PROSPECTS PRACTICE PAPER NO. 2: BUILT TO (IM)PROVE

Leveraging realtime M&E for adaptive youth employment programming

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Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is a crucial component of programme management, used to satisfy a range of information needs for donors, implementers, and the wider development community alike. These information needs typically fall within one of two categories: information used to ‘prove’ an intervention’s activities, impact, or model; or information used to ‘improve’ programming, through the supply of relevant data to inform decision-making during the programme lifecycle. While these two should ideally complement each other, donors’ and others’ demands for independent and objective proof have increasingly caused M&E systems to be structured around this objective, missing opportunities to gather and use data to improve programme impact during implementation. This paper explores three areas where tweaks to M&E system structures could enhance scope for ‘improvement’: in tracking service delivery; in identifying and understanding outcomes; and in the scope of participation from the implementing team. The paper then presents the M&E system employed by Prospects’ Employment and Entrepreneurship Programme, which is heavily geared towards ‘improvement’ and adaptive management, and shares some learnings about challenges and successes.
1. Executive Summary

While monitoring and evaluation (M&E), is used in youth employment programs to provide a range of information sources for a variety of stakeholders, these different tasks of M&E typically fall within one of two categories; ‘prove’ and ‘improve’. M&E is often used as a tool to ‘prove’ what was done, or what impact was achieved, particularly as accountability for donors. At the same time, M&E is also needed to help ‘improve’ programming: to generate quick feedback loops that enable programs to increase impact by revising plans or delivering services differently. A good M&E system ideally involves a balance of both proof and improvement. The challenge is that many of the development sector’s M&E systems have been designed solely to provide proof, and in many cases this has resulted in missed opportunities for M&E to enable adaptive management to improve programme quality and impact.

How M&E can be used to improve programmes

Looking at three areas of M&E – (1) Tracking Service Delivery; (2) Identifying and Understanding Outcomes; and (3) the extent of Participation in the process – we see that many systems are by default structured to provide proof, yet can be tweaked to better provide information that is useful for programmatic improvements:

(1) Service delivery is often tracked primarily in order to report the achievement of contractual outputs. By shifting the unit of analysis from ‘the program’ to ‘the participant’, implementers can identify individual interaction with programmes allowing response to behaviours and needs of users.

(2) While the trend towards increased rigor in recent years has improved the reliability of the evidence base of development interventions, a recent literature review has found that such methods provide minimal utility for decision-making by program managers during the lifetime of the intervention due to a combination of time constraints, poor alignment with implementation priorities, and difficulty in interpreting findings for decisions. This can be responded to by avoiding the divorce between monitoring and evaluation, by making the former more change/outcome-focused and the latter more decision-oriented, in order to foster an ongoing process of learning and adaptation.

(3) In the interests of ensuring objective and rigorous proof, M&E tasks are frequently assigned to a separate M&E team or an independent body. This reduces ownership of findings, the speed at which information is available, and the appropriateness of the data for implementers. Internal learning within implementation teams can be better promoted through widening participation, which also helps to orient field staff to outcomes, so that they are consistently considering progress towards outcomes (rather than just their workplan), and are better able to adapt at a localised level.

PROSPECTS PROGRAMME, LIBERIA

Prospects is a youth empowerment programme implemented by Mercy Corps and funded by the Swedish Embassy in Liberia and Chevron which seeks to equip young Liberians with the skills, information, and opportunities to find meaningful and sustainable employment or self-employment. Prospects combines direct implementation with efforts to stimulate positive systemic changes in terms of youths’ role in the labour and job hiring markets. The programme works across the full spectrum of youth demographics, engaging over 11,000 youth through a range of services, including psychosocial support, on-the-job training, entrepreneurial support, skills training and job matching services.

Find out more at prospectsliberia.com

How Prospects uses M&E to improve programming

A few tweaks to the tools and processes traditionally used in M&E can significantly enhance its ability to inform improvements in programming. The Prospects Employment and Entrepreneurship programme focuses on three main processes:

1. **A case management approach to track service delivery and understand user behaviour**
Prospects seeks to get more out of the process of tracking service delivery than the simple counting of activities or outputs. It does this by tracking individuals over time – their demographics, interactions with the programme, socio-economic changes, and their feedback on the interventions themselves. Longitudinal data such as this, when available at a granular enough level, allows for programme-specific insights which enable enhanced decision-making on how the program is structured. For example, by tracking the attendance data across different training curricula, we recognised high early drop-out rates on one curricula, and have been able to re-structure it to start with the more interesting sessions.

2. **Identifying short-term outcomes through ‘change monitoring’**
Rather than waiting until the program has completed before evaluating, Prospects captures early outcomes (such as using a simple traffic light system to track status of businesses established with small grants – see left) to ensure that we are on target not just with our deliverables, but our anticipated impact. This can then be used to stimulate immediate response. For example, in our apprenticeship program, we track which apprentices were offered jobs at the end of their placement. At the end of each cohort, these findings are reviewed, and businesses that consistently do not hire apprentices are not provided with further apprentices. Moreover, our M&E team is tasked with conducting Action Research investigations to understand any issues which require further analysis.

