and, above all, coordinated. Contradictions or ambiguities in the two sets of guidelines must be avoided.

As the detailed M&E plans may contain an overwhelming degree of detail, summaries for all project participants are helpful to keep everyone focused on their responsibilities. A good way to summarise specific inputs is in an M&E timeline for everyone who plays an important M&E role (see Box 4-8). Ideally, these timelines should be integrated within weekly and monthly activity timelines so that M&E becomes an integrated part of activities.

Box 4-8. Working with an M&E timeline

Knowing when information is needed is critical. By the time you have reached this point of specifying the M&E plan, you may find it hard to remember all the key M&E moments and how they relate to each other and to planning.

An M&E timeline is a useful tool for maintaining an overview of the various internal activities scheduled, key reporting moments and external missions. One simple aid for coordinating M&E activities is to hang a copy of the timeline in a central meeting room and ask each team member to make a personalised version in which his/her responsibilities are outlined over the year.

Example 1. One project in Zimbabwe records M&E milestones in a calendar like the one below. This project also had a separate monitoring calendar on institutional process that indicated when reports had to be sent to whom and on what topic.

EXTRACT FROM: Calendar on outcome and impact monitoring and assessment (annual)

Year	Activity	Responsible Person and/or Unit
Y1, 3-4th quarter	Participatory irrigation scheme appraisal in all schemes	> District team/planning facilitators
Y2, 1st and 2nd quarter	• Farmer and scheme-level baseline survey (questionnaire)	> Project management/consultant
	• Study on scheme costs	> Project management/consultant
	• Financial viability survey of 24 schemes	> Planning facilitators
Y2, 3rd and 4th quarter	• Environmental screening/scoping	> Consultant
	• Training needs assessment	> Training coordinator
	• Service performance assessment of selected rural district councils and support agencies	> Consultant
	• Institutional mapping and SWOT analysis	> Consultant
	• Context assessment	> Monitoring expert

Example 2. A project in Nepal plans to use a CEA, a critical events agenda, which lists the most critical project milestones to be monitored. It is to be discussed in annual stakeholder workshops and included in all annual reports. It will be updated regularly. It looks like the table below.

Number	Critical Event	Target Date	Completion Date	Status/Causes of Delays

The same project also outlined its indicative monitoring and evaluation plan in the appraisal report in terms of what each M&E report and activity was contributing towards the six main M&E objectives it had set (see below).

M&E Report and Records	Objectives						Responsibility	Methodology	Users
	Progress Monitoring	Performance Monitoring	Learning	Impact Monitoring	Tracking of Broader Context	Trend Analysis and Forecasting			
Periodic									
19 different entries									
Non-periodic									
8 entries									

4.3.2   Indicative Contents for an M&E Plan

A documented plan is critical for keeping track of activities and resources. The operational plan for project M&E provides the conceptual and, above all, practical basis for planning, monitoring and evaluation within the project. In Cuchumatanes, Guatemala, the M&E document described: its objectives, strategies, methodologies, work plan, its activities in detail and the technical tools to be used. The document also defined the main concepts related to M&E, the redesigned logframe matrix, the adjustment of information collection systems and the database of primary stakeholders.

The M&E operational plan will be the reference point for stakeholders throughout the project life. So it needs to be comprehensive enough, at the macro level, to provide a clear picture of the overall project intentions and how the M&E system will serve this. At the micro level, it must give fine detail on schedules, responsibilities, budgets and so on, which will help guide the drawing-up of AWPBs. Where monitoring tasks are implemented with local stakeholders, such details may have to be translated into local languages.

Table 4-4. Indicative contents for an M&E operational plan

Topic	Description
Purpose and scope	• Project overview and objectives, rationale and justification for the design of the M&E system • How the M&E system will support project management and meet the reporting requirements and information needs of different stakeholders • Summary of overall experience of M&E undertaken with key stakeholders • Discussion of extent of participation, balance between qualitative/quantitative approach, resource intensiveness and the intended poverty focus of the M&E system
Approach	Overview of how stakeholders will be involved, what learning-oriented approaches will be used and, in general terms, what information gathering and analysing methods will be used; for example, the extent of use of participatory approaches, geographic information systems, computer-based information systems or baselines surveys
Revised logical framework, plus performance questions, indicators, information needs and sources	Precise definition of all performance questions, indicators and information needs for all levels of the objective hierarchy: • Assessment of the information needs and interests of all key stakeholders • Assessment of indicators of exogenous factors and assumptions (e.g., climate, prices, outbreak of pests and disease, economic situation, policy environment) • Assessment of information needs and indicators for relevance and end-use and for technical and resource feasibility • Selection of performance questions and indicators

