

AGENTS FOR CITIZEN-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION (ACT)

DEVELOPING A MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL) FRAMEWORK IN A CSO



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This Toolkit is produced as a resource to support the organisational capacity development of the CSOs that are participating in the EU-funded Agents for Citizen-Driven Transformation (ACT) Programme in Nigeria. The content and materials used to develop the booklet were sourced from existing third-party publicly available material, details provided in the Reference Section, which we would like to acknowledge and thank.



PURPOSE

The ACT CSO Toolkits provide support to CSOs¹ who know what they want to do, but are not sure how to do it. The Toolkits provide guidance to CSOs who wish to improve specific aspects of their internal systems, their project and programme approach and their external relations with stakeholders.

This ACT Toolkit aims to support CSOs to develop a MEL² framework which will guide CSOs to think about the link between the CSO's strategy and its programmes and/or projects' goal, outcomes, objectives and planned activities, whilst helping to confirm that these are appropriate to implement and are on track. It is aimed at CSOs that have a basic understanding of MEL, but would benefit from some guidelines as to how to develop the tools required. This toolkit offers managers and staff of CSOs a set of tools that will help them make Monitoring Evaluation and Learning an integral part of their work.

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

A clear MEL framework is critical to guide all a CSO's programmes and projects. This will help to articulate goals, and to measure progress towards achieving short and long-term objectives, it also helps to develop a sound and systematic plan for everyone in the CSO to follow. This Toolkit will provide details of how to plan the MEL framework, by laying out the order in which steps need to be taken to achieve the desired results, and to measure the progress of change that can be directly attributed to the CSO's work.

A MEL framework increases understanding of the project's³ goal and objectives, it defines the relationships between inputs (staff and financial), activities (actions to be taken), outputs (the results of the activities), outcomes (the immediate changes as a result of the outputs) and impact/s (the long-term and sustainable change the project brings). It also articulates the relationship between project activities (internal) and external elements that could affect a project's longer-term success and sustainability.

Having an MEL framework demonstrates in a graphical way how the activities will lead to the outputs, the outputs will lead to the outcomes and the outcomes will contribute to the long-term impact.

All CSOs' programmes and projects should conduct their MEL activities to ensure that they are not putting women or other traditionally marginalised groups (eg: People with Disabilities (PWDs), youth, children, older people, indigenous groups, ethnic groups, etc) at risk.

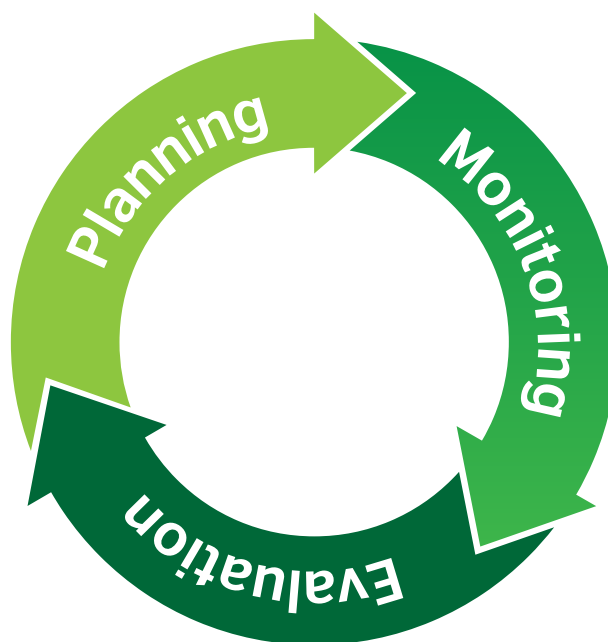
¹ For CSOs please read CSOs, CBOs, CS Networks and NGOs

² A MEL Framework and an M&E Plan are interchangeable terms

³ A MEL Framework can be developed for a CSO's Programme or an individual Project

Citizens are diverse, and diversity is often given limited consideration during project planning and monitoring. In line with ACT's commitment to human rights and gender and social inclusion (G&SI), it is anticipated that CSOs' programme's, projects and plans demonstrate the mainstreaming of G&SI and the adoption of a Rights-based Approach.

The ACT programme supports CSOs to collaborate through Peer to Peer Learning. We believe there are skills in all aspects of Organisational Development within CSOs, including MEL, that can be shared across the sector, from those CSOs that are mature and experienced to those that are nascent – all have skills and knowledge to share, and the capacity to learn. CSO collaboration can erode any lack of trust, build a culture of shared learning and support, and together CSOs can better meet the capacity and resource challenges that face them.