3. **M&E as everyone’s job**
While a small M&E team provides strategic management of the overall M&E system and undertakes data quality control, the spectrum of M&E responsibilities is shared across the team (and reflected in Position Descriptions). Staff collect data not only on what they have done, but on outcomes. They are then involved in the analysis, visualised in real-time on Excel dashboards. As programme staff are the primary dashboard users, data is depicted through simple graphs and charts, which are filterable to the specific location of each programme team. Crucially, periodic reviews at all levels of staff are conducted to review the data and discuss implications (see box summarising the methodology for the Semi-Annual Self-Review Workshops), and decision-making is devolved as close to the location of implementation as possible. The tools that form this system were built by the team, and consistently updated based on the information they required; for example, the dashboard has been adapted over a dozen times (so far!) to better meet the needs of the participants using it.

### Status of Businesses - Grand Bassa County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
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<td>Business is operational</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business is facing challenges</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneur cannot be found</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business has not started yet</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business has closed</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Monitoring Information</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Semi-annual review method

**Day 1 – Understanding the dashboard & the data:** Despite the system being in existing for months, most staff had only minimally engaged with the dashboard. To respond to this, staff undertook a ‘data treasure hunt’ in teams, requiring them to use the dashboard in order to find answers to a series of questions. This enhanced familiarity and ownership of the data as they had ‘found’ it.

**Day 2 Understanding why:** Based on the data and their experiences, the team then discusses the significance of what they had found out about key themes using probing questions: are we on target (both outputs and outcomes)? Why? Why not?

**Day 3: Action planning:** The team decides what needs to be adapted or done differently going forward, including setting new targets.
Challenges and Considerations

The M&E system employed by the Prospects Employment & Entrepreneurship Programme has taken a year to get fully standing, and has required significant staff commitment, a complementary working culture, and support from the donor. The time and commitment required should not be underestimated—a similar M&E system on one of Mercy Corps Liberia’s sister programs, launched in an emergency context during the Ebola crisis, never had the time to start truly generating useful information, nor embed itself in the decision-making culture.

Prospects’ system is now providing valuable information to both prove and improve the workings of the programme, but has been borne out of its own adaptations to challenges and opportunities. Crucially, we must emphasize that while such a system may help you to make the right decision, it does not make the decision for you. This includes sometimes still making value judgements, particularly if it is unclear where ‘on the curve’ we are—are things going to get worse before they get better? In order to enhance this decision-making process, the data needs to be as useful as possible; while we initially collected a wide range of data, we soon found ourselves without the time to both analyse and respond to it. Instead, we have focused on collecting the most useful information, and presenting it in as simple form as possible.

It should also be emphasized that there is not an automatic hunger for adaptation within implementing teams—we actually found that adaptation happened best through formalised reviews of data and periodic mail-outs (push), rather than consistently available information (pull). Related, staff can ‘adaptation fatigue’ from continuously changing what they do—in some cases, we have had to delay centrally-driven rollouts of small iterations, in order to package a number of programme adaptations together rather than tiring people with consistent ‘changing of plans’. Similarly, ‘adaptation’ does not necessarily mean ‘improvement’—some adaptations don’t end up working out. In the same spirit that the paper encourages, the M&E system Prospects uses has continued to adapt based on our experiences, providing scope for consistent improve of programme quality and impact.

2. Introduction: M&E to Prove and Improve

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems on youth employment programs typically satisfy a range of information needs, from counting ‘beneficiary’ or participant numbers, to calculating job placement rates, identifying lessons learned, and a host of other needs. Some of these information requirements are driven by donors, some by beneficiary accountability, and some by everyone’s interest in understanding what the hard work of implementers is really achieving. These different tasks of M&E typically fall within one of two categories; ‘prove’ and ‘improve’.

M&E is often used as a tool to ‘prove’; donors typically demand large amounts of ‘proof’; a key part of value-for-money accountability. They ask: What activities or outputs were delivered? What impact did the programme achieve? At a broader level, think tanks, implementers, and funding agencies seek proof to answer some of the sector’s toughest questions: What are effective models of youth employment? Are apprenticeships a good value-for-money investment? In seeking answers to these questions, the youth employment sector, as the development sector at large, has become increasingly evidence-driven. The use of rigorous impact evaluations has largely been driven by this increasing requirement of M&E to ‘prove’ what we are really achieving, and build a knowledge base in the development sector.\(^2\)

\(^2\) See Prospects Practice Paper No. 1 for more information on the other components of making an adaptive management system work. Available at http://prospectsliberia.com/

