# How are M&E systems strengthening approaches defined and conceptualized in the literature?

## Executive Summary

This literature review explores how Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems strengthening is defined and conceptualized in scholarly and practitioner literature. It responds to growing global emphasis on robust, sustainable M&E systems that support evidence-informed policymaking and accountability in public governance. The review finds that M&E systems strengthening is widely understood as a holistic, multi-level process encompassing individual, institutional, and systemic capacity building. Core themes include the integration of M&E into national policy and budgeting processes, the institutionalization of M&E through legal mandates and dedicated structures, and the creation of enabling environments supported by political will, financial investment, and stakeholder engagement.

Key conceptual frameworks emphasize a three-tiered capacity-building approach – spanning micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (national) levels. Institutionalization is identified as essential, transforming M&E from isolated technical efforts into embedded governance functions. The review also highlights the importance of aligning M&E with national priorities, avoiding donor-driven fragmentation, and building demand for evidence among policymakers and civil society.

Notable gaps include limited tools to measure the long-term outcomes of M&E capacity-building efforts and an overemphasis on monitoring over evaluation. Emerging insights call for a shift toward outcome-based indicators, a stronger evaluation culture, and balanced supply and demand for M&E information. Ultimately, the review underscores that strengthening M&E systems requires more than technical inputs – it demands strategic alignment, sustained political commitment, and structures that foster continuous learning and use of evidence.

## Introduction

How are M&E systems strengthening approaches defined and conceptualized in the literature? This question has gained increasing prominence as governments, development partners, and research institutions emphasize the importance of robust and sustainable monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices. Strengthening M&E systems goes beyond technical capacity alone: it involves fostering a culture of learning, ensuring political support, and embedding M&E within policy and governance processes to enhance accountability and evidence-based decision-making (CLEAR-AA, 2020). Given the heightened demand for reliable performance and outcomes data – especially in the context of global development goals and public-sector reforms – a clear understanding of M&E systems strengthening is vital to ensure interventions are both context-sensitive and durable.

This review is structured into five main sections. First, it offers a working definition of M&E systems strengthening, drawing on key sources that explicitly address the term. Next, it examines core conceptual frameworks and approaches often discussed in the literature, organized under three themes: (1) multi-level capacity building, (2) institutionalization and policy integration, and (3) enabling environments and contextual factors. Following that, the review explores gaps and emerging insights, shedding light on unresolved challenges and notable shifts in practice. Finally, it concludes with a synthesis of the main findings and reflections on future directions.

## Defining M&E Systems Strengthening

Although the notion of “M&E systems strengthening” can encompass various organizational, institutional, and national-level processes, multiple sources converge on a definition that emphasizes holistic capacity development, integration into public policy, and a sustained demand for evidence. CLEAR-AA (2020, p. 2) defines M&E capacity strengthening as “the process through which individuals, institutions, and countries develop, enhance, and organize their M&E systems to effectively monitor performance and evaluate development interventions.” This definition underscores three essential dimensions: (a) the multi-tiered nature of capacity (individual, institutional, systemic), (b) the importance of a cohesive, organized approach to M&E, and (c) the end goal of facilitating better monitoring and evaluation of development outcomes.

Similarly, Chirau, Dlakavu, and Masilela (2022) describe national M&E systems as “the collection of frameworks, capacities, and institutional arrangements for conducting and using M&E in government” (p. 2). Their emphasis on both the conduct and use of M&E situates system strengthening as a process aimed at enhancing “supply and demand” – ensuring that credible, high-quality data are produced (supply) while fostering strong demand for such data among policymakers and stakeholders. Where these elements align, M&E becomes an integral part of governance, thus strengthening the system over time (Kanyamuna, 2021).

A recurring concept across the literature is “institutionalization” of M&E, sometimes used synonymously with “M&E systems strengthening.” For instance, Makadzange (2022) draws on the International Atlas of Evaluation Framework to discuss “fully institutionalised M&E systems,” pointing to the need for legal mandates, pervasive practice, and parliamentary or legislative support. In this sense, M&E system strengthening moves beyond sporadic or donor-driven projects and is woven into the daily functioning of public-sector organizations.

In sum, the literature conceptualizes M&E systems strengthening as a comprehensive, multi-level undertaking. It involves building individual competencies to conduct and interpret evaluations, establishing institutional frameworks and policies, and ensuring an enabling environment that fosters continuous use of M&E findings. Such an environment often requires sufficient funding, leadership commitment, and integration with existing governance structures (Matsiliza, 2019).

