

How to Move beyond the Impact Evaluation Trap? Setting up Comprehensive M&E Systems for Social Protection Programmes

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"It is tempting—but dangerous—to view M&E as having inherent value. The value of M&E does not come simply from conducting M&E or from having such information available", but from "using the information to help improve government performance" (Mackay 2007). When set up appropriately, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems can support policymaking, performance budgeting and planning; help to manage activities; and enhance transparency and accountability. In the context of social protection programmes, M&E can play a critical role in improving programme design (including building synergies with other sectoral policies), solving problems in programme implementation and aiding decision-making (e.g. prioritising and budgeting), while also fostering the political and social support needed for scaling up from pilots to nationally owned programmes.

So which key factors play a role in successfully introducing and embedding M&E in social protection programmes? And how to establish a comprehensive system that goes beyond the undertaking of a few specific ad hoc external studies, to provide systematic and continuous information for internal improvement and external accountability? This brief provides a framework for answering these questions drawing on the work that Oxford Policy Management has carried out developing M&E systems for social protection programmes in four countries: Ghana, Kenya, Moldova and Mozambique.

Conceptual framework and findings

For an M&E system to be successful, it needs to be able to provide reliable, quality information (supply) while also ensuring there is actual use of M&E information to support core programme/government activities at all levels (demand). This is shown graphically in the conceptual framework in the figure.

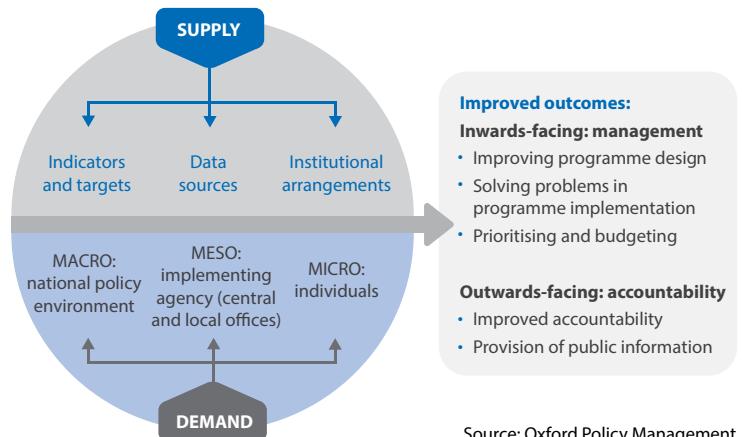
As the case study country experience highlighted, on the **supply side**, this will be the case when:

- **indicators** have been agreed on, prioritised and refined as the result of a participatory and iterative process that accounts for the information needs of stakeholders at all levels, as well as reflecting the programme's objectives, Theory of Change, and core business processes;
- a range of **data sources** (both internal and external) is adopted, ensuring these build on existing sources, minimising the burden of data collection and reporting, and prioritising monitoring over evaluation at the initial stages of programme maturity; and
- **institutional arrangements** of the M&E system reflect the overall institutional structure of the programme, work with existing systems, staff and processes, and are built acknowledging the need for time, dedication and in some cases legal frameworks or memoranda of understanding.

On the **demand side**, evidence from Ghana, Kenya, Moldova and Mozambique showed that use of M&E data will be enhanced when:

- the macro-level **national policy environment** is 'enabling' (performance-oriented and with a strong focus on Standard Assessment Procedures, offers an overall institutional culture that fosters linkages between different

Conceptual framework: demand and supply of M&E data for social protection programmes



Source: Oxford Policy Management

ministries and has actors focused on planning, and allows for donors and civil society to play an active role in fostering M&E practice;

- the meso-level **implementing agency** has a sufficient level of autonomy in decision-making to ensure M&E activities are perceived as useful and not frustrating, has backed the process of developing an M&E system in the first place, and has a culture of benchmarking performance across different locations. This is especially the case where there is strong liaison between central and decentralised levels, based on mutual feedback and awareness of location-specific constraints (M&E perceived as learning rather than judgement) and where standard service agreements help to transparently frame objectives in terms of service delivery; and
- at the micro-level, **individuals** responsible for M&E understand its potential usefulness, do not 'fear' M&E as a 'controlling' function and have sufficient capacity to perform their duties. To achieve this, managers need to shift the focus of M&E from 'controlling' to 'learning' and build forums for local and central-level administrators to compare and contrast their experiences and learn from each other.

References:

- Mackay, Keith. *How to build M&E systems to support better government*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007.
 Attah, R., Barca, V., MacAuslan, I., Pellerano, L., Ragno, L.P., Riemschneider, N. and Simon, C. "How to move beyond the impact evaluation trap? Challenges and solutions for the setting up of comprehensive M&E systems for Social Safety Nets." *Oxford Policy Management Working Paper*. Oxford: Oxford Policy Management, 2015. Available at <<http://www.opml.co.uk/publications/how-move-beyond-impact-evaluation-trap>>.

Notes:

1. Oxford Policy Management.
 2. UNICEF – Ghana.
 3. Independent Consultant: Research, Evaluation and Learning.
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