At the same time, M&E is also needed to help ‘improve’ programming; to generate quick feedback loops that enable programs to increase impact by revising plans or delivering services differently. Rather than just proving what works, this approach to M&E recognises that an initial plan is not perfect, and encourages adjustments, iterations, and in some (many) cases, drastic pivots when well-intended theories of change do not end up working out as first intended. A growing body of evidence recognises the need for development and youth employment programs to employ adaptive management approaches in order to respond to complex and consistently evolving contexts, and to respond to emerging opportunities.4

A good M&E system ideally involves a balance of both proof and improvement; the ability to ‘prove’ impact and deliverables, at the same time as ensuring that information can be quickly fed back into programme design to ‘improve’ impact. The challenge is that many of the development sector’s M&E systems have been designed solely to provide proof, and in many cases this results in missed opportunities for M&E to influence and enable improvements and adaptive management.

Based on our learning from Phase I of the Prospects programme, Prospects’ M&E model for Phase II has a significant focus on making information usable, and a strong emphasis on consistent improvement and adaptation of programme activities. This Practice Paper presents how Prospects structures M&E to better enable ‘improvement’ in programme delivery and design.

3. How M&E can be used to ‘improve’ programmes

This section explores three common themes of M&E – Tracking Service Delivery, Identifying Outcomes, and Participation – to summarize how M&E is commonly designed by donors, implementers, and others, to provide ‘proof’, as well as how those same systems can be tweaked to better provide information that is useful for programmatic improvements.

3.1. Tracking Service Delivery

How M&E provides proof: In the development sector today, programme implementation is typically equated with the realisation of pre-determined contractual deliverables as set out in proposals.5 In this context, implementers are incentivised to ‘prove’ the realisation of activities or outputs in logframes. In a youth employment programme, for example, this is typically done by counting how many youth enter a programme, how many activities are conducted, and how many exit or ‘graduate’ from it. From this, we learn our activities and outputs, and also some useful information like dropout rates.

There are a number of different ways of collecting such data though, and how we collect it has significant implications for its use. See the table on the left below in Figure 1, which tracks youth attendance at different sessions of a training program. According to this, just under 200 people attended each session, suggesting reasonably good attendance, with a slight tail-off towards the end. This information would be achieved by counting how many youth were at each session, and would provide ‘proof’ of how many activities delivered. This data could, however, have been collected and presented in another way. The table on the right below is of the same data, but displayed to show the number of trainings that each participant attended. In this case, we see that actually, over 30 percent of participants are attending

4 Oxfam Blog. Available at: http://oxfamblogs.org/wp2p/which-of-these-three-books-on-complexity-and-development-is-right-for-you-reviewusers-guide/#.VvkARPHeCMsY.twitter
fewer than half of the training sessions – far less impressive. This data is collected by tracing each participant’s engagement with the program. Through a subtle change in the way the data was collected and presented, we have an entirely different finding and use.

Figure 1: Comparison between data capturing total activities, and user behaviour

How M&E can also support improvement: The table above on the right has clear applicability for improvement; only ten percent of youth entering the training see the benefit or enjoyment to complete the full training schedule. Prospects has indeed used this very data to create a second and more focused curricula (4 sessions instead) with more simplified messages to engage the lower literacy and busier demographic who did not have the interest and time for a longer training. This is data to help us ‘improve’. The table on the left ‘proves’ to our donor that we’re delivering our training activities, but does not tell us much more than the fact that we’re operational.

The example above comes from a pretty simple training programme, but provides an insight into how a slightly different method of data collection can provide vastly different insights. This ability to track individual behaviour in order to enable programme improvement becomes even more important in multi-intervention or demand-driven programs (i.e. where a single participant pathway is not prescribed). For example, a user may participate in a single training, or conversely may take advantage of several different services for an extended period of time. If youth interventions seek to tailor service provision to youth needs and aspirations, they need to know not just what services and activities young people need, but what services they want, and how they want them; a strong proxy for this comes from understanding what young people are actually doing when given the choice.

3.2. Identifying and understanding outcomes

How M&E provides proof: The traditional ex post endline evaluation is increasingly being replaced by more rigorous evaluation methods, the ‘gold standard’ of which is the Randomised Control Trial (RCT). These methods provide scope to build the knowledge base around key interventions by evaluating impact of pre-determined intervention models against a control, and/or experimental methods which compare impact of different intervention models, approaches, or combinations.