Management information system and reporting	• Purpose of the management information system
	• Organisation of information gathering and synthesis:
	  - For each expected information product – who, what, when and where
	  - Schedule of information production – who, what, when, to whom, for what purpose
	  - How computerised networks and manual archiving systems are expected to function, with/to whom, for which data
	  - Outline of data storage needs
	• Expected reporting outputs, for example:
	  - Informal communication and feedback channels
	  - Report flows – deadlines and frequencies
	  - AWPBs – outline of the AWPB format, including output/activity plans and budgets, consolidated budgets, a training plan, a procurement plan, a contracted services plan
	  - (Bi-) Annual progress reports for the project as a whole and each component, village-based reviews
	  - (Bi-) Annual financial reports
	  - Recurrent supervision missions

The M&E work plan (processes and events) and timing of activities	Precise definition of methods to be used with different stakeholder groups for two core purposes: *1. M&E of resources, activities and implementation for effective project operations:* • Project resources: transport use, allowances, register of assets, register of services/technical assistance • Project activities: training (workshops, study tours, etc.), construction (technical or social infrastructure), scheme organisation, trials and demonstrations, credit lines, etc. • Other monitoring activities *2. M&E of outcomes and impact for guiding the project strategy, for example:* • Proposed surveys: baseline/household, component, staff • Participatory annual assessment and planning workshops • Other annual evaluation and beneficiary assessments, reviews and planning sessions • Mid-term review and project completion report • Feasibility of methods in terms of technology and resources • M&E work plan schedule: integrated schedule of key events and reporting/decision-making moments • Critical events agenda
Establishing conditions and capacities	M&E organisation: • Necessary institutional and stakeholder linkages for M&E • Existence (or not) of a specific M&E unit and how it relates to the project structure and hierarchy of authority Human resource needs: • Number, capacities and responsibilities of different stakeholders in M&E, including project staff and primary stakeholders • Incentives for different stakeholders • Training needs of stakeholders and staff Resource needs: • Vehicles and equipment • Technical assistance
The M&E budget	Detailed budget allocation
Appendices	• Original and revised logframes • List of proposed indicators • Outline formats for data collection, annual and biannual schedule of activities, etc. • Outline formats for preparing: quarterly, biannual and annual reports; a summary of main project achievements; status reports on project inputs and resources, project outputs and results; evaluation studies – summary of findings and recommendations • Baseline survey questionnaire • Staff job descriptions and details of allowances • Technical Assistance terms of reference • M&E work plan • Detailed budget of M&E

4.4 Quality of your M&E and Keeping It Updated

Once you have a detailed M&E system, two more steps are needed. First, you need to check the overall quality of the system itself, as designed. Second, you need to keep updating it to accommodate changing information needs, skill levels and contexts as well as the refinements in project strategies and activities. Box 4-9 shows why and how one project revised its M&E functions.

The standard criteria for assessing the quality of your M&E system are:

- *Utility* – the M&E system will serve the practical information needs of intended users;

- *Feasibility* – the methods, sequences, timing and processing procedures proposed are realistic, prudent and cost effective;

- *Propriety* – the M&E activities will be conducted legally, ethically and with due regard for the welfare of those affected by its results;

- *Accuracy* – the M&E outputs will reveal and convey technically adequate information.

These criteria can also be used when updating the M&E system.

Box 4-9. Assuring quality in M&E

To standardise M&E information in Cuchumatanes, Guatemala, the project – with the implementing agencies – developed formatting outlines and rules about registering and using information. This was critical to be able to analyse project actions using information that had been collected and analysed by diverse actors at various levels applying a variety of methods and through different intervention models.

