

# WHEN AND HOW TO DEVELOP AN IMPACT- ORIENTED MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEM

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Greet Peersman, Patricia Rogers, Irene Guijt, Simon Hearn, Tiina Pasanen and Anne L. Buffardi

The Methods Lab is an action-learning collaboration between the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), BetterEvaluation (BE) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The Methods Lab seeks to develop, test, and institutionalise flexible approaches to impact evaluations. It focuses on interventions which are harder to evaluate because of their diversity and complexity or where traditional impact evaluation approaches may not be feasible or appropriate, with the broader aim of identifying lessons with wider application potential.

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**Research  
& Policy in  
Development**

**Overseas Development Institute**

203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
Tel +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
info@odi.org.uk  
www.odi.org



**BetterEvaluation**

**BetterEvaluation**

E-mail: [bettereval@gmail.com](mailto:bettereval@gmail.com)  
[www.betterevaluation.org](http://www.betterevaluation.org)



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**

# Focus

This guidance note focuses on:

- what an impact-oriented monitoring and evaluation system entails
- why an organisation may want to establish such a system
- when integrating an impact-orientation into an monitoring and evaluation system is most useful
- what should be considered in developing the monitoring and evaluation system, or in tweaking an existing system, to become more impact-focused.

# Intended users

The primary audience for this guidance note is internal and external monitoring and evaluation advisors involved in designing and implementing, and/or assessing monitoring and evaluation systems to include a focus on impact.

It will also be useful for senior management of organisations who need to know how best to plan for a sustainable monitoring and evaluation system that supports impact assessment or to adapt an existing system to incorporate an impact perspective.

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# Authors and acknowledgements

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The authors and their contributions are:

**Greet Peersman** (BetterEvaluation), who led the overall writing, reviewing, revising and finalisation of the guidance note; Greet conceptualised the content and wrote substantive sections of the guidance note, in particular chapters 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6.

**Patricia Rogers** (BetterEvaluation) also conceptualised the content for the guidance note and wrote sections on applying systems and complexity thinking, as well as using theories of change – specifically in chapters 2 and 5.

**Irene Guijt** (ODI) conceptualised the focus of the paper and identified key themes drawn from the different programmes upon which the guidance note is based. In particular, she contributed to chapters 1, 2 and 5.

**Simon Hearn** (ODI) wrote sections on defining impact-oriented M&E systems in Chapter 2.

**Tiina Pasanen** (ODI) helped to conceptualise the overall guidance note and identified key themes drawn from the case study programmes; she wrote chapters 3 and 6, and contributed to Chapter 4.

**Anne Buffardi** (ODI) also helped identify key themes from the case studies and contributed to chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5.

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## Acronyms

<b>BE</b>	BetterEvaluation, RMIT University, Australia
<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>DFAT</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia
<b>DFID</b>	Department of International Development, UK
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and evaluation
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>ToC</b>	Theory of change

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# 1. Rationale and purpose of this guidance note

Many development programme staff have had the experience of commissioning an impact evaluation towards the end of a project or programme only to find that the monitoring system did not provide adequate data about implementation, context, baselines or interim results. This guidance note has been developed in response to this common problem.

The opportunity of learning-by-doing through engagement with ongoing interventions helped to ground this guidance note in the practical experiences of programme managers and staff, and those commissioning or conducting monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of development interventions. The interventions involved shared some common challenges related to:

- **the type and delivery of the intervention:**
  - multiple components implemented by different organisations across several sites and aiming to affect change at multiple levels. As such, negotiations around what impacts to assess were needed between many different stakeholders or
  - interventions with defined impacts but uncertain pathways as to how to get there.
- **the type of impact, such as:**
  - diffuse effects which are difficult to discern or
  - effects at the end of a long causal chain requiring good intermediate or proxy measures.

Some challenges, in terms of the impact focus, were specific to the stage in the intervention cycle (see Table 1).

Many of these challenges could have been avoided or, at least, reduced by planning for impact assessment early on in the intervention cycle. While there are

**Table 1: Challenges in impact focus of interventions involved in the Methods Lab**

Interventions 'en route' or 'ending'	Interventions 'starting up'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lacked a clear impact logic or needed retro-fitting</li> <li>• Portfolios lacked an overarching impact logic that brings results of different components together</li> <li>• Existing data not fully aligned with impact logic, hence not relevant or under-utilised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact not yet addressed</li> <li>• Different interpretations between different stakeholders about what constitutes impact</li> <li>• Difficulty prioritising among many relevant impact-related questions</li> <li>• Difficulty balancing shorter-term demands to demonstrate performance and longer-term learning about impact</li> </ul>

benefits of integrating impact-orientation early on, it can easily overwhelm programme staff. Moreover, a focus on impact is not always appropriate. This guidance note aims to facilitate a better understanding of what is involved in designing, implementing and/or assessing impact-oriented M&E systems including:

- what an impact-oriented M&E system entails
- why an organisation may want to establish such a system
- when integrating an impact-orientation is most useful, and
- what should be considered in developing the system or in tweaking an existing M&E system to become more impact-focused.

**Figure 1: Representation of a simplified results chain that includes impact**



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## 2. What is an impact-oriented M&E system?

In this section, we define the key terms used in this guidance note: impact, monitoring, evaluation, impact monitoring, impact evaluation and impact-oriented M&E system. Defining these terms is an important part of developing and implementing a multi-stakeholder M&E system: it ensures that all those involved have the same understanding from the outset and thus helps avoid confusion or disagreement later on.