How M&E can also support improvement: While the drive to rigorous evidence should be welcomed, some impact evaluation methods can limit scope for program improvements. In order to enhance rigor, implementation approaches may need to be re-structured to fit research requirements, data collection and analysis may take longer, and flexibility in implementation is typically reduced (see box below).
RCTs can add rigour and subtlety to an existing evidence-base, but they are frequently applied to pilots or as ‘experiments’ testing innovative ideas that by definition have not been done before. The challenge is that many (most) of those innovations are not perfect designs at the outset, and have neither had the opportunity to test challenges or respond to opportunities. Prospects Phase I (2013-2014), included an RCT on two experimental components of the Psychosocial Programme: a Sports for Change and innovative Cash-for-Work component. Mercy Corps was keen to enhance its evidence-base (proof) on what works on youth programming. We made two big mistakes in this process. Firstly, in order to enhance the rigor of our proof, we compromised the structure of the program:

- Randomised groups to reduce biases (by age and sex) destroyed the natural strengths and resiliencies of participants which successful psychosocial programs build off.
- The randomised intervention assignments meant many youth were assigned interventions that they did not want, leading to high drop-outs.
- The need to deliver consistently for academic rigor required a top-down approach which undermined the core beneficiary-driven principles of good psychosocial programming.

The second challenge was that these models – the theory of change as well as the administrative and implementation modalities – were pilots, and the RCT did not provide the scope for improvements. The weaknesses in program design, in part coming from the issues above, in part from cumbersome administrative systems, were apparent within a month of the start of the intervention, but the intervention could not be improved or adapted as this would undermine the ‘rigor’ of the proof. The final evaluation report was released two years after the end of the intervention ended, and found no statistically significant change.

As we know, interventions are rarely perfectly designed at outset, particularly in complex and consistently evolving contexts, and such methods can reduce our ability to improve. A profit-seeking company does not continue to implement a failing product just because it said it would; it uses quick feedback loops to revise the plan and start again. For M&E to support improvements, up to date and accessible information needs to be available during implementation in an accessible form to impact decisions and offer better services.

Herson and Mitchell note that the sector’s focus on proof has come ‘at the expense of evaluation’s poorer cousin, monitoring’ and has ‘led to a disproportionate emphasis on accountability and a focus on longer-term outcomes and impacts, compared with real-time programmatic change and improvement’. In response to this, a recent movement of practitioners and academics has sought to blur the distinction between ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluation’ to consider M&E as a single integrated activity which is both regular (like traditional monitoring) and outcome-focused (like traditional evaluation). This form of ongoing or ‘real-time’ evaluation (also known as outcome or change monitoring) has given rise to concepts and initiatives such as PDIA (problem-driven iterative adaptation), MeE (Monitoring, Structured Experiential Learning, and Evaluation) and Decision-Focused (as opposed to ‘Knowledge-Focused’) Evaluation. All these approaches seek to promote adaptation, iteration, and quicker feedback loops in development programming. Because ‘the key premise of real-time monitoring is to affect programming as it happens’ the methods used for improve-focused M&E is often different than that which aims at proving impact. Frequently there is a trade-off between timeliness and rigour, with improve-focused M&E prioritising formative or illustrative indications of results over sanitised quality.

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3.3. Participation

How M&E provides proof: The focus on proving impact without bias has led to many evaluative capacities being outsourced to external stakeholders or experts. The value placed by donors on ‘independence’ and ‘accountability’ is evident from the norm for ‘monitoring strategies’ and ‘evaluation strategies’ of multi-million dollar development programmes to be formally separated, with the latter removed from the remit of implementers in favour of independent consultants or donor-recruited contractors. Even at the level of implementing organisations, ‘M&E’ and ‘programme’ departments are frequently separated, in part due to the primacy of ‘independence’ between evaluators and implementers, as well as the perception that the skills or interests of these departments are different.

How M&E can also support improvement: For information to be used to make decisions, the relevant information needs to be available to those decision-makers quickly, in a form that they require it, and with openness for them to use it. The separation of ‘M&E’ functions and ‘implementation’ roles might be fully reasonable from an accountability perspective and a check or balance, but can limit the scope of this information to stimulate improvements. Greater participation, by contrast, can offer the chance to enhance M&E’s ability to improve:

- **Ownership**: It is a fairly accepted theory, that those who are involved in the generation of knowledge are more likely to use that knowledge or process. In contrast, external evaluators are often mistrusted, with their findings seen as ‘misunderstanding’ the concept or results. Engagement in the process of information generation can promote understanding and ownership of those findings, and subsequent take-up of recommendations.

- **Speed and appropriateness**: As discussed, findings from independent evaluations often come much too late to decision-makers to influence their management of a programme, and an age-old problem has come from academic research or findings being impractical or presented in overly sophisticated a form for traditional ‘implementers’. Participation in collection, analysis, and presentation findings is likely to produce information that is useful for those who created it.

- **Outcome-orientation**: With evaluation left as the responsibility of ‘someone else’, there is less reason for implementing staff to think beyond the activities they are mandated with delivering. By contrast, if field staff are consistently considering progress towards outcomes, there is more chance of them spearheading localized adaptations or improvements to service delivery.