KEY DEFINITIONS RELATED TO MEL

Definition of a Programme

A programme is defined as a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way and defined in response to the strategy within the CSO. Programmes are often long-term, and don't have a fixed timeframe.

Definition of a Project

A project is created by a CSO for the purpose of delivering activities related to a specific CSO strategy. A project is often part of a programme of activities. Projects have an end point, and the project manager ensures that the project delivers the intended goal and objectives within a defined timeframe and budget.

This ACT Toolkit provides basic information for the development of a MEL framework. For a complex programme, more information may need to be gathered. The MEL framework is also an important part of the CSO's fundraising efforts as it is a tool used to help grant-makers assess funding proposals, against which they can make funding decisions. (When the donor provides their own template it is important to use this – but the information should be easily transferable.)

Firstly it is important to establish what the 'MEL' acronym actually means:

M = Monitoring is used on an ongoing basis to measure whether the Activities have happened, whether they have led to the achievement of the project's Outputs and whether they are influencing change at Outcome level. It provides the CSO with information about progress against planned activities, objectives and budgets – whilst helping to check whether the CSO is doing what it said it was going to do, whether it is doing it well, effectively, on track and in line with the budget. It helps the CSO to manage its work. Monitoring is an internal process which the CSO does for itself (and usually for its donors), and by itself. It is linked to good planning and provides an opportunity to identify problems that can be learnt from, and strengths that can be built on, as well as helping the CSO to adapt to changing, and often unexpected, circumstances and contexts. Through its ongoing monitoring the CSO can adapt to potential risk and check its assumptions.

E = Evaluation, is generally used to assess the results at Outcome level, ie: what change has taken place and whether it can be directly attributed to the work of the CSO, and whether these outcomes have contributed to the long-term and sustainable change expected at Goal level. An evaluation usually examines the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, impact and sustainability of a project. To ensure objectivity, often these are carried out by an external body. Usually an evaluation takes place mid-way through a project (to ensure it is on track and to make recommendations for its improvement), and at the end of the project (to gather learning, to disseminate learning and to ensure future projects are based on learning).

An Impact Assessment can take place after a project has been completed to assess whether the Project has brought about sustainable change at Impact level – this can be up to 5 years following its completion.

Why should the CSO evaluate its projects and programmes?

Evaluation is an important management and learning tool. It helps the CSO to:

- Review its performance (against plans and budgets)
- Participatory evaluation can verify that a project has been designed to meet the real needs of its beneficiaries/constituents
- Make informed decisions (about next steps)
- Learn from experience (what it should continue doing, stop doing, and what it could do better)
- Identify unexpected outcomes
- Be accountable for its actions
- It supports accountability by providing stakeholders with information to assess the activities and to learn and agree ways of improving with the CSO

L = Learning from what has taken place. It is critical to understand what is working, what isn't working and why it is or isn't working, throughout the project's lifespan. Learning informs the CSO how it can modify and improve its approach during the project, or plan for future projects. This learning is also very valuable to share with other CSOs and stakeholders. It is also good practice (when reporting) to include unexpected outcomes (good and bad), not to shy away from negative outcomes to show that learning has taken place and to consider how these could be mitigated against in the future. This demonstrates useful learning for the CSO (and others).

How to create a learning CSO: Bruce Britton identifies eight functions of a learning organisation:

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

Britton identifies 'External and Internal' barriers to learning within CSOs, these include:

External Barriers: Those that arise from the external environment over which the CSO may have little or no influence, eg: key stakeholders such as funders, LGAs, other CSOs. The nature of the priorities of donors, for example, can inhibit CSO's learning. There may be pressure to demonstrate low overheads, so the CSO is unable to invest donor resources effectively into MEL. Competition for funding with other CSOs may create a perceived pressure to generate success stories for supporters and communities, that are uncomplicated. This can detract from self-criticism and analysis by the CSO. Rising competition for public funds may lead to the CSO highlighting the 'good' and burying the 'bad'. Through participatory approaches to MEL, it is important to create a learning culture with beneficiaries/constituents too.