### 2.1 What do we mean by impact?

While there are many different definitions of ‘impact’ (see the discussion in Hearn and Buffardi 2016), in this guidance note, we define impact as per the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

*‘Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended’*  
(OECD-DAC 2010)

We use the term impact to refer to long-term results such as health status, well-being or social change as the ultimate results at the end of a causal chain (see Figure 1).

Impact is distinct from ‘outputs’ – which are the direct products resulting from the implementation of intervention activities – and from ‘outcomes’ – which are the intermediate-term changes in the target group(s) who have been engaged in the intervention and which precede, and are usually a pre-condition for, impact to occur.

There may be particular challenges to assessing the long-term results: it is usually harder to gather evidence

that they actually occurred; they are often not visible during the life of a short-term intervention; and they are more likely to be affected by other interventions and other factors. In practice, a particular intervention is rarely sufficient to produce the intended impacts alone and there are often alternative ways to achieve them. It is far more likely for there to be a situation of joint causal attribution (Figure 2) or alternative (or multiple) causal paths (Figure 3). And, in some cases, it may not be possible to define impacts and/or the pathway in advance (see section 5.2).

Joint causal attribution (Figure 2) is when the intervention produces the impacts in conjunction with other interventions (i.e., complementary or other ongoing interventions) or certain contextual factors (i.e., impacts will only be achieved if favourable conditions are present and/or unfavourable conditions are removed).

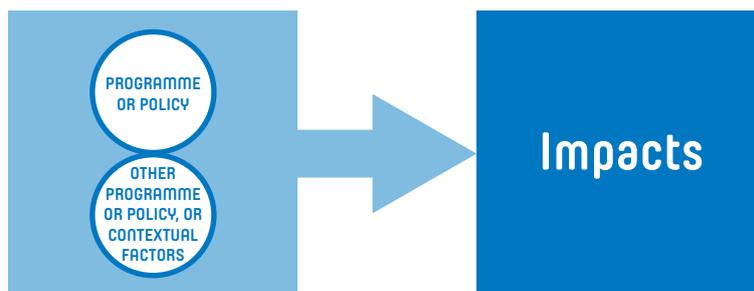
The alternative (or multiple) causal paths, shown in Figure 3, are when a particular intervention can produce the impacts but they may also come about through other interventions (e.g., participants are able to access services through an alternative provider) and/or external factors. These situations are common and have important implications for how impact assessment is conducted and how the findings are used – especially in terms of scale-up of the intervention or potential replication elsewhere (Rogers 2014).

Impact has many dimensions (see Table 2), including:

- **positive or negative** – that is, beneficial or detrimental as judged by those affected by the intervention or other stakeholders

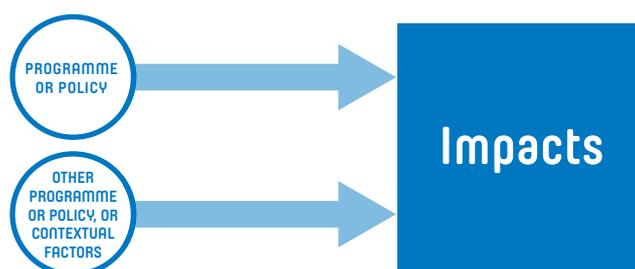
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**Figure 2: Representation of joint causal attribution**



Source: Rogers, P. (2014) *Overview: Strategies for causal attribution. Methodological Briefs on Impact Evaluation, Nr 6.* Florence: UNICEF Office of Research.

**Figure 3: Representation of alternative (or multiple) causal paths**



Source: Rogers, P. (2014) *Overview: Strategies for causal attribution. Methodological Briefs on Impact Evaluation, Nr 6. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research.*

- **primary or secondary** – they may relate to the objectives of the intervention or may be side-effects or spill-over effects
- **direct or indirect** – there may be a direct causal link with the intervention activities or they may come about through cascaded activities
- **long-term** – they are dependent on other results being achieved first, and thus, take longer to be materialised or observed
- **intended or unintended** – they may be specifically targeted through the chosen activities or they may be additional
- **foreseen or unforeseen** – they may be predictable or not.

We refer to the Methods Lab paper *What is impact?* (Hearn and Buffardi 2016) for a broader discussion about impact dimensions and their implications for impact assessment.

## 2.2 What do we mean by monitoring and evaluation?

Monitoring is the routine tracking and reporting of priority information about an intervention.<sup>1</sup> This information can relate to the intervention’s inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts but also to emerging issues or results, and the internal and external context in which the intervention operates.

**Monitoring** is used primarily for internal management and accountability. Intervention managers and implementers can use monitoring information to assess whether the implementation of the intervention is on track and to identify and correct any challenges in a timely manner. A subset of this information is often reported to senior management or funders (upward accountability), intervention beneficiaries (downward accountability) and/or peers or implementing partners (horizontal accountability).

**Evaluation** refers to discrete studies that aim to produce an overall evaluative judgement about the merit, worth or significance of an intervention, in addition to descriptions of the way things are and analysis of causal relationships. Evaluation findings are intended primarily to inform decisions about a specific intervention but also about future investments and planning.

**Table 2: Dimensions of defining impact**

	Intended	Positive unintended	Negative unintended
<b>Foreseen</b>	Planned programme goals	Predicted spill-over effects	Predicted risks or side-effects
<b>Unforeseen</b>	Emergent programme goals	Nice surprise	Calamity, mishap or backlash

Source: Hearn and Buffardi 2016 – adapted from Ling 2014

<sup>1</sup> Such as a project, programme, policy, portfolio of projects, initiative.