3.4. Summary

As outlined above, M&E can be conceptualised as both proving results and supporting the improvement of programming. Whichever one is prioritised has implications for how M&E is carried out, both in terms of the type of information that is collected, when it is available, and how it is used. Driven by notions of accountability, the ‘prove’ function has generally dominated development M&E, particularly over the last decade, at the expense of ‘improvement-focused M&E’. This does not, however, need to be the case, as the distinction between proof systems and improvement systems is not binary; a recent paper on ‘Decision-Focused Evaluations’ (as opposed to ‘Knowledge-Focused Evaluations’) concluded simply that, “any methodology that would not meet the implementer’s decision-making requirements should not be considered... The guiding principle is to improve the evidence available for a given decision”.

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11. Iran-Nejad, A. Constructivism as substitute for memorization in learning: Meaning is created by learner, Education; Fall 95, Vol. 116 Issue 1. Available at: http://2020engineer.iss.utep.edu/world/Research%20Literature/constructivism%20and%20piaget.pdf


propose that with a few tweaks, M&E systems that provide proof can be more effectively used for improvement. The next section covers how Prospects seeks to do this through its M&E system.

4. Enabling ‘improvement’ in Prospects

Prospects’ M&E system seeks to make small alterations to the three themes outlined above to enhance its ability to stimulate improvements; by focusing more on individuals’ engagement with the program than organisational outputs; challenging of traditional distinctions between ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluation’, yielding more real-time outcome monitoring; and a focus on processes of internal learning rather than just external evaluation ‘events’. These areas are summarised in the table below and covered in detail after.

Table 1: How M&E can be used to support improvements and how this is done in Prospects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>How M&amp;E can be used to Improve</th>
<th>How Prospects uses M&amp;E to Improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tracking service delivery</td>
<td>- Understanding demand and user behavior in order to improve services offered.</td>
<td>- Case management system to track youth participation and behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Participant feedback to assess and improve quality of services offered.</td>
<td>- Receiving feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying and understanding</td>
<td>- Ongoing, real-time evaluation on short-term outcomes to adapt services offered.</td>
<td>- Monitoring and analysing early outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>- Internal staff engagement in learning process beyond the M&amp;E team, to ensure that findings are quickly applied.</td>
<td>- M&amp;E as everyone’s job.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Semi-Annual and Periodic Reviews.</td>
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<td>- Prospects Blog.</td>
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4.1. Tracking Service Delivery to understand user behaviour

Prospects seeks to get more out of the process of tracking service delivery than the simple counting of activities or outputs. It does this by tracking individuals over time – their interactions with the programme, their socio-economic changes, and their feedback on the interventions themselves. Longitudinal data such as this, when available at a granular enough level, allows for programme-specific insights which enable enhanced decision-making on how the program is structured. This is how we do it:

4.1.1. Registration of individuals as ‘cases’

All youth are registered into the learning system when they first participate in the programme’s services. This is undertaken through the mobile-phone based CommCare case tracking software. While originally designed for the mHealth space, this registration process works much like registering for any membership-based system: each individual is provided a unique ID number, to which (as explained below) all subsequent information collected about that individual (such as trainings undertaken and socioeconomic changes) is logged. The registration form collects information on key demographic information including sex, age, community/area and economic status. This allows all subsequent information collected about individuals to be disaggregated by those demographic factors without recollecting the same information during subsequent monitoring phases. Once registered, youth receive a barcoded Prospects ID card, entitling them to all services provided through Prospects for the duration of the programme.
ID cards not only fulfil an administrative purpose by registering activities to individuals, but also provide a sense of membership and motivation for continued involvement in the programme. This ‘pull’ factor is particularly important for demand-driven programs which see youth as customers rather than beneficiaries.

4.1.2. Linking activities to individuals

All activities or services undertaken by youth are linked electronically to his or her ‘case’. This information, like all of the data, is collected on CommCare by Prospects staff (see Figure 2 below), and can even be done by scanning the barcode on participants’ ID cards.

Figure 2: Illustration of the activity registration system

With each training session, coaching event, or ‘touch point’ with participants logged, the system at its simplest level provides an overview of total outputs and participant numbers, such as the number of youth completing apprenticeships, or the number of youth completing a particular training. The case management system also allows us to identify exactly how many participants are accessing services in total (and month by month), across the intervention portfolio. At more than forty distinct participant interactions or touch points, a normal M&E system (such as the system we had in Phase I) would struggle to accurately keep track of beneficiary numbers without double-counting. With a case management system which allows multiple activities to be logged to one case, we can easily keep track of participant numbers as well as activity delivery (see Figure 4 below).
4.1.3. Analysing participation behaviour

More than just avoiding double-counting, tracking user participation provides insights into participants’ needs; while some young people only need one service to achieve their personal goal, some youth may need many more (see Figure 5). This could be because young people are negotiating a mixed livelihood\(^{14}\), or because the individual services are not enough to improve a livelihood in themselves.\(^{15}\)