Internal Barriers: Staff and volunteers in CSOs may acknowledge that their CSO has certain processes that make learning difficult. These may be expressed as "If only our CSO... valued learning... was structured differently... listened to us... put enough resources into learning... etc." These demonstrate a recognition internally that there may be barriers to learning.

Learning within CSOs can be difficult. Capacity strengthening within the CSO should be cascaded to others, to ensure that knowledge does not rest with one individual, who may take this with them when they move on to another CSO!

MEL can only take place systematically throughout the project implementation phase when there is a system in place to measure progress and effectiveness – for this it is important to develop a MEL Framework.

The word 'framework' makes what is in fact a 'table' sound more complicated than it should. The framework (or table) will demonstrate how the CSO will measure whether the project or programme is successful.

Before developing the MEL framework the CSO needs to consider:

- How its projects meet the needs of the constituents/communities it works with, and how this relates to the CSO's mission
- Whether the CSO's organisational structure and roles allow the CSO to implement the project activities (does it fit with the CSO's strategy?)
- What systems are in place for project planning, project implementation and MEL to be effective?
- What is the capacity of the CSO (staff capacity, funding, partnerships, networks, etc) to monitor and achieve the Project Goal?

To develop the MEL framework, the CSO must be very clear what it is measuring, so it is important to establish the Project's hierarchy of Objectives, in other words, its:

- Goal – the long-term change the project will contribute to
- Outcome(s) – the immediate change(s) the project will bring about that will contribute to the achievement of the Goal or long-term Impact
- Objectives/Outputs – the results that the CSO will achieve that will lead to the achievement of the Outcome(s)
- Activities – the activities that need to take place in order to achieve the Outputs

WHAT IS THE MEL FRAMEWORK FOR?

In a nutshell, the purpose of an MEL framework is to focus the CSO to gather the right information for the management of a given project or programme. It provides:

- Accountability (upwards – government, donors)
 - Accountability (downwards – constituents/beneficiaries/communities)
 - Accountability (horizontally – partners, other CSOs)
 - Accountability (to the CSO's Strategy – Vision, Mission, Values, Goal, Objectives)
 - Control and supervision (project management, staff, volunteers) to ensure that they are carrying out planned and relevant activities, which are leading to the planned results
 - Learning from the CSO's work (internal systems and programme approach/ activities) - the CSO finds out what works and what doesn't work, and also identifies best (and not so good) practice
 - Improved performance and legitimacy
 - The provision of evidence for advocacy activities - the CSO can generate evidence that can be used when carrying out lobbying or campaigning work to influence change
 - The measurement of change and to assess whether it can be fully attributed to the CSO's activities, or has the CSO contributed to that change in some way, and if so how
- **Attribution:** refers to an accurate measurement of how much a CSO was fully responsible for the change process brought about because of their intervention
 - **Contribution:** refers to where the CSO has been part of a collaboration with others that have brought about change.

Although CSOs should gather numerical data, many CSOs are unlikely to have the capacity or resources to perform statistical studies to identify their contributions fully (quantifiable evidence). Often case studies, focus group discussions, etc., are used to explore different stakeholders' views, which can demonstrate a link between the CSO's project and any changes that have occurred (qualitative evidence). Baseline and Endline studies can demonstrate the benefits of a project to its constituent group.

- Public relations and fundraising - the CSO is able to document stories of change acquired through the MEL process which can influence others to support them
- Resource allocation and fundraising - the CSO bases its fundraising on the evidence of the successes of their projects/programmes
- Measuring impact – to assess the potential for sustainable and long-term change



THE MEL PROCESS: TOOLS AND SYSTEMS

The Project Plan (Table 1)⁴ is integral to the MEL framework:

PROJECT GOAL:

Equal access by all to Secondary Education in X LGAs, in X State by X year is reducing State level poverty data

Inputs	Outputs/Results	Outcomes/Purpose	Impact/Goal
Human Resources Financial resources Physical resources	X no of partners Trained X no of partners Coached Policy development by X partners Advocacy and Influencing campaigns run by X partners X Published Guidelines on Gender and Social Inclusion by LGAs	Behavioural change Attitudinal change Inclusive Policy implementation	Inclusive practices Educational equality Reduction in poverty

Table 1: Sample Project Plan

- A Logical Framework (logframe) is very similar to a MEL framework, with slightly less detail. For each project, the importance of developing a Logframe cannot be stressed enough, it is conducive to assessing the project's potential to make a real difference by checking the rational and logical sequencing of 'if we do this... then we should achieve this'. How to develop a Project Logframe is available as an [ACT Toolkit here](#).

