

How CSOs Can Set Up & Sustain an M&E System: An Introduction for Development Practitioners

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Introduction

Most civil society organisations (CSOs) grapple with the difficult challenge of measuring and demonstrating impact. While many factors account for this, the inability of CSOs to institutionalise and make monitoring and evaluation (M&E) an integral part of the organisational architecture is one of the greatest impediments to track performance and demonstrate results effectively. Nonetheless, the ability to measure and demonstrate impact provides the *raison d'être* for continuous donor funding/support and legitimacy of many CSOs in the global south¹. This assertion finds more credence in the ever-changing global milieu of international development cooperation, where funding partners in the global north are increasingly fixated at better results from their partners (CSOs in the global south) to justify the use of taxpayers' money for aid. In the face of this reality, CSOs may still find it extremely difficult to show results or impact of their work without a robust system to provide a framework for M&E and learning activities.

This paper provides short practical steps to enable CSOs to set up, own their M&E system, and propel them on a path to achieving and measuring change. It shows in the end, with determination, CSOs can adopt and adapt an M&E system that is relevant to its context.

¹ Spreckley, F., (2009). *Results Based Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit, 2nd Edition*



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I. Results Based M&E: Dawn of a New Era in Managing for Results

Since the institutionalisation of development aid as we know it today, there have been some significant shifts in the way progress realised from development activities, projects and programmes are measured. Traditional M&E which fixated so much attention on measuring outputs is giving way to results-based monitoring and evaluation (RBM&E), with a huge emphasis on results. RBM&E is not just a buzzword in the lexicon of international development and new public management. It is part of wider efforts invested in promoting increased accountability of all major stakeholders in the attainment of results at any level. [RBM&E differs](#) from traditional M&E where more attention is centred on implementation, processes, inputs and outputs to a more sequential and purpose-driven emphasis on results and [change](#).

Undergirding this logic is results-based management (RBM). RBM is not only the name of the game globally but more importantly, it is the most sought after powerful public management tool by policymakers and decisionmakers within the public and private spheres. It is proven to have the potency to track progress and demonstrate the impact of a given project, programme, or policy. The rise in the popularity of RBM in the developing world can be attributed to two important factors: one, state failure – especially in developing countries – and two, changes in the aid world. Considering the first factor, the World Bank notes “... the clamour for greater government effectiveness has reached crisis proportions in many developing countries where the state has failed to deliver even such fundamental public goods as property rights, roads, and basic health and education²”.

The second factor relates to a worldwide push for results in international development cooperation circles, triggered by shrinking aid and tightening grip to better demonstrate results among some of the world’s most influential donors: Development Assistance Committee (DAC)-OECD, European Union, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as well as various United Nation Agencies, multilateral and bilateral donors. Accompanying this impetus for results in the aid industry is the constant search for innovative approaches and ideas on how to optimise dwindling resources for better results and impact.

From a ‘global’ perspective, the considerations and imperatives for CSOs to be interested in results-based management are enormous and compelling. This is especially true given the asymmetrical power relations that exist between donors in the north and CSOs in the south. Most CSOs in developing countries are at the aid pyramid base and are rattled by developments in the north. Furthermore, at a time CSOs in the south are struggling to demonstrate their relevance, legitimacy and accountability, the intrinsic value of the tenets of RBM cannot be overemphasised. RBM could offer them a way out here. The tenets of RBM can have therapeutic effects in strengthening their legitimacy, accountability while contributing to organisational growth and sustainability.

² World Bank, (1997, p. 2). World Development Report 1997: The State in a Changing World. New York: Oxford University Press

II. Defining and Institutionalising an M&E System

A well-functioning results-oriented M&E system provides the anchor for an effective RBM practice for any CSO; but what is an M&E system? Many jargon and phrases in non-governmental organisations are used lingua; the precise definition of an M&E system varies between organisations and donors. In most cases, an M&E system refers to all the indicators, tools, and processes that an organisation will use to measure if a programme has been implemented according to the plan (monitoring) and is having the desired result (evaluation). Nigel Simister offers a more compact definition of an M&E system³ as framework or approach comprises a 'series of policies, practices and processes that enable the systematic and effective collection, analysis and use of monitoring and evaluation information'⁴.

Building and maintaining a results-based M&E system is not a very complicated task. However, the process requires sustained and consistent time, effort, and resources to engineer and maintain. Specifically, for CSOs, it would require influential people who will champion it right from the onset, especially from the senior management level.