Insights into which components of the programme are in higher/lower demand also provides important information about whether or not objectives and activities remain relevant to the context, and how we might need to adapt services to better serve needs of participants. Our system, for example, has provided some interesting insights into participation across gender; roughly two thirds of Basic Business Skills training are female, while roughly two thirds of Effective Job Applications training are male (see Figure 6 below):


\[^{15}\text{By tracking individual participation, we have learned that there is a fairly clear split between youth desiring entrepreneurship support and those wanting employment services. This is reflected in the fact that only around ten percent of youth who have accessed business skills training have additionally opted to access training in work readiness.}\]
The reason for this divergence that many young Liberian women are not looking for fulltime employment, but a small business close to the house alongside other responsibilities. By contrast, many young males are set on getting a formal job which provides them with status. This M&E approach provides the space for diverse participants to engage differently with the programme based on their own needs and aspirations, as well as providing insights which can inform programme adaptations. This finding, for example, hints to a series of potential programme adaptations; (1) providing more alternatives to formal employment support for some female participants, potentially targeted around small business support; or (2) improved outreach and engagement with female youth to build their faith in the formal labour market and targeted support to improve their success in finding jobs. As will be covered in the final section, a system like this does not provide all the solutions, which often still rely on judgement calls, but provide insight into what the status is and what options might make more sense than others.

Tracking individuals’ attendance can also provide crucial insights into programme quality and relevance. The graphs below for example, show a strong completion rate in Basic Business Skills Training, but a much smaller percentage in Soft Skills training. While employers emphasise soft skills as a priority, many young participants clearly do not see the value in our training to complete the cycle. In response to this, we have restructured our Soft Skills curriculum to a shorter (4 session) training, which starts with the more appealing topics to avoid early drop-outs.

Figure 7: Comparison of completion of Soft Skills and Business Skills training
4.1.4. Receiving feedback
While quantitative activity-tracking provides a certain level of insight into participant interests and needs, the Prospects programme also seeks to gain a deeper understanding of why these choices are being made through a combination of feedback mechanisms, including feedback boxes in training centres and SMS surveys. Feedback data gained through the SMS system is linked to individual youth, allowing feedback to be disaggregated by user profiles. This can also be triangulated with participation data covered above.

4.2. Identifying outcomes

4.2.1. Monitoring and analysing early outcomes
Rather than just waiting for an endline evaluation, Prospects identifies and measures ‘early outcomes’. These allow quick feedback loops about what we are doing right, what we are doing wrong, and what needs to be improved.

As Figure 8 below shows, the ultimate desired outcomes of the programme surround improvement of portfolios of work and increased income levels. However, evidence of impact on these indicators is not available until some time after the intervention has occurred. This risks the traditional problem of outputs being satisfied (in this case completion of apprenticeships) only to ultimately find disappointing results at outcome or impact levels once an evaluation is finally conducted.

Figure 8: Chain of results from Prospects’ Apprenticeship intervention

In order to avoid this, and to produce early signals of whether or not the programme is on course to reach its intended ultimate outcomes, we seek to measure early outcomes. Two major examples of early outcome measurement come from our Apprenticeship activities and Youth Investment Fund below.

Apprenticeships
Outcome monitoring on our apprenticeship program focuses on apprentice retention rates in host businesses, and satisfaction levels of both apprentices and host businesses. For example, results so far show that 42 percent of apprentices have been retained, which is a positive indication (though of course not a guarantee!) that the programme is on target to achieve its ultimate outcomes. We are also able to understand shortfalls, such as why 58 percent of businesses have not kept on their apprentices. To attempt to understand this, post-apprenticeship surveys are carried out with...
both businesses and apprentices, with a particular aim of understanding impediments to retention. Shortcomings on the apprentice-side have stimulated changes in pre-deployment training and interview processes, while shortcomings on the business side might indicate that businesses in the programme are too small and should not receive further apprentices, and push us to review the profile of businesses we engage with.

Youth Investment Fund

For the programme’s entrepreneur cash grant component, participants are monitored every 2-4 weeks and administered with a brief CommCare-based survey to understand early outcomes. While in Prospects Phase I, we collected a wealth of information on these businesses, from challenges faced to profit use, we learned that this was too much information to make decisions on. For Phase II, we have simplified down to two key metrics: a ‘traffic light’ update on business status displayed on dashboards (see Figure 9), and business profit (where calculable).

Although Phase II is in its relatively early stages, during Phase I of the programme, the cash grant intervention experienced a fairly high default rate (7.5 percent), whereby the entrepreneur stopped business activities before receiving the full grant amount. If similar challenges are faced in Phase II, being able to identify these trends early is essential in order to allow staff to attempt to make changes to implementation modalities to rectify this. While less sophisticated than the system used in Phase I, this hyper-simplified version is geared towards providing usable information for programmatic response. Monitors are also trained to provide coaching and mentoring, and are encouraged to immediately respond to the issues that they identify while monitoring.

Meanwhile, regular monitoring of the metric of business profit ensures that the team maintains a focus on achievement of overall outcomes and health of businesses rather than simply their existence (see Figure 10 - although note that this represents initial monitoring data and small sample size!).