The project management of the ADIP project in Bangladesh regularly reviewed and evaluated the performance of different monitoring methods and tried to correct the problems and remove bottlenecks. Further, they continually updated M&E plans. For example, four years after project start-up, their plans were:

- Further computerisation of the routine monitoring activities;
- Increase field-level monitoring (by standard data collection) after organising new M&E technical assistance staff;
- Gradually increase emphasis given to participatory types of M&E.

Just as the project requires continual adaptation, the M&E system will also need to be adjusted regularly and improved as the project evolves and experience develops (see Box 4-10). The WUPAP programme in Nepal recognised this in its project appraisal report: "Keeping in view the demand-driven approach of the programme and flexibility embedded in the implementation arrangements, the M&E and MIS approach will also be flexible … in that it will respond to emerging requirements for the feedback and information of users by redesigning its outputs as the vision of the stakeholders broadens."

Box 4-10. Revising M&E in Guatemala

Four years after start-up, the project team in Cuchumatanes, Guatemala, analysed both the M&E expectations laid out in the appraisal report and the information needs at different stages of management and project execution. Results showed that the M&E activities were not very effective for:

- decision-making at management levels;
- determining component progress and achievements;
- analysing the changes that have occurred among the primary stakeholders as a result of project intervention;
- determining the appropriateness of the institutional mechanisms undertaken.

This had led to much information being produced and yet not being used for project planning and for sharing with others.

The project decided to reorganise and redirect the M&E unit, reformulate the M&E work plan and renew the M&E team itself. The main purpose became "to guarantee that the actions and work strategy of the M&E unit contribute to the achievement of expected project outcomes". A new M&E system was designed specifically to:

- reinforce the management capacity of the PMU;
- strengthen local stakeholder capacity for M&E;
- ensure the documentation, organisation, dissemination and use of project experiences.

One outcome would be to generate a process of permanent reflection and communication about: project focus, appropriateness of the intervention strategy and progress with implementation and the accomplishment of objectives. Another would be to contribute to a better ordering and use of information." It was also expected to build up and/or reinforce local capacities for sustainable M&E among different actors and circumstances involved in project management and execution.

Discussions among key stakeholders are critical to point out weak areas of a project's M&E system. In the APPTDP project in India, discussions with state-level project authorities brought up the need for a process to be able to document changes from village to village and for resources to be available to meet changing priorities. They also wanted support to synthesise lessons and document project impacts. In addition, they suggested reviewing and modifying progress-monitoring formats to provide room for recording qualitative information, besides quantitative information. Finally, they suggested reviewing formats to remove information gathering of data that has not been useful over the last ten years of implementation.

Updating not only needs to happen with the project-based M&E systems and procedures. The learning processes of other stakeholder groups also need regular updating (see Box 4-11).

Box 4-11. Self-evaluation means that indicators change over time

In one project in India, the self-evaluation of the self-help groups had become a mundane process and needed to be reviewed. The indicators needed to change, as groups were maturing and achieving stability in terms of, for example, attendance and making deposits. The original indicators were no longer so critical. More pertinent issues such as "increase in loans from banks rather than only internal borrowing" would be a potential new indicator that would reflect the evolution of the local self-help groups.

Further Reading

Three useful Websites on monitoring and evaluation (in English):

* News service, discussion lists, key readings, projects, courses and workshops on M&E: http://www.mande.co.uk

* A quick search for PME provides links to online documentation as well as document lists and discussions on M&E: http://www.ids.ac.uk/eldis/

* Online links to participatory M&E: http://www.worldbank.org/participation/partme.htm (or look under Operations Evaluation Department (OED) under the general Website)

Action Aid. 2000. *ALPS: Accountability, learning and planning system (with Notes to accompany ALPS).* London: Action Aid. Download this document in English and Spanish via: http://www.actionaid.org/policyandresearch/mae/mae.shtml. Or contact: iau@actionaid.org.uk or Action Aid, Hamlyn House, Macdonald Road, Archway, London N19 5PG, United Kingdom.

Estrella, M. and Gaventa, J. 1998. *Who Counts Reality? Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: A Literature Review.* IDS Working Paper 70. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. Download this and other documents on participation by conducting a search via: http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/information/

Hogger, R., C. Kuchli, A. Zimmerman, M. Engler and E. Vokral. 1997. *Monitoring - keeping in touch with reality.* Berne: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Download from: http://www.gtz.de/pcm/download/english/monit_e.pdf

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