³ Bullen, P. B., (no date). Practical tools for international development. Tools4deve
⁴ Simister, N., (2009). Developing M&E Systems for Complex Organisations



Photo from www.annmurraybrown.com

As succinctly captured in the Op-Ed titled [4 Common Reasons Why CSOs Struggle with M&E](#), most CSOs justify that they do not have adequate resources and time to conduct proper monitoring and evaluation, and usually resort to sporadic donor commissioned external evaluations to satisfy temporal needs. Amid different competing interests and budget constraints, M&E is often sidetracked and only considered when programmes or projects are close to completion, and there is pressure to demonstrate results. This perhaps explains why a good number of nonprofits although willing and seeing the need, have neither been able to design nor maintain an effective and well-functioning M&E system. Nonetheless, by every means possible, setting up an M&E system is an achievable feat by the organisation that sets its sights on achieving and demonstrating results.

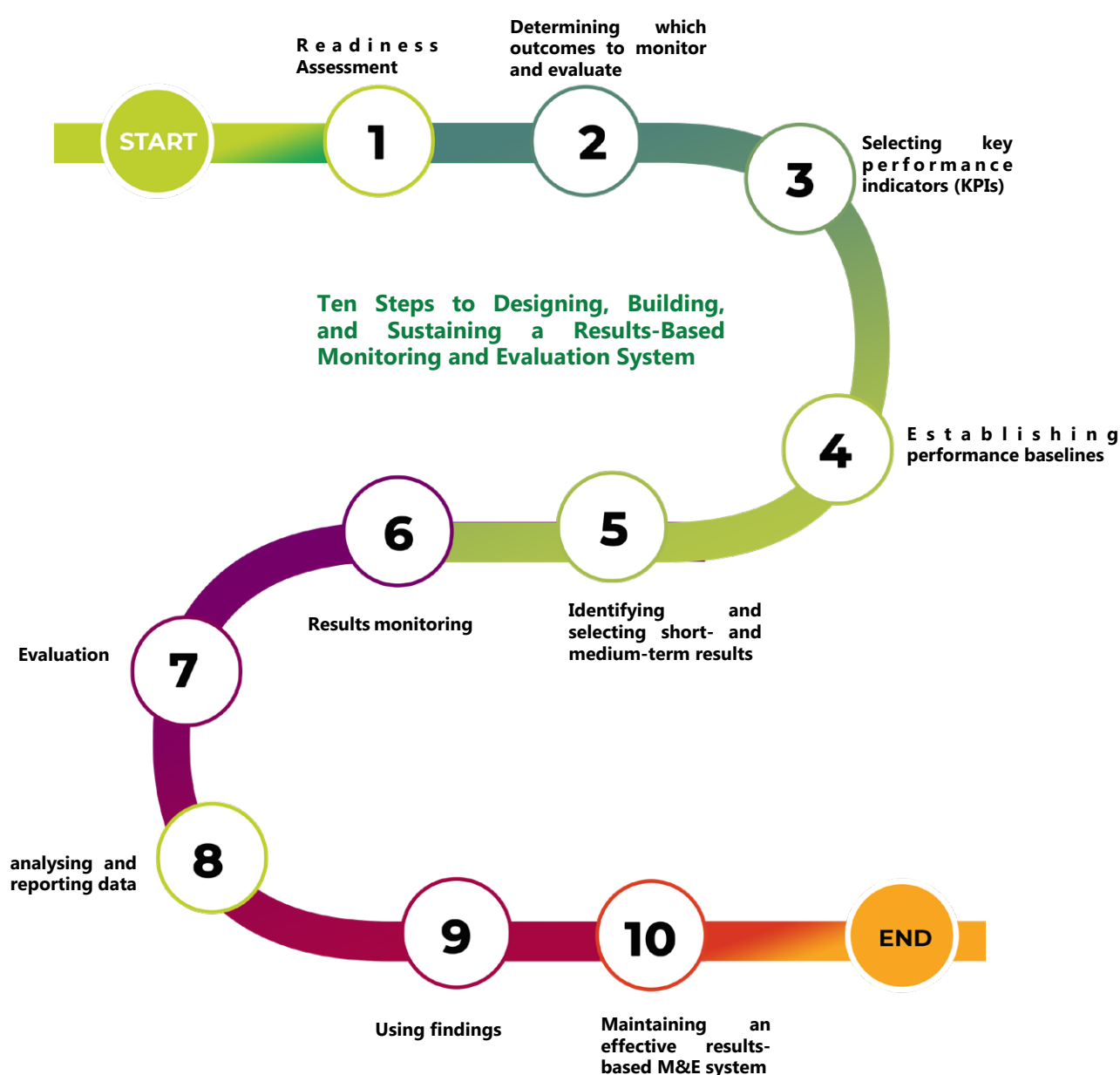
Regarding the issue of resource constraints, there are a number of initiatives CSOs can take to generate and allocate resources for M&E related expenditures including WACSI's Guidebook on [Alternative Funding Models for CSOs in Africa](#), which offers CSOs with twelve (12) tried and tested models on how to raise/mobilise funds locally.