Building on the pre-prepared Project Plan and the Project Logframe, the MEL framework is simply a table that also includes a description of the Indicators at each level (against Outputs, Outcomes, Goal) that are used to measure whether a CSO's project is on track. It will enable the CSO to assess on an on-going basis whether it is achieving what it set out to achieve.

(Table 2): Sample MEL Framework

The Project's MEL framework focuses on:

- Results
- Changes
- Challenges

⁴Template from <https://tools4dev.org/resources>

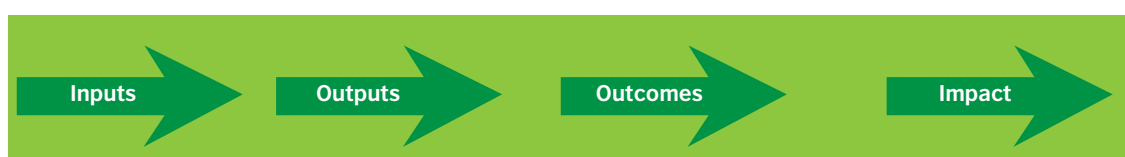
	Indicator	Definition (how it is calculated)	Baseline (what is the current value?)	Target (what is the target value?)	Data source (how will it be measured?)	Frequency (how often will it be measured?)	Responsibility (who will measure it?)	Reporting (where will it be reported?)
Goal	Equal access by All children to Secondary Education in X State by X date, leads to a reduction in household poverty	No of students attending secondary schools in X State (disaggregated by sex and disability) in Y1, Y2, etc	40%	60%	School, records In X LGAs in X State	6 monthly	ED MEL Officer Programme Officer G&SI Officer	6 monthly and annual reports
					State Employment Statistics	Annual		Evaluation (mid-term and final)
					Multidimensional Poverty Index -survey	Annual		Impact Assessment
		No of students engaging in further or university education in X State in Y1, Y2, etc (disaggregated by sex and disability)	5%	15%	Further Education and Higher Education statistics in X State			
		Household income increases	Average income is X	Average income increase by 10%	Surveys FGDs Case studies			
Outcomes	Inclusive education policies are in place and being implemented in X State by X date	No of inclusive education policies in place and being implemented, In Y1, Y2, etc	0	15	School, records In X LGAs in X State	6 monthly	ED MEL Officer Programme Officer G&SI Officer	6 monthly reports
					Further Education and Higher Education statistics in X State	6 monthly		
		Attitudinal and behavioural change towards inclusive education			Feedback from pupils, students, their families and learning establishments Case studies	6 monthly		

Outputs	Partners Trained and/or Coached in Inclusive Education in X State	Nos of partners trained/coached in inclusive education approaches and policy development across X State in Y1, Y2, etc	0	35	Training and Coaching Reports	2 Monthly	MEL Officer Programme Officer G&SI Officer	Monthly reports
					Feedback from participants	2 monthly		
	Policy development by X no of partners in X State	No of policies developed across X State, in Y1, Y2, etc	0	30	Policies developed	6 monthly		6 monthly reports
	Advocacy and Influencing campaigns run by X no of partners in X State	No of advocacy campaigns taking place in each LGA, Y1, Y2, etc	0	30	Advocacy Plans	Monthly		Monthly reports
Activities	Published Guidelines on Gender and Social Inclusion for Education Sector in X State	No of LGAs developing and adopting the G&SI guidelines for their schools, Y1, Y2, etc	0	30	G&SI Guidelines developed	3 monthly	MEL Officer Programme Officer G&SI Officer	Monthly/6 monthly reports
					Feedback from education establishments	6 monthly		6 monthly reports
	10 x Training and coaching sessions on inclusive education, across all (35) LGAs	No of training/coaching sessions, frequency and location, Y1, Y2, etc	0	350	Training and coaching records	Monthly		Monthly reports
	15 x Stakeholders engaged in G&SI training and policy development, from each LGA (35)	No of stakeholders engaged in G&SI training and policy engagement in Y1, Y2, etc	0	525	Disaggregated attendance records			
					Reflection sessions	Monthly	MEL Officer Programme Officer G&SI Officer	Monthly reports
					G&SI Guidelines			
		No of G&SI guidelines developed by LGAs, Y1, Y2, etc	0	30	Feedback from users	2 monthly		Monthly reports
					Feedback from communities			

HOW TO DEVELOP AN MEL FRAMEWORK

1. Use a Planning Tool (see the Project Plan template example provided below). Be clear about what your CSO is trying to achieve, capture this on paper. The MEL plan is developed at the start of a project.