Monitoring and evaluation are distinct but closely inter-related activities. For example, evaluation is often triggered by monitoring data – such as when unexpected things happen that need more in-depth investigation as to why they occurred. Evaluations are also often dependent on information that has been collected through ongoing monitoring – for instance, documented progress with implementation of planned activities; such information would be much harder and less reliable to obtain retrospectively.

Generally, monitoring and evaluation findings are used at different times, with different regularity, different resource needs and for different purposes. Table 3 summarises the ways in which monitoring and evaluation are often defined and practiced. It highlights why monitoring and evaluation are both needed for effective programme management and decision making; it is not sufficient to conduct monitoring without any kind of evaluative reflection and, given the episodic nature of most evaluation studies,<sup>2</sup> they are, by themselves, inadequate to support adaptive management of

an ongoing intervention. Hence, it makes sense to implement M&E activities in a manner that draws on their respective strengths and to plan for them as part of a monitoring and evaluation system.

### 2.3 What does a monitoring and evaluation system involve?

A monitoring and evaluation system is more than simply a system for collecting data or a list of measures or methods for data collection. The BetterEvaluation Rainbow Framework ([www.betterevaluation.org](http://www.betterevaluation.org)) provides an organising framework of seven ‘clusters’ of monitoring and evaluation tasks (see Table 4), from defining what is to be monitored and evaluated, clarifying primary intended users and uses, and then setting out how data will be collected or retrieved, analysed, reported and used for particular purposes.

**Table 3: How monitoring and evaluation are often defined or practised<sup>3</sup>**

Key characteristics	Monitoring	Evaluation
<b>Purpose and approach</b>	Routinely collects priority information, often through standardised performance indicators linked to the objectives of the intervention	Is episodic and investigates particular dimensions of an intervention and observed results, usually, in depth and by using multiple data sources
<b>Understanding causality</b>	Links inputs and activities to results, often limited to outputs but outcomes and/or impacts may also be tracked  Does not conduct causal inference	Tests (elements of) the underlying theory of change  Assesses specific causal contributions of the intervention to the results, going beyond outputs to include outcomes and/or impacts
<b>Use</b>	Provides actual results, which can be compared with intended results, often expressed as specific, pre-established targets  Tracks unintended results that are foreseen  Identifies areas of under-achievement, which may alert managers to problems that need to be corrected or further investigated  Reports achievements to funders or policy makers (upward accountability) and/or beneficiaries (downward accountability)	Analyses why intended results were or were not achieved  Assesses unintended results, both foreseen and unforeseen  Provides a judgement about the merit, worth or significance of an intervention  Provides lessons learned and offers recommendations for intervention improvement and/or resource allocation

*See, for example, CDC (2003), Kusek and Rist (2004), Peersman and Rugg (2010).*

- 2 There are notable exceptions such as developmental evaluation, which is particularly suited to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments.
- 3 Some characteristics are not necessarily exclusive to either one of the functions. For example, routine monitoring may include assessing unintended results such as in early warning systems; monitoring can assess the logic of particular links in the theory of change through analysing the patterns in increases or decreases in indicator values though they may be more difficult to interpret by themselves.

**Table 4: Holistic approach to M&E using the BetterEvaluation Framework**

Task	What it entails
<b>Manage</b>	The planning and management of the implementation of the M&E system, including who will make decisions about it, who will lead development and implementation and the roles and responsibilities of different actors
<b>Define</b>	Developing or obtaining a description of the intervention and how it is understood to work
<b>Frame</b>	Setting the parameters for M&E – the purposes, what to monitor and what to evaluate including key evaluation questions and information needs for decision making about the intervention, and the criteria and standards to be used
<b>Describe</b>	Collecting or collating data to answer descriptive questions about the intervention, the various results observed, and the context in which the intervention is implemented
<b>Understand causes</b>	Analysing data to answer causal questions about the extent to which the intervention produced observed outcomes and/or impacts
<b>Synthesize</b>	Using multiple sources of data to support evaluative judgements about the merit, worth and/or significance of an intervention
<b>Report and support use</b>	Developing and presenting findings in ways that are useful for the primary intended users, and supporting them to make evidence-informed decisions

A monitoring and evaluation system requires integrated planning around the purposes, information priorities, underlying values and principles, roles and responsibilities but also capacities of different actors contributing to the system, implementation procedures and activities and tools.

If M&E is to facilitate and foster, not only individual, but also organisational learning it needs to be built into the regular organisational and financial allocation processes in order to become integral to the thinking and acting of the organisation (Dlamini 2006). This requires:

- establishing organisational structures, strengthening human capacity and building strategic partnerships to plan, coordinate and manage the M&E system including:
  - understanding the capacity requirements for monitoring and evaluation at different levels of the system (individual, organisational, across organisations), and
  - clearly defining roles and responsibilities drawing on the strengths and comparative advantage of different actors
- support for, and regular communications about, the usefulness of M&E, and identifying M&E champions to create a supportive culture for M&E within the organisation
- identifying and prioritising information needs, and selecting and supporting appropriate data collection, verification and analysis strategies
- storing and managing the information in ways that protect sensitive data but also facilitate sharing where appropriate (within the organisation and with others) and knowledge accumulation
- supporting dissemination tailored to different primary users of the information, and providing dedicated time and appropriate spaces for its use in decision making.

## 2.4 What is an impact-oriented M&E system?

In the same way that an M&E system brings together elements of monitoring and evaluation in a mutually beneficial way, an impact-oriented M&E system goes beyond investing in a one-off impact evaluation process that might run parallel to other M&E activities. The aim is to align different data sources, how and when they are collected and analysed so they can contribute to understanding impact, not only performance compliance and short-term learning. Before we look at what this integration looks like, we define impact evaluation and impact monitoring.