Figure 9: Traffic lights of cash grantees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status of Businesses - Grand Bassa County</th>
<th>Basic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business is operational</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business is facing challenges</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneur cannot be found</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business has not started yet</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business has closed</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Monitoring Information</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: Real-time information on profit of cash grantees
4.2.2. After Action Reviews / Action Research / Investigations

After the completion of a significant activity, such as the piloting of a new intervention, teams carry out After Action Reviews. Drawing on the dashboards’ data, as well as qualitative insights, these sessions identify what went well, what can be improved, and lessons learned. It is relatively easy to collect data, and for an M&E manager to analyse the data, but reflecting on and taking action on the data is the most important (and often underdone!) task of an M&E system like this.

In addition to After Action Reviews, when a particularly complex or surprising issue emerges, we may conduct investigations or further research to better understand it. For example, to our great surprise, we learned from our M&E system that more females than males were being offered jobs at the end of their apprenticeships. We were able to conduct a follow-up research study (see Prospects Learning Paper No. 116) which identified that this was because female participants, when given the chance to compete equally, were out-doing their male colleagues who were more used to getting jobs through contacts.

4.3. Participation

4.3.1. M&E as everyone’s job

A key strategy through which Prospects seeks to ensure learning occurs throughout the programme team is through overtly designating M&E as a cross-cutting role to which all staff contribute. While a small M&E team provides strategic management of the overall M&E system and undertakes data quality control, the spectrum of M&E responsibilities is shared across the team (and reflected in Position Descriptions):

*Data collection:* The vast majority of data collection is undertaken by programme staff who are also responsible for implementing activities. Having the same staff ‘produce’ the data as ‘consume’ it has the advantage of them attaching greater value to accurate administration than if it had been collected by an external team. This is of course complemented by data quality checking by an external team. As discussed above, having programme staff tasked with generating information about results encourages them to be naturally oriented towards outcomes, rather than merely signing-off on activities.

*Data analysis:* All information collected through the mobile-based CommCare system is visualised in real-time on Excel dashboards. These visualisations combine information about both activity progress and outcomes achieved. As programme staff are the primary dashboard users, data is depicted through simple graphs and charts, which are filterable to the specific location of each programme team. The

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16 Barriers to Employment Facing Young Women in Liberia’ Available at https://prospectsliberia.com/2015/08/22/hello-world/
dashboard is sent out on a weekly basis, and requires review from field teams once per month, and periodic centralised review on an ad-hoc basis.

**System development:** The tools were built by the team, based on the information they needed. While we used the CommCare platform for data collection, the dashboard was built internally using Microsoft Excel, rather than by external consultants with custom-built platforms (there is no-one particularly tech-savvy on the Prospects team!). This allowed for the data collection systems and dashboard to be consistently adapted to better provide the information required, alongside a balanced desire not to inconvenience implementing teams. The dashboards, for example, have been adapted over a dozen times (so far!) to better meet the needs of the participants using it. Initial data needs were overestimated, and many visualisations were simplified to the simplest charts and those most useful for decision-making. Making information simple is a key learning from this, but even more is the importance of being able to adapt our own systems when we realise that they need to be adapted themselves.

**Decision-making:** Decision-making authority for the development of monthly service delivery plans is delegated to regionally-based teams who use the latest information from the dashboard to inform their forward planning targets and activities. Rather than an ‘all-seeing eye’ at the head programme office looking at the data to make decisions, management encourages localized feedback loops.

"I used to always see the email about the dashboard but I didn’t open it because I thought it was for someone else. But now I understand the information and will always make sure to look at it."

— (Prospects staff member at semi-annual review)

### 4.3.2. Semi-Annual and Periodic Reviews

While the section above outlined that all staff are required to engage with the data collection and analysis processes in a regular basis, formalised workshops on a semi-annual basis (in addition to ad-hoc workshops if focusing on a particular issue) allow a space for reflection upon progress towards targets (both output and outcome), plan adaptations, and formulate targets for the forthcoming period.

While small adaptations can continuously be made, these periodic, more formalised processes of review are essential for agreeing on bigger issues. Moreover, they provide scope for further capacity-building around M&E functions, and ownership of data (see box below). These workshops are also used to feedback findings from other Prospects learning products – such as mixed livelihoods – which have implications for how the programme is structured and staff approach their work.
In addition to collecting large amounts of information, a Prospects blog provides a channel within which to share it. While fulfilling a programmatic objective to share learning, the blog also serves as a motivator for staff to engage with the learning process themselves; all team members are encouraged and supported to publish short articles relating to their work on the Prospects blog. This enables deeper reflection and creates the possibility for greater insights to emerge which can in turn influence practice.