The required Inputs will be agreed following the completion of the planning process and the development of the MEL framework.



1. **Goal/Impact level:** The impact of the work of the CSO can be difficult to evidence. It takes time to measure long-term change. There are often many factors that influence change at this level, so untangling the attribution related to a CSO's project can be problematic. It also involves understanding what would have happened if the CSO was not undertaking this project (this is known as the 'counterfactual'). An Impact Assessment may be required to get evidence of longer-term sustainable change, which will require specific skills and resources. But the CSO may wish to develop quantitative and qualitative indicators if it thinks there is a way to measure long-term change and to attribute it to the work of the project.

2. **Describe the 'Outcomes'** Outcomes are the changes that come about as a direct result of the CSO's work. Describe the broad areas of change that the project will make that will contribute towards the Impact or long-term change described at Goal level.

Write down the outcome(s) clearly, avoid outcomes such as: communities feel more empowered – this is very difficult to measure. The outcome(s) should demonstrate what exactly will change that can be attributed to the outputs of the project. Planning more than one Outcome is fairly common, but remember the more Outcomes you develop, the more difficult it can be to measure.

Be careful about developing an outcome that, for example, 'improves access to services'. This doesn't say anything about what changes in the lives of the beneficiaries as a result of the CSO's work.

Outcomes should describe the changes the CSO wants to create, not the work that it is delivering.

3. **Set Outcome Indicators** Outcome Indicators contain specific and measurable information that can be collected at regular intervals to keep track of the difference the project is making. They provide details of progress being made towards the achievement of the outcomes, based on how much change has occurred.

Indicators need to be tailored to the context. Think about what the signs are that will show that the project is being successful. How will you be able to tell when you have made progress? The answers to these questions usually make strong indicators.

Combine numbers (quantitative data) and descriptions or narrative of change (qualitative data) to give a full picture of what has changed.

4. **Describe the 'Outputs'** The Outputs are details of what the project will deliver. The Objectives of a project will determine the Outputs that the CSO intends to achieve – the Objectives/Outputs describe what is to be achieved by the end of the project period, eg: X number of G&SI policies to be developed by X number of partners by X date.
5. **Set Output Indicators** Output Indicators specifically provide information to track and report on the work that has been delivered. They give information about:
 - What outputs have been delivered
 - Who the CSO has delivered them to
 - Whether the beneficiaries were satisfied with the quality of the support

This, again, will require numbers (quantitative information) and feedback on the value of the outputs to the beneficiaries (qualitative information).

Many funders will require specific profile information about beneficiaries, eg: gender, age group, people with disabilities, ethnicity, etc. The qualitative information, therefore, should be disaggregated to provide this level of detail. It will also demonstrate that the CSO is inclusive, and accessible to all.

It is important to set realistic priorities for measurement and try to limit the number of Indicators so that the process of monitoring does not become too exhausting. Often it is a good rule to set one quantitative indicator and one qualitative indicator against each Outcome and Output, often another one or two may be required – but be cautious about making the process unmanageable.

Donors request specific profile information about the CSO's 'beneficiaries', often this is based on gender, PWD status, age, ethnicity, etc. So it is important for the CSO to gather this information and to monitor whether their project is inclusive and able to ensure equality is in its reach. Remember, if a project is not inclusive – it cannot be sustainable.

When considering quantitative change, it is important to develop a final target to be achieved by the end of the project, and to set milestones towards that target at regular intervals. Throughout the lifespan of the project, the milestones are cumulative towards the final target.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD INDICATOR?

Good indicators need to be easily understood and meaningful to those who will use the information they provide. There is little point in collecting complex information if it is difficult to analyse, or it will not be used. Indicators should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable and attributable, relevant and realistic, and timebound).

Specific – indicators should capture the essence of the desired result by clearly relating to the achievement of an output or outcome – and only that output or outcome.

Measurable – indicators must be measurable – with consideration given to how often it will be assessed, what is needed for measurement and the time and resources required for the assessment. Indicators should be framed in a way that enables comparison over time.