**Impact evaluation** is a specific type of evaluation that systematically and empirically investigates the impacts produced, or contributed to, by an intervention and seeks to determine what difference the intervention has made. Impact evaluations can be undertaken for formative purposes – to improve an intervention, or for summative purposes – to inform decisions about whether to continue, discontinue, replicate or scale-up an intervention (Rogers 2014).

An impact evaluation addresses three types of questions: descriptive questions (asks how things are or what has happened); causal questions (asks whether or not, and to what extent the intervention brought about the observed changes); and evaluative questions (asks about the overall value or the intervention taking into account intended and unintended impacts, the criteria and standards established upfront and how these should be weighted and synthesised).

**Impact monitoring** tracks and reports information related to the longer-term benefits an intervention intends to achieve. But it does not establish whether any observed changes are due to the intervention or not. The most obvious form of impact monitoring would involve direct tracking of impact-level results – for example, by periodic measuring of the health of participants or measuring air quality around a construction site. However, impact monitoring may also involve developing feedback mechanisms to understand early signs of possible unintended impact (both positive and negative).

We use the term ‘impact assessment’ more broadly where making the distinction between impact monitoring and impact evaluation is not pertinent.

An **impact-oriented M&E system**, then, is concerned with tracking and judging impact-level results in addition to short-term outputs and intermediate-term outcomes. Perrin (2012) suggests that ongoing monitoring can contribute four types of information that are crucial to evaluating impact:

1. information about the nature of the intervention, such as services provided, who has been served, baseline data, and changes over time
2. information about the context of the intervention, such as other interventions that are co-occurring, external factors and the political, economic, social and physical environment

3. information about observed or potential impacts: existing evidence or strong suggestions that changes may be taking place
4. other pertinent information, such as the continued relevance of the intervention, potential impact evaluation questions, existing data sources.

As Perrin (2012) surmises, only in rare circumstances can an impact evaluation be conducted independently from ongoing monitoring. Indeed, the premise of this guidance note is that impact assessment relies on co-developing impact evaluation and impact monitoring, along with other forms of M&E, into an impact-oriented M&E system that supports decision making more efficiently and effectively than if these elements were treated separately. This means that each of the clusters of M&E tasks in Table 4 will need to address appropriate dimensions of impact. For example:

- ‘define tasks’ will need to include descriptions of the intended impact and how the intervention is expected to lead to these, commonly referred to as the theory of change (ToC) and visualised using a logic model
- ‘frame tasks’ will need to include the development of impact-focused questions such as ‘What are the long-term (negative and positive) effects experienced by different targeted groups?’
- ‘describe tasks’ will need to include collection of information about impacts and factors (such as context) that might affect impacts
- ‘tasks for understanding causes’ will need to include strategies for assessing attribution or contribution of the intervention to the observed impacts.

In summary, an impact-oriented M&E system is about intentionally focusing on impacts throughout the intervention cycle, and bringing information about impacts and their causes into the decision making about the intervention.

### Key messages

An impact-orientated M&E system:

- integrates tracking, describing and judging impact-level results in M&E efforts throughout the intervention period
- requires long-term M&E planning with attention to what needs to be done to maintain a good quality system over time
- is dependent on a shared understanding of M&E concepts and clarity around the role and responsibilities of different stakeholders involved, and
- relies on the continued and active engagement of programme staff in designing, implementing and/or managing M&E functions.

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# 3. Why should an organisation consider developing an impact-oriented M&E system?

This section focuses on the rationale for designing impact-oriented M&E systems and why it can be beneficial to integrate impact-orientation early on.

The practical experiences from the Methods Lab action-learning and previous literature on impact assessment (IEG 2009, CONCORD 2010, Guinea et al. 2015, Vaessen et al. 2014) highlight four key benefits of integrating an impact-orientation early on in the intervention cycle, which are:

1. shifting the focus from outputs to impact, from indicators to impact-related questions
2. improving the availability and quality of data for impact assessment to draw on
3. providing timely, relevant data to guide adaptive management of the intervention, and
4. offering space for collective sense-making of data collected.

## 3.1 Shifting the focus from outputs to impact, from indicators to impact-related questions

During the proposal stage, projects are often required to complete a logframe and identify indicators that will demonstrate progress towards fulfilling the stated objectives. Thus, M&E frameworks often focus on inputs, activities and outputs. For example:

- ‘How many trainings were conducted?’
- ‘What is the quality of the reports produced?’
- ‘How many books were given to the school children?’

Output monitoring is within a project’s sphere of control and provides visible signs of project implementation. However, it can also orient the project from the outset towards indicators rather than a set of key questions that decision makers and other stakeholders are most interested in answering about the project.

Integrating an orientation towards outcomes and impact can help surface what are often implicit questions and assumptions on which the project design is based. For example:

- ‘What longer term results is the project aiming to achieve?’
- ‘What information do stakeholders need to be able to understand the extent to which these are achieved and how and why they are occurring?’

Using the project ToC and impact-focused questions as the foundation for the M&E system can help identify which assessments or measurements (including indicators) are most relevant and which methods for data collection and analysis are most appropriate to use.

## 3.2 Improving the availability and quality of data for impact assessment

Gathering data on a periodic or ongoing basis, rather than just at the end of the intervention (as is often done with impact evaluation) can help with the interpretation of data about longer term results. For example, information on monthly micro-entrepreneur revenue, seasonal agricultural yields and annual household income gives a more comprehensive picture of the extent and direction of change, including any fluctuations over time. Collecting information when activities are being implemented also reduces recall bias and can help to identify and correct for missing or misinterpreted information. Hence, including an impact-orientation in M&E activities can increase both the availability and the quality of the data.