Secondly, senior or programme managers with an eye for results can take up the challenge of championing the institutionalisation of an M&E system within the organisation. Conventional wisdom also portrays the building and sustenance of an M&E system as a technical process, but more than anything else, it is first and foremost a political process. There is a need for political will and commitment to the full process and implementation of the M&E system by the organisation's political hierarchy and management. Beyond the confines of politics, the technicalities are defined. Considering this, it is important that an influencer within the organisation takes charge, provides impetus, and motivation for the entire process.

III. The 10 Point Guide to Developing an Effective M&E System

Before delving into the content of developing an effective M&E system, it is good to point out that there is not one 'correct' way to build an M&E system. CSOs are of varying strengths and capabilities, and maybe at different stages of organisational growth. As such, with respect to M&E in general, CSOs may have divergent experiences. Therefore, it is important for the CSO to recognise where it stands, its priorities, and what could be of value with regards to the steps.

The literature on RBM⁵ is awash with a plethora of cost-effective approaches for designing and implementing an effective M&E system. However, the World Bank's landmark document⁶ on M&E system provides the simplest and user friendly ten (10) steps to designing an M&E system. Among other advantages, the steps are easy to follow, enabling CSOs with basic architecture and resources to adopt and implement.



Source: Inspired from the 10 steps to Results Based M&E, World Bank Handbook for Development Practitioners

⁵ The open knowledge repository of the World Bank provides useful and state of the art knowledge on development practice and M&E specifically
⁶ Kusek, J. and Rist, R. (2004). 'Ten Steps to a Results-based Monitoring and Evaluation System'. World Bank, Washington, D.C.



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Before work is started on the M&E system, an organisation must understand as much as possible itself, its mission and vision and the various interventions/programmes/projects that it runs. The organisation must be aware of the rationale behind its interventions, what its goals are, and how the goals could be achieved. The organisation also needs to know all their activities, outputs and outcomes⁷. For everyone to be carried along and be involved, it is important that, from the initiation stage, there is widespread/broad support and participation by every member of the organisation and not just limited to programme staff or core M&E staff. Sometimes, it may be expedient to involve relevant external partners or stakeholders too as part of the consultative process, especially in developing performance matrices such as outcomes, indicators, and targets.

The readiness assessment is the foundation stone of the M&E system. Just as a building must begin with a foundation, constructing an M&E system must begin with the foundation of a readiness assessment. A shaky foundation will ultimately be counterproductive in the journey to building an effective M&E system. **This is Step 1 of the process.**

⁷ This information should be available in documents such as the program log frame, problem tree and/or theory of change of the organisation/programmes

Step 2 of the process involves determining which outcomes to monitor and evaluate. Here, the first step is to decide which indicators you will use to measure your programme's success⁸. This is a very important step, so organisations should try to involve as many people as possible to get different perspectives. In choosing or developing indicators, it is expedient to keep indicators SMART, i.e. specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound. Indicators must be formulated for each level of your programme/project – outputs, outcomes, and goals. More than one indicator can be selected for each level. However, it is advisable to maintain a manageable number of indicators to analyse and track performance adequately.

Outcomes give a projection of the endgame or what lies ahead⁹. **Step 3** involves formulating or selecting key performance indicators (KPIs) to enable you to track progress with respect to your inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. Indicators help to give you an indication of how well you are performing. However, KPIs should not be seen as a concrete, chiselled on a tablet that cannot be amended or recalibrated. However, one should align indicators with the overall project framework, strategic ambitions, and the organisation's objectives.

