

# Simple tech in M&E for non-profits

By [Anja Mulder](#)

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Technology is advancing every day, often with promises of solutions to make our lives easier and simpler. Greater access to digital devices and tools has changed how we obtain information, how we communicate, and how we make decisions.



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Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is the routine process of collecting data and making a judgement about an initiative's processes or outcomes. M&E is commonly used by government, civil society and foundations/CSI to track progress towards targets as well as enabling data-driven decisions about what is working well and what needs to change. But obtaining sufficient, good quality data can feel overwhelming to those inundated with piles of paperwork. Fortunately, tools are becoming available for every stage of the M&E cycle, and integrating some of these simple, low-cost tech applications can make a world of difference.

## Increasing stakeholder participation

Simply having access to a cellphone can greatly increase the participation of stakeholders who include funders, board members, staff, and beneficiaries by allowing them to input on core issues requiring attention at the needs analysis stage of the M&E cycle, which is when core problems (and the causes and effects of these) are identified. It allows for individuals and groups in hard-to-reach areas who are directly affected by social and/or environmental problems to be accessed for their input.

The inclusion of important stakeholders also allows relevant information to be gathered to inform the intervention planning phase of the M&E cycle, which includes the development of logic models (identifying outputs, as well as outcomes and indicators) and frameworks (to determine which data should be collected, how this data will be collected, and by when it will need to be collected).

## Overview of needs

Technology can assist in providing a variety of stakeholders with a clear overview of the needs, and so enabling improved decision-making around the allocation of resources. Furthermore, the development of tools such as the theory of change, which is a high-level presentation of how intervention activities are expected to lead to outcomes, can be developed collaboratively (without having to sit in the same office or even in the same country) by using online platforms such as Lucidchart, which is an online chart-maker.

During implementation, which is when activities take place, technology allows the collection of monitoring data far quicker than before, which in turn means that data analysis can be completed much earlier and can inform the correction of the intervention processes to maximise outcomes. Such applications can include Google Forms; Survey Monkey; Salesforce and Mobenzi (digitised data-collection software, which can be used on tablets when staff are in the field) among many other options. The benefits include;

- they are mostly low-cost and time-efficient,
- they help to reduce errors in data collection,
- and they assist by eliminating additional data capturing which also reduces time spent on data cleaning.

At the evaluation stage, which focuses on the collation and analysis of intervention data, online databases, such as Salesforce and Google Sheets are platforms that can be used collaboratively to support greater quantities of data that have been collected and can therefore enable more efficient data management and analysis. When used well, these can ensure better quality data.

Technology and tools such as data visualisation platforms (for example; Canva, Piktochart, Infogram etc.) enable wider communication and sharing of progress and findings, in ways that are much more comprehensible to larger, more diverse audiences including known stakeholders, but also anyone who holds an interest in the intervention.

## **Challenges**

While there are many ways in which tech can assist throughout the M&E cycle, there are also challenges that come with adopting new technologies. For example, budget and time is required - for the purchase of the technology, but also to train staff in appropriately implementing new systems. In addition, the safety of staff using electronic devices in the field – and potentially being selected as a target for theft - is an important reality to consider and to weigh up against any benefits that using technology may promise.

There is no one silver-bullet tech solution to all M&E requirements. Certain tech applications will serve some interventions better than others due to their unique nature. But technology can be used to improve M&E systems and assist stakeholders in obtaining relevant information rapidly.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Anja Mulder is a monitoring and evaluation officer at Salesian Life Choices. Salesian Life Choices is a Cape Town-based social enterprise that invests in youth to tackle inequality. Mulder holds a master's degree in programme evaluation and is passionate about building capacity in M&E in the NPO sector.

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