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### 3.3 Providing timely, relevant data to guide adaptive management

In addition to gathering data for judging impact at the end of the intervention period, inclusion of impact indicators in ongoing M&E efforts can provide useful information throughout the project's lifetime. This information can demonstrate trends over time and provide early signals about project impacts. As such, it can help to guide project implementation and inform the design of subsequent projects, the planning for which often starts years in advance. Including procedures and processes for periodic analysis and reflection throughout the implementation can uncover unexpected (positive or negative) impacts that may be otherwise overlooked.

### 3.4 Offering space for collective sense-making of data collected

CONCORD (2010) suggests that impact-focused M&E can also 'offer spaces for political discussion on the objectives of development, leading to a reflection on the relevance, sustainability and effectiveness of actions' (p. 2). Such discussions took place at a more operational (rather than political) level in the various Methods Lab projects but also offered the opportunity for joint discussion and collective sense-making at a project-wide level. This included: discussing the project's ToC, underlying assumptions and implementers' understanding of impact, and prioritising evaluation questions and key indicators. The interaction between implementing staff was particularly important in cases where external consultants or grant writers at the organisation's headquarter office had developed

the M&E framework with limited engagement from implementing staff (many of whom had not yet been hired at that stage). Engagement from all stakeholders in the design and implementation of the M&E system can help buy-in and encourage the use of data for decision making and learning. A review of evaluations conducted in the European Union suggests that the use of evidence from evaluations is influenced by the way in which they are planned and the degree of stakeholder involvement, among other factors (Bossuyt et al. 2014).

CONCORD (2010) also points to the potential of an impact-orientated M&E system to reinforce accountability and credibility towards intended beneficiaries, donors, partners and the wider public, and to strengthen ownership and empowerment of partner organisations and rights-holders. For this to occur, engagement processes need to include these actors. In the Methods Lab, all interventions were large, multi-site, multi-organisational initiatives. Stakeholder engagement in M&E was primarily restricted to representatives from the donor agency and managerial staff of the implementing organisation (in some cases, government officials were also involved). Not often were those actually implementing the intervention involved in setting the direction for and implementing or supervising M&E activities. The intended beneficiaries were occasionally consulted at the project proposal stage and a few implementing organisations planned for beneficiary involvement in ongoing monitoring processes. However, beneficiaries were, overall, less involved than other stakeholder groups. To be feasible, large projects with many stakeholders need to take the time to clarify who will be involved in which elements of monitoring and evaluation.

# 4. When is an impact-oriented M&E system appropriate?

Not all interventions need to have impact-oriented M&E. This section focuses on what considerations and tools can help in deciding whether it makes sense to invest time and resources into developing an impact-oriented M&E system.

The M&E system of all types of interventions will likely include needs assessment and monitoring inputs and outputs once implementation begins. Expectations to conduct additional levels of M&E vary by the nature, size and maturity of the intervention, and also by its ‘complexity’ (see Figure 4). There are a few rules of thumb. First, the extent and costs of M&E activities should be commensurate to the size, reach and cost of the intervention; M&E should never compromise or overtake implementation. Second, not all M&E activities are appropriate for all types of interventions, or the intervention’s stage of development (maturity).

## 4.1 Matching M&E efforts with implementation efforts and decision-making needs

Not all interventions need to collect information about impact. Focusing on inputs, activities, outputs and intermediate outcomes is often enough.

M&E data should, first and foremost, address the specific decision-making needs of the intervention. These depend on what is or is not already known about the intervention. For example, the M&E standards of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) state that the degree of M&E rigour should be proportional to the importance of the decisions to be made.<sup>4</sup> An intervention that aims to address a new or poorly understood need, or that trials a new approach to a persistent problem, may want to invest more in M&E than an intervention that replicates a standardised service in a different but similar setting.

All interventions would need to carry out input, activities and output monitoring. The UK Department of International Development (DFID), for example, requires all new projects to do so using a standard DFID Business Case including a logframe. Interventions may also be expected to conduct a process evaluation assessing the extent to which,

Figure 4: Setting realistic expectations for monitoring and evaluation



\*Impact monitoring should be part of all national level development efforts to monitor population-level changes in health status, wellbeing or social change; but it cannot be easily linked to specific interventions.

Source: Adapted from Rugg, D., Peersman, G., Carael, M. (eds) (2004) *Global advances in HIV/AIDS monitoring and evaluation. New Directions for Evaluation* 103.

4 <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/monitoring-evaluation-standards.pdf>

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and how, the intervention is being implemented, and/or conduct an outcome/impact evaluation at the end of the implementation period. Although the number of impact evaluations has significantly increased in the past ten years (Savedoff 2013, Cameron et al. 2015), they represent a small proportion of the total number of development evaluations.

Impact M&E requires that process monitoring and/or process evaluation has been done first; information about how a project is implemented in practice, rather than solely relying on documentation of how it was designed, is critical to interpreting findings about impact. For example, there may be variation in intervention delivery across sites based on staff motivation or the extent to which they adhere to implementation protocols. Process monitoring and evaluation that document what activities took place, with whom, where and how can help to rule out ‘implementation failure’ as a possible explanation for the lack of intended longer term changes occurring (Stame 2010).

## 4.2 Determining plausibility, utility and feasibility of impact assessment

Impact should be a focus only if there are plausible links between the intervention activities and the chain of results. Other key issues to address first are: ‘Is there sufficient interest in the use of impact findings?’; and, ‘Is it feasible to assess impact?’. It is a waste of time and resources if impact findings are likely not to be used or come too late to inform important decision making. Similarly, if it is not feasible to collect the types of impact-related information that are pertinent to decision-making needs, it makes little sense to invest in it.