5. Challenges and Considerations

The Prospects program runs on an annual funding base of about $3 million, working with about 7,000 youth per year. So while it certainly has resources as its disposal, it is still small compared to some youth employment programs in Sub-Saharan Africa. It therefore offers potential learning for either small or larger initiatives. The M&E system covered in this paper has taken over a year to get fully standing and functional, and is based on experiences of dysfunctional M&E during Phase I. Costing less than $10,000 over the two-year Phase II (for purchase of all data collection devices, set-up costs, and hosting), the direct cost for such a system is minimal, but it requires staff commitment, a complementary working culture, and support from the donor (see Prospects Practice Paper No. 1 for more information on the other components of making an adaptive management system work). The time and commitment requirements should not be underestimated – a similar M&E system on one of Mercy Corps Liberia’s sister programs, launched in an emergency context during the Ebola crisis, never had the time to start truly generating useful information, nor embed itself in the decision-making culture. This system itself has faced a number of challenges, and been born out of a number of adaptations and improvements itself. Some challenges we are still facing, and are not yet sure of the answers to. Some of these thoughts and considerations are outlined below:

Where on the curve are we? With real-time data consistently flowing, one crucially needs to ask oneself one big question before making any decisions on it: where on the curve are we? Woolcock writes about the importance of understanding what the impact trajectory looks like in advance – are things going to get worse before they get better? – in order to make decisions on

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the data coming out and not to make decisions to change course too soon. Effective implementation of youth employment initiatives take time, and in contexts of low capacity, can experience many hurdles along the way. Understanding what is a poor programme design that needs to be improved, and what is just a process of ‘wearing-in’ a new delivery approach, is crucial. For example, a new training curricula might have a low learning outcomes initially: does that require a re-design of the curricula, or is it just because the trainers need to deliver it a few times before they are comfortable with it?

‘Improvement’ fatigue. Related to the above, consistently changing what we are doing, where it improves things or not (and sometimes adaptations do not always effectively improve things!) can be tiring. In some cases, we have had to delay centrally-driven rollouts of small iterations, in order to package a number of programme adaptations together rather than tiring people with consistent ‘changing of plans’. This comes in addition to iterations and improvements on the learning system itself!

Decision-making still required. Related to the above, it is important to state that a system like this does not tell you what to do; it tells you information about the current situation, and might provide some pointers about what might work. In other words, it may help you to make the right decision, but it does not make the decision for you. The decision-making function of users is still critical.

There is only so much data that can usefully be absorbed. Initially, we found ourselves collecting a wide range of data, but lacked the time to both analyse it and to respond to it. As a consequence, as we have refined our M&E system, we have realised the importance of identifying a few key metrics to be collected consistently and accurately.

Data needs to be simply presented: The dashboard used in this system was internally built in order to allow us to adapt it (many times!) to better meet the needs of the participants using it. Related to the previous point, early versions of the dashboard were too complicated, and data needs were overestimated. We latterly have reduced the quantity of data presented to those charts most useful for decision-making.

Information on-demand vs ‘push’: While we had originally hoped that the dashboard could be consistently available (online, on a server, or Google Drive), we found that few people were regularly accessing it – data didn’t change enough on a day-by-day basis. Rather, what functioned more effectively was using a regular ‘push’ mechanism, where the dashboard was sent out on a weekly basis with a short amount of analysis attached, alongside formal reflection activities.

‘Adaptation’ doesn’t necessarily mean ‘improvement’: While this system seeks to promote adaptations which result in programmatic improvements, not all adaptations do effectively improve things. Some adaptations do not work, and all changes inherently involve risk. In Prospects, which seeks to devolve improvements and adaptations to implementing teams, adaptations can destabilise different components of the programme if not fully thought through, or can lead to confusion and/or corruptions. Limits or ‘tolerances’ therefore sometimes need to be placed on flexibility in areas where risk is high.

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6. Conclusions

Monitoring and Evaluation is crucial to effective implementation, management, and accountability of youth employment programs. It satisfies information requirements of managers, donors, and implementers in a variety of ways, yet M&E systems have largely been structured to satisfy the ‘proof’ needs of donors and senior management, rather than the ‘improvement’ needs of adaptive management. The latter does not need an entirely different system as the two should ideally complement each other; with a few tweaks, M&E systems can offer a wealth of opportunities to help ‘improve’ youth employment programs, through feedback loops and evidence-driven adaptations. Specifically, opportunities present themselves related to the method that (1) service delivery is tracked; (2) outcomes are identified and understood; and (3) the participation and capacities of the implementing team in collecting, analysing, and using this information.

Prospects’ Employment & Entrepreneurship programme has created an M&E system that seeks to promote improvement through a range of tweaks to traditional M&E. In line with the spirit of this paper itself, it is important to state that the Prospects’ M&E system is not perfectly designed, and will undoubtedly go through a series of adaptations and improvements over the coming years, but the system provides a demonstrated method to stimulate data-driven programme adaptations, and provides some unique insights for other implementers seeking to enhance their ability to manage adaptively.
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About Mercy Corps
Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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