Achievable and Attributable – the MEL framework, and its related indicators, identify what changes are achievable as a result of the activities and whether those results are realistic. Attribution requires that changes in the issue can be directly linked to the CSO's intervention.

Relevant and realistic – the MEL framework and related indicators establish levels of performance that are likely to be achieved in a practical way and that reflects the expectations of the stakeholders.

Timebound (trackable and targeted) – indicators need to be time sensitive to change, eg: some variables are slow changing across the years, like behavioural change or skill development or climate change, meaning that progress towards outcomes can be difficult to assess over the short-term. In these situations it is helpful to identify intermediate outcomes that lead towards longer-term outcomes. Indicators allow progress to be tracked at agreed frequency over the life-span of a programme or project.

Sample Objective: Increased participation of women in local governance, in X Department, in X LGA, in State, by X date)

Example of Qualitative Indicator: *The percentage of participation by women in local governance by the end of the project*

Examples of Quantitative Indicator: *Changes in knowledge and attitudes towards equal opportunity employment by the end of the project*

Method of data collection

The CSO will need to consider:

- What methods are suitable for the beneficiaries the CSO works with, ideally they should be involved in deciding the process?
- How much budget is in place?
- How much time and skill does the CSO have available for data collection and analysis?
- Who is the audience for the data collection – both monitoring and evaluation - and will they find the indicators and data sources credible?
- Consider the CSO's values when deciding on what and where to gather data, it should not be intrusive, and reporting should remain objective, with information held confidentially.
- Will the data collection require regular in-person visits, or can it be gathered virtually?

Types of data collection, with pros and cons:

Type of data/ evidence	Definition	Cons	Pros	Example
Qualitative	Narrative, in depth data	More subjective than quantitative methods. Can be time-consuming and difficult to analyse.	Useful for exploring how people feel, exploring how and why things happen.	Interviews (virtual, face to face) Focus Groups Observation Case Studies
Quantitative	Numerical Data	Numbers don't represent the human experience. Can over-simplify situations.	Usual for counting things/people, developing disaggregated data, and for comparisons.	Surveys Baseline and Endline Data collection
Creative	Data collected through art, photographs, dramas, songs, poetry, etc.	Can be higher effort and more difficult to analyse than traditional methods.	Often more engaging, rewarding and accessible than traditional methods.	Photos, videos

Ensuring that the needs and benefits for each stakeholder in MEL is carefully considered makes the CSO accountable.

ATTRIBUTION AND CONTRIBUTION

It is critical to understand how to gather evidence that will determine whether a CSO's project is directly 'attributing' to the change that is found as a result of MEL, or if it is making a 'contribution' to the change, alongside the efforts of other development actors.

Attribution refers to an accurate measurement of how much a CSO was fully responsible for the change process brought about because of their project's intervention. Eg: The CSO was the only cause of the change brought about in the community. There needs to be a direct line of evidence leading to the change between the CSO and the change within their beneficiary group.

Contribution on the other hand is when a number of CSOs or other stakeholders have all had some influence in bringing about change. Many CSOs will not have the capacity or resources to perform statistical studies to identify their contribution. Therefore it may be better and more effective to provide a case study that shows a plausible link between their project and any changes that have occurred, exploring different stakeholders' views of how the change came about.

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



WHO BENEFITS FROM MEL⁶?

Stakeholder	Benefits of MEL
The CSO itself	<p>MEL helps the CSO to answer questions, such as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the CSO on track to achieve its objectives? 2. Is what the CSO doing contributing to the long-term change (impact) it is trying to create? 3. Are the CSO's project activities on track? 4. Are the CSO's partners activities on track? 5. Is the CSO's intervention reaching its target communities? 6. Are the target communities experiencing the anticipated changes as a direct result of the CSO's project? 7. Are there challenges that need to be addressed? 8. What is working well, what is not working well, why not and what could be done differently?
The CSO's partners	<p>MEL helps the partners to answer questions, such as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are their activities on track? 2. Are their activities reaching the target communities? 3. Are communities achieving the anticipated changes as a direct result of the project activities? 4. Are there any challenges that should be addressed? 5. What is working well, what is not, and what could be done differently?
Constituents/Beneficiaries, Communities, Traditional Leaders, LGAs, other CSOs – all important stakeholders to the CSO	<p>MEL enables key stakeholders to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Share critical information on their needs 2. See how their participation influences the project design 3. Appreciate how project activities reflect/benefit from their participation 4. Their scrutinization of the project and the CSO ensures accountability of the CSO to its beneficiaries 5. They provide information as to how the project is affecting them and may change attitudes, behaviours and approaches 6. They participate in reflections with the CSO on project achievements 7. They can provide recommendations for how to improve the project approach and achievements
The CSO's funders/donors	<p>MEL allows funders to better understand:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How the funds are being used 2. Whether the funds are spent on the identified needs 3. Whether strategies to address needs are appropriate 4. Who benefits from the project activities and outputs 5. Whether lives are being changed as a result of the project 6. Whether the changes will last after the project ends (the sustainability of the change the project has brought about) <p><u>Note:</u> It is important that CSOs are able to invest resources to ensure they have a good MEL system so they gather the evidence of attributable change required for themselves and for the donors/funders. There is a case to advocate for adequate resourcing when submitting a proposal and budget to a donor.</p>