An evaluability assessment or similar scoping can help programme staff address these three conditions in a systematic way before embarking on impact assessment (see, for example, Dunn 2008, Davies 2013, Peersman et al. 2015). Such an assessment focuses on:

- **adequacy of the intervention design in terms of the impact it aims to achieve.** Is it plausible to expect impact, and, if so, is it likely to be observable within the time period studied?
- **conduciveness of the organisational context to support and use impact assessment.** Are the results likely to be used and useful?
- **feasibility of impact assessment.** Is it possible, with the available resources, to collect useful impact data?

The intervention activities should reasonably be expected to lead to the intended outcomes<sup>5</sup> and impacts (i.e., there is a plausible relationship). Verifying the logic of this on the basis of the intervention design may reveal the need to modify the intervention and/or revisit the expectations regarding anticipated outcomes and/or impacts.

Impact assessment should only be undertaken when its intended use and users can be clearly identified and when it is likely to produce useful findings. To manage expectations, clarity about who needs what information, when, and for what purpose(s) is crucial. Assessing stakeholder expectations about what ‘evidence’ is seen as credible is equally important. Stakeholders’ needs and expectations will affect the timing of the evaluation, the type of data to be collected, the way in which they are obtained and analysed, and the strategies and channels by which to present and share the findings with intended users.

Not all data are easy to collect and data that can be more easily obtained may not be particularly relevant or appropriate to understand causal pathways. Similarly, the timing of the impact assessment is crucial in determining what is worth assessing: it may be undertaken too late to inform important decisions; or, if undertaken too early, it may lead to inaccuracies such as understated impacts (when there has not been sufficient time for impacts to emerge) or overstated impacts (when one needs to determine whether impacts last over time).

Other practical considerations include:

- characteristics of the intervention such as roll-out over time and location, levels of client intake and reach may affect the sampling approach or sample size, the baseline data needs, options for a control or comparison group (where appropriate) or the use of other strategies to investigate causal attribution
- the size of the available M&E budget. This plays an important role in influencing which designs are possible. For example, gathering data at the beginning and end of an intervention or for intervention participants and non-participants can increase required resources substantially.

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5 Outcomes are defined as the intermediate-term results that are intended to lead to the desired impacts.

### 4.3 Ensuring adequate capacity and resources for impact assessment

An impact-orientation should only be added if there are adequate capacities and resources to do it well (IEG 2009). For example, if existing M&E efforts are gathering information in an inconsistent or incomplete manner – affecting data quality – or if the information is not being analysed regularly or used appropriately, then it is not worth adding additional requirements for impact assessment (see Box 1). Instead, resources would be better targeted at addressing existing gaps and weaknesses first.

How M&E is valued within an organisation may also influence what is considered worth investing in. For example, M&E staff time is often focused on tracking what is contractually agreed rather than on what is needed for good programme management; capacity and time for critical reflection may not be judged as important as strengthening capacity for statistical analysis or database management.

#### Box 1: Importance of assessing existing M&E capacity before deciding on impact assessment

Based on 11 projects in which the authors have been involved over the past year, projects proposed gathering an average of 58 indicators (range 18-132, median 58). One large project had a comprehensive data collection system in place, with a wide range of information intended to be gathered at local and regional levels and procedures to aggregate the data into a national monitoring information system on a monthly basis. In practice, however, the project's ambition significantly overwhelmed its capacity. The very large number of indicators, high staff turnover and insufficient M&E training, and limited capacity to implement data quality assurance and to conduct analyses, resulted in substantial variation in the quality and completeness of the information across different sites. Not enough space and time was allocated to analyse and interpret the data so the information that was gathered was not fully used.

DFAT's 2014 M&E standards include that those responsible for implementing the M&E plan have the time, resources and skills to do so. They also encourage documenting how M&E efforts have informed learning, decision making and action.

#### Key messages

Integrating an impact-orientation into a M&E system should only happen when:

- information about impact will be useful and timely to support specified decision-making needs
- impact is deemed plausible and is feasible to assess with rigor
- resources and capacity for collecting, analysing and interpreting impact data are adequate.

# 5. What are key issues to address when establishing an impact-oriented M&E system?

Once an organisation has decided it is appropriate and they are able to develop an impact-oriented M&E system it should address:

1. using the ToC as the foundation for impact-oriented M&E
2. determining impact focus based on complexity thinking
3. balancing emphasis on accountability and learning
4. prioritising impact-related information needs
5. clarifying M&E roles and sequencing M&E activities

## 5.1 Using the theory of change as the foundation for impact-oriented M&E

A theory of change explains how the activities of an intervention are understood to contribute to a chain of results (short-term outputs, medium-term outcomes) that produce ultimate intended or actual impacts. It can include positive impacts (which are beneficial) and negative impacts (which are detrimental). It can also include other factors that contribute to producing impacts, such as the particular context in which the intervention is implemented and other projects and programmes.

A ToC can be a useful tool during the intervention planning phase – particularly for identifying assumptions about the plausibility of the overall theory and any of the specific links in the causal chain, and for encouraging checks of these and revisions to intervention design for addressing gaps. It can be used to orient new stakeholders and to develop a shared understanding of an intervention, especially among diverse stakeholders and new stakeholders coming on board over time (Funnell and Rogers 2011).