Step 4 of the model relates to establishing performance baselines. These could either be qualitative or quantitative in nature. Without carefully articulated performance baselines, an organisation may not tell how far and how well they have travelled on the road to results. The baseline gives an impression of the status quo and a starting point from which future/subsequent monitoring and evaluation can be done.

Step 5 continues from the previous step. It involves identifying and selecting short- and medium-term results to be achieved in pursuance of longer-term outcomes. Targets can be selected by referencing baseline indicators and gauging desired improvement levels.

Step 6 of the model includes implementation and results monitoring. Monitoring for results includes the systematic collection and gathering of relevant performance data and information to track performance towards achieving your desired objective/goal.

⁸ Indicators are units of measurements that help to determine if a result has been achieved or not.

⁹ Outputs are the direct immediate term results associated with a project and outcome refers to medium term consequences of the project. Outcomes are specific measurable changes that usually relate or contribute to the overall project goal or aim



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Step 7 then proceeds to focus on evaluation. This is based on the data/information collected from step 6, that is, monitoring. In this step, the primary aim should be to consider the different uses, types, and timing of evaluation. Evaluations can be carried out at different intervals, but in a typical project situation, evaluations are carried out in three stages: baseline, mid-term and end of the project¹⁰.

Step 8 flows from step 7 and looks at analysing and reporting data. Reports are generated from these evaluations to help decisionmakers make the necessary adjustments. This leads us to step 9, which involves using the data generated.

Step 9 - using findings. It is highly critical that the evaluation's substance includes, based on accurate data and sound analysis, key findings accompanied by a set of recommendations for decision making, knowledge management and learning among purposes. The inability to fulfil this defeats the purpose of undertaking evaluation.

The final step (10) focuses on the essential bits of maintaining an effective results-based M&E system once it is in place. Once an M&E system is built, most organisations' nightmare is to how to sustain it. This is what step is all about. There are/ may be political and technical and organisational realities to respond to sustain an M&E system. These challenges relate to issues of capacity, clear roles and responsibilities, trustworthy and credible information, data flow (reporting) and management appropriate incentives.

¹⁰ The FAO defines Baseline as a descriptive cross-sectional survey that mostly provides quantitative information on the current status of a particular situation – on whatever study topic – in a given population. It aims at quantifying the distribution of certain variables in a study population at one point in time". IFAO. (2013). *Baseline Study in Participatory Rural Community Appraisal*. Mid-term evaluation is a review that is done at middle of a project usually to track progress and take corrective measure while End term or summative evaluation is carried out to establish project outputs and immediate outcomes, with results of the evaluation compared to the results at baseline.

Usually, after creating the tool for each indicator, you need to decide who will be responsible for each step in the process. This includes who will be responsible for using the tool to collect the data, enter the data into the computer/app, analyse it, and create the final report. In this regard, the CSO can design a simple flow chart with illustrations on how the data will flow from the point where it is collected up to the end-user where it influences decision making.

IV. Some Useful Hints

For most organisations, some of the challenges outlined above can be daunting, but there are a number of ways to overcome many of these constraints. Thanks to the internet and online resources, many CSOs would not have to build most of these templates for designing the M&E system from scratch. A variety of online platforms provide technical resources and documents including manuals and simple tools for setting up an M&E system either for free or at a giveaway cost.¹¹ These range from data, storage and analysis tools, M&E plan templates, and even short courses and training.¹²

In addition to these, there are an array of ideal tools that organisations should develop to operationalise the M&E system effectively. These include log frame¹³, the theory of change¹⁴, and the problem tree to mention a few. Most of the templates for these tools are free and downloadable online, while many other portals offer hints and design methods.¹⁵

¹¹ Some of these resources' include <https://www.plusacumen.org/>, www.betterevaluation.org/en.

¹² WACSI offers training in Results Based M&E. Other free- online course offers include acumenacademy.org

¹³ A log frame is a table that lists your program activities, short term outputs, medium term outcomes, and long-term goal. It is supposed to show the logic of how the activities will lead to the outputs, which in turn lead to the outcomes, and ultimately the goal.