⁶ Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger in their 1991 book *Situated Learning*.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, here are 10 reasons⁷ why MEL is important to a CSO:

1. MEL results in better CSO transparency and accountability

When CSOs track, analyse and report on a project throughout its monitoring there is more transparency. Information should be shared freely with stakeholders, encouraging more 'buy-in' to the project, and therefore more potential for its sustainability. This, in turn, leads to better accountability.

2. MEL helps CSOs to identify problems early

It is rare that a project goes truly to plan, however a well-designed MEL framework helps the project to stay on track. The MEL framework defines the project's scope which helps the CSO to identify how when something goes wrong it will affect other aspects of the project. They can consider speedy interventions to address the problem and reduce knock-on effects.

3. MEL helps ensure resources are used efficiently

Every project requires resources – these are determined by the number of CSO staff on the project, its location, number of beneficiaries, MEL related costs, etc. These will be determined during the planning stage. However, other unforeseen costs may arise and it is possible that mitigation measures will need to take place if things don't go to plan that will require further resources. The data collected through ongoing monitoring may reveal gaps or issues that were unplanned when budgeting. Without MEL it would be difficult to identify priorities – and resources could be wasted without the ability to do this.

4. MEL helps CSOs to learn from their mistakes

All CSOs (in fact all organisations, institutions, businesses...) make mistakes and have failures. MEL provides detailed information of everything that went right and everything that went wrong on a project. CSOs can pinpoint specific failures, as opposed to guessing what may have caused the problems.

5. MEL improves decision-making

The data and findings should drive the CSO's decisions. MEL provides essential information which is needed to see the bigger picture. At the end of a project, the CSO with a good MEL system can identify its successes, its mistakes and how it can adapt approaches and replicate them for future



projects. Decisions are, therefore, made based on MEL learning.

6. MEL helps CSOs to be organised

Developing a good MEL plan requires work and planning. The very process itself is helpful to the CSO. It helps it to collect and analyse information and to share it with others. Developing the MEL framework requires CSOs to agree desired outcomes, how it will measure its success, and how to adapt and modify the project as it goes on so the outcomes become a reality.

7. MEL helps CSOs to replicate its best projects and programmes

CSOs don't like to waste time on projects and programmes that go nowhere or fail to meet standards. The benefits of MEL (eg: catching problems early, good resource management, making informed decisions, etc) all result in information that ensures CSOs can replicate what's working and to let go of what is not.

8. MEL encourages innovation

MEL can help to fuel innovative thinking and methods for data collection. For example, some projects traditionally use questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, etc, but they could branch out to video or photo documentation, storytelling, the use of digital tools, etc. They can provide new perspectives on data and new ways to measure success.

9. MEL encourages diversity of thought and opinions

With MEL, the more information the better. Every team member provides a differing perspective on how the project is doing. Encouraging diversity of thought and exploring new ways of obtaining feedback enhances the benefits of MEL. With MEL tools, like surveys, they are only really successful if there is a wide range of participants and responses. In good MEL plans, all voices are important.

⁷ Modified from 'Tools4Development'

However, be careful not to waste time and resources by collecting data for data sake!

10. Every CSO benefits from MEL

While some CSOs can use more unique MEL tools, all CSOs need some kind of MEL system. All types of organisations need a way to monitor their work and projects and to determine their success, or not. Without strong MEL organisations are not sustainable, they are more vulnerable to failure and they can lose the trust of their stakeholders.

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Find out more

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