When developing an impact-oriented M&E system, a ToC can help to identify:

- what needs to be assessed (i.e. described or measured), including the quality and quantity of input and activities, outputs, short-term and longer-term outcomes and impacts
- which longer term results will be able to be observed during the life span of the intervention, and which will need to be projected on the basis of other evidence
- how data will need to be analysed to understand linkages between different variables
- where existing data can be used and what the priorities are for additional data collection.

Box 2 provides an example of using a ToC for impact orientation.

### Box 2: Using theory of change to examine contribution to impact

In two agricultural projects, a ToC was used to examine contribution claims related to impact (Guijt 2014; Van Hemelrijck and Kyei-Mensah 2015). The development of the ToC was based on how different components of the projects were actually implemented. Each component (e.g. agricultural production or agricultural processing) claimed to make a specific contribution to the overall project impact.

An evaluation aimed to look at how the different contribution claims were being realised and how they interacted to achieve impact. At the outset of the evaluation, stakeholders agreed on the projects' key mechanisms for change, the critical assumptions for each and the key questions about different causal pathways that should be addressed in the evaluation. Through using appropriate evidence, it was possible to make the links between various pathways ('claims') visible but also make explicit any discrepancies between expectations of performance and what was actually achieved. For example, in both cases the project's impact on access to food and income was undeniable but evidence also showed that the lower-than-planned level of implementation had led to fewer and less sustainable gains in livelihoods.

While the evaluation was undertaken as the projects started a new phase, this kind of questioning and analysis can be undertaken more regularly during the project's lifespan by using existing data supplemented by new data collection. The advantage of building this type of data collection/collation and analysis into ongoing M&E activities is:

*'It enables actors to critically and collaboratively engage with the evidence collected on these links, probe their assumptions and hold each other accountable for their contribution to realising impact over time.'*

*(Van Hemelrijck and Kyei-Mensah 2015)*

## 5.2 Determining impact focus based on complexity thinking

While many theories of change are represented as a simple, linear process, most development interventions have complicated and/or complex aspects, which are important to acknowledge and address. It is useful to distinguish between what is complicated (involving multiple components and requiring expertise in each component to bring the components together effectively – but ultimately predictable) and what is complex (emergent, adaptive and responsive; inherently, unpredictable) (Glouberman and Zimmerman 2002). Some aspects of a development intervention might be best treated as simple, some as complicated and/or some as complex (see Table 5). It is, therefore, not a matter of deciding how to categorise an entire intervention – simple or complicated or complex; it is a matter of categorising aspects of it.

‘Simple’ aspects of intervention involve dealing with the known, where cause and effect are understood well and good practices can be confidently recommended. These aspects of an intervention require less investment in learning-oriented reflection and more on verifying ongoing impact – i.e. is it still working? (Table 5).

What is ‘complicated’ has many components and interconnections, but if enough expertise and planning can be brought to bear, a detailed plan can be developed, implemented, tracked and retrospectively evaluated. Intervention elements that are complicated

can benefit from a realist approach to impact assessment – i.e., what works for whom in what contexts (Table 5 or, for a detailed description see also Westthorp 2014, for example).

What is ‘complex’ is not just very, very complicated but is fundamentally different, and the strategies used to deal with complication are not likely to be effective here. What is considered ‘complex’ is emergent either because the situation is rapidly changing and/or the level of knowledge available is insufficient. A linear approach of ‘situation analysis, then planning, and then ‘doing’ is bound to fail. Rather, complex intervention aspects require an iterative approach, with development of early prototypes and rapid trialling and adaptation, as well as ongoing scanning of the situation as it changes.

Intervention elements that are complex will require considerable reflection, as one needs to analyse the emerging evidence of what seems to be working and what seems problematic – i.e. what is working in the current conditions? What is the best way forward at this point in time? (Table 5) and make evidence-based decisions on how to move forward at that point in time. This distinction between ‘complicated’ and ‘complex’ is not universally used by those claiming to address complexity in evaluation; many discussions of complexity are actually referring to layers of complication. It should be emphasised that this typology does not represent a hierarchy in which ‘simple’ is necessarily ‘easy’, or ‘complex’ is necessarily better than ‘simple’.

**Table 5: Distinguishing simple, complicated and complex aspects of interventions and their associated impact focus**

<p><b>Simple, ‘known’</b></p>	<p><b>Standardised</b> – a single way to do it</p> <p>Works pretty much the same everywhere / for everyone Best practices can be recommended confidently <i>Knowledge transfer</i></p> <p><b>Impact focus: did it work or is it still working?</b></p>
<p><b>Complicated, ‘knowable’</b></p>	<p><b>Adapted</b> – need to do it differently in different settings</p> <p>Works only in specific contexts that can be identified Good practices in particular contexts <i>Knowledge translation</i></p> <p><b>Impact focus: what worked for whom in what ways and in what contexts?</b></p>
<p><b>Complex, ‘unknowable’</b></p>	<p><b>Adaptive</b> – need to work it out as you go along</p> <p>Dynamic and emergent Patterns are only evident in retrospect <i>Ongoing knowledge generation</i></p> <p><b>Impact focus: what is working in the current conditions? What is the best way forward at this point in time?</b></p>

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### 5.3 Balancing emphasis on accountability and learning

To work well, any M&E system – including an impact-oriented one – needs to ensure people are motivated, have both the means and the opportunity to generate and use information for learning as well as accountability purposes. However, M&E is all too often a tug-of-war between the need for ‘accountability’ (showing you are doing what the contract says) and the desire to ensure ‘learning’ (understanding what is and is not working and why). And often, the need for accountability is prioritised over the need for learning.