¹⁴ A theory of change is roadmap that guides you on your journey to change

¹⁵ For example, for [easy reference](#)

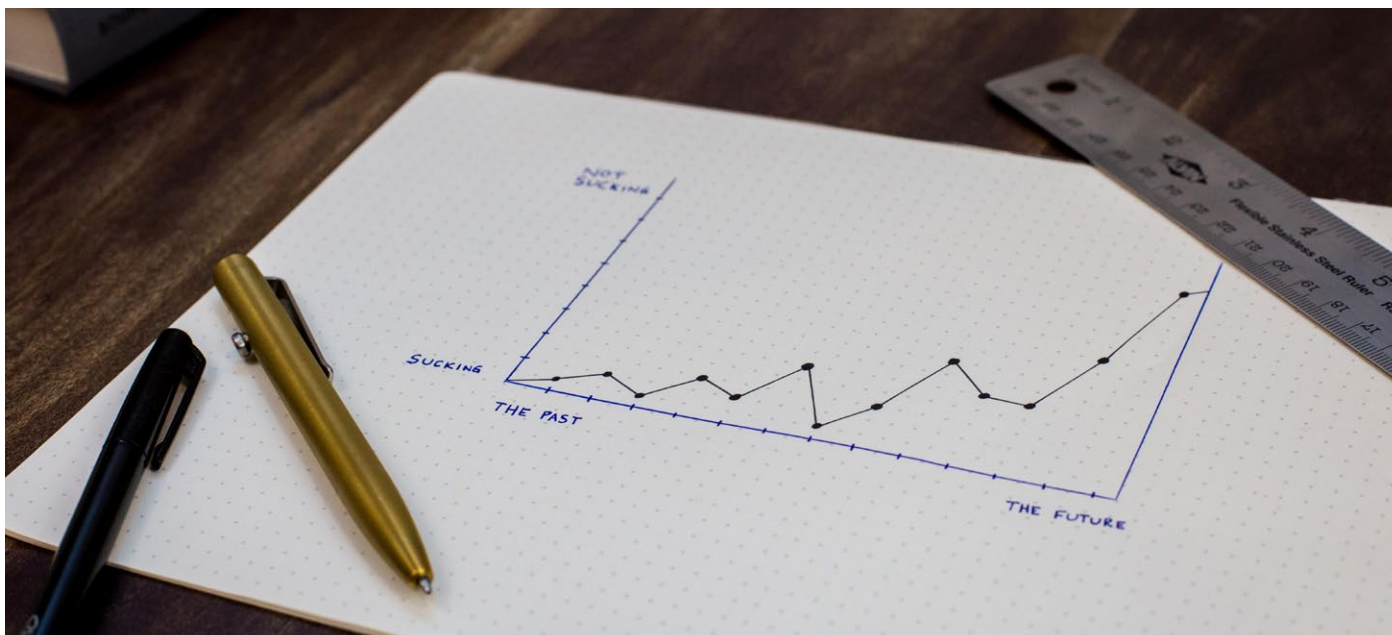


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V. Recommendations

The following recommendations are essential for CSOs and other key stakeholders to address some of the inherent challenges CSOs may face in designing and operationalising the M&E system.

- International donors/development partners should consider supporting their local partners' institutional development by allowing a small window in funding budgets for operational cost such as the M&E to engender greater accountability, transparency, cost, and effectiveness of their interventions. For example, some funded projects run by WACSI have included training on RBM&E, and the effect on project impact has been positive.
- Setting up a results-based M&E is a political as much as it is technical. There is a need to buy-in and support from the hierarchy of CSOs. Management is strongly encouraged to prioritise M&E by giving letter and meaning to the institutionalisation of M&E and culture, including dedicating resources and time.
- As recommended in the previous Op-Ed on [4 Common Reasons Why CSOs Struggle with M&E](#), it also is beneficial to identify a patron for driving the political process of setting up an M&E system. Equally important, is the need to assign staff exclusively to manage or spearhead the technicalities such as collecting, storing, analysing and utilising data.

- Practice makes perfect. CSOs are encouraged to operationalise the system once it is set up by integrating it into daily operations and programming and trying to use it daily.
- Organisations must ensure that lessons emanating from practice and the constant use of the system should inform improvements and constant development of the system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when built and sustained properly, an M&E system can lead to greater accountability and transparency, improved performance, and knowledge generation. The 10-point step enumerated above provides guidelines and building blocks for creating and sustaining a credible results-based M&E system.

It is useful to keep in mind that these steps are not cast in concrete, and one will inevitably move back and forth along the steps, or work on several simultaneously/concurrently. The use of such results-based M&E systems can help bring about major systemic and sustainable changes in CSOs' operations.

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