The results-orientation of many international development efforts elevates success that is illustrated with numeric data over more nuanced stories of social transformation. And many interventions are implemented on the wrong assumption that there is more predictability and order than actually exists. Hence, performance tracking is prioritised over learning from the complex dynamics in which the intervention operates (Guijt 2010). When developing an impact-oriented M&E system, it is important to have a candid discussion at the outset about the relative emphasis on accountability and learning.

### 5.4 Prioritising impact-related information needs

As already noted, different stakeholders may have different understandings of what constitutes ‘impact’ and the broad OECD-DAC definition of impact<sup>6</sup> certainly leaves room for many interpretations. It is, therefore, important to clarify how impact is defined. In any case, integrating an impact-orientation into the M&E system increases the number of evaluation questions and the range of data to be collected to determine what changes have taken place and what factors may have contributed to them. Operationalising ‘what was the impact of the intervention?’ into a realistic number of key questions requires prioritisation. This involves:

- identifying who needs what information, when and for what decisions
- identifying what elements in the ToC are least understood and most crucial to assess
- exploring stakeholder preferences for particular questions and types of evidence
- determining what questions may feasibly be answered within the time frame lined to decision-making needs and with the available resources.

The prioritisation process requires reconciling many, sometimes conflicting, priorities – particularly when the intervention involves a large number of stakeholders and/or has many components. For example, stakeholders in one Methods Lab case represented five organisations leading implementation and nine supporting organisations in partnership with three government ministries; together they identified more than 40 potential evaluation questions covering 13 topical domains.

Often, grant-funded projects identify a broad ToC but select quite specific indicators to collect as part of the project proposal stage. Starting with indicators orients M&E towards what can be measured rather than asking key questions about the project (for which there may be hypotheses rather than definitive measures). Identifying impact-related questions may take place once projects are approved and M&E systems are being developed or existing organisational M&E systems are applied to the newly approved project. Making the M&E system fit for purpose can be further complicated by multi-component programmes or initiatives where projects are grouped together under a common set of high-level objectives and programme-wide ToC, including a requirement to use a set of common indicators (Buffardi and Hearn 2015).

### 5.5 Clarifying M&E roles and sequencing M&E activities

Determining *who* will be involved in what M&E activities is as important as deciding how the M&E system will be structured. Identifying and agreeing on who will be involved in which impact monitoring and evaluation tasks – particularly the role of implementing staff – should take place early on. Implementing staff are typically specialised in a particular sector of development work but are not necessarily well-versed in M&E. Differences in M&E terminology used (e.g., what constitutes an output, outcome or impact) can create confusion and different experiences with M&E can underscore the perception that it is the exclusive domain of experts. Taking on additional M&E tasks also has important implications for staff time management. Dividing M&E responsibilities, conducting joint impact assessments and/or sharing data within and across organisations should be explored wherever possible.

After project design and approval, it may take several months for all key operational staff to be in post, with a relatively short window of time between staff start dates and initiation of project activities. The stakeholders involved in designing the M&E system may not,

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6 ‘Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.’ (OECD-DAC 2010)

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therefore, include key implementation staff. This division of labour requires a delicate balance; M&E decisions should be made early enough to allow time for development and potentially preparation for baseline data collection, yet include sufficient key staff to provide input and buy-in. Moreover, the group of stakeholders will likely also change over time including staff turnover or new partner organisations becoming involved. It may also be difficult to anticipate at the start what priorities in terms of impact will be most relevant to a donor organisation in office four or five years later. Prioritisation of impact-related questions needs, therefore, to be revisited over time and adjusted as needed.

It is also critical to set realistic expectations for what can be achieved in M&E implementation – and for what can be sustained longer term. Some general good practice rules are to:

- build on what is already in place, do not duplicate or set up parallel systems
- start small and strengthen the system over time
- conduct regular M&E system assessments and prioritise capacity strengthening over time
- stay the course: prioritise actions without short-changing immediate needs or compromising long(er) term needs.

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## 6. Conclusion

This guidance note was developed in response to a common challenge experienced by organisations whereby they commission an impact evaluation at the end of intervention only to find that there is insufficient data about implementation, context, baselines or interim results. We provide a rationale for dealing with impact – if deemed relevant to the type of intervention – early on in the intervention cycle and the main benefits of doing so. Primarily, these are that: it helps to shift the focus of the assessment from indicators to impact-related questions, thereby broadening what can be learned about the value and worth of the intervention; it can improve the availability, timeliness and quality of data which are pertinent for decision making about the intervention; and it allows for early attention to collective sense-making and appropriate interpretation of data collected as well as building in support for effective use.

Recognising that not all interventions need to have impact-oriented M&E, we present considerations and tools to help organisations decide whether it makes sense to invest time and resources into developing such a system. Specifically, integrating an impact-orientation should only happen when: (i) information about impact will be useful and timely to support specified decision-making needs; (ii) impact is deemed plausible and is feasible to assess with rigor; and, (iii) resources and capacity for collecting, analysing and interpreting impact data are adequate.

This guidance note discusses the importance of using the ToC as the foundation for impact-oriented M&E; determining impact focus based on complexity thinking; balancing emphasis on accountability and learning; prioritising impact-related information needs; and clarifying M&E roles and sequencing M&E activities. This guidance supports M&E advisors and programme managers and implementers to plan for a M&E system that supports impact assessment or, to adapt an existing M&E system to incorporate an impact perspective.

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# Resources

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## *Monitoring and evaluation*

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- BetterEvaluation. Impact evaluation. [http://betterevaluation.org/themes/impact\\_evaluation](http://betterevaluation.org/themes/impact_evaluation) Including 13 methodological briefs, several of them with an animated video and webinar.
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**Overseas Development Institute**  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300  
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

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