## Key Conceptual Frameworks and Approaches

### Multi-Level Capacity Building

A prominent theme across sources is the notion that capacity building must occur at multiple levels – micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (system/national) – to enable genuine and lasting M&E systems strengthening (CLEAR-AA, 2020; Masvaure & Chirau, 2020). At the individual level, building evaluators’ and policymakers’ technical skills is critical; however, as Stewart (2015) argues, one-off trainings are not sufficient. Ongoing mentorship, networks, and peer-to-peer learning cultivate sustained changes in evaluation practice. Process use – where active participation in evaluations fosters organizational learning – also helps embed a culture of inquiry (Alkin & King, 2016).

At the institutional (meso) level, capacity-building initiatives often include forming dedicated M&E units, standardizing data collection processes, and clarifying roles and responsibilities. As pointed out by Alkin and King (2017), stakeholder engagement and evaluator credibility can be decisive factors in whether institutions adopt M&E findings. Where these processes are well-managed and transparent, the likelihood of organizational ownership and continuous refinement of M&E grows.

Finally, at the macro or system-wide level, national M&E policies, legal mandates, and budget allocations form the backbone of a sustainable M&E system (Chirau et al., 2022). For example, Kanyamuna (2021) underscores the value of a whole-of-government approach, in which standardized indicators and integrated national frameworks ensure that data are comparable across ministries and feed into a shared platform for evidence-based policy. Country-led approaches further emphasize that local contexts, rather than donor imperatives, should dictate the focus and structure of M&E system interventions (Chirau, Masilela, & Dlakavu, 2020).

In total, multi-level capacity-building strategies highlight the importance of synergy: individual skill enhancements are supported by organizational processes and resources, which in turn are validated and scaled up through supportive national frameworks. This three-tiered logic ensures capacity is not built in isolation but as part of a coordinated strategy for strengthening M&E systems.

### Institutionalization and Policy Integration

Another cornerstone of M&E systems strengthening lies in formalizing M&E within governance structures, often referred to as “institutionalization.” This process includes legal or policy mandates requiring government agencies to not only collect data but also use it systematically in planning and budgeting (Matsiliza, 2019). Makadzange (2022) describes this as achieving “fully institutionalised M&E systems,” which entails embedding M&E principles across the public sector, reinforcing them with legislation, and ensuring that responsibilities for data collection, analysis, and reporting are clearly designated.

Integration with budgeting processes is repeatedly cited as crucial (Chirau et al., 2022; Kanyamuna et al., 2018). When M&E data inform resource allocations, it provides a tangible incentive for policymakers to value credible, timely information. In contrast, where M&E remains a peripheral activity – requested primarily by donors or external partners – its potential impact on policy decisions is diminished. By linking M&E outputs to annual budget cycles and strategic planning, governments can create what Kanyamuna (2021) calls a “functional whole-of-government monitoring and evaluation system.” This integration signals that evaluation and monitoring are not isolated tasks but integral components of evidence-based governance.

Policy integration also involves creating national M&E frameworks or strategies that guide ministries, departments, and agencies (CLEAR-AA, 2020). Such frameworks typically outline standards, reporting structures, and capacity-building plans. As Masvaure and Fish (2022) note, a recurring challenge is balancing monitoring (which tends to be more routine and compliance-oriented) with deeper evaluative work. When laws and policies mandate not only data collection but also structured evaluation of outcomes, a more genuine learning culture can emerge. This balanced approach helps shift the paradigm from “accountability alone” to both accountability and continuous improvement.

### Enabling Environments and Contextual Factors

The success of M&E system strengthening depends on more than technical or policy mechanisms; it also hinges on the broader political, cultural, and financial context. As CLEAR-AA (2020, p. 3) states, “An enabling environment … is a prerequisite for strengthening M&E capacity at individual, institutional, and system levels.” Political buy-in is particularly critical: high-level support can legitimize M&E, allocate resources, and champion evidence-based decision-making (Chirau et al., 2022; Campbell, 2021). In contrast, weak demand for evidence, frequent leadership changes, or minimal accountability structures can undermine even well-designed initiatives.

Resource allocation further shapes the enabling environment. Without sufficient budgets to hire qualified staff, establish reliable data management systems, or fund evaluation studies, M&E efforts risk remaining superficial. As Kanyamuna et al. (2018) argue, sustained investment in both infrastructure (e.g., information systems) and human resources (e.g., M&E officers, evaluators) is essential. Donor-driven fragmentation, however, can inhibit the formation of robust national systems when multiple agencies fund short-term, project-based M&E without aligning to national strategies (Chirau, Masilela, & Dlakavu, 2020).

Lastly, stakeholder engagement and a strong evaluation culture are widely cited as enabling factors. The presence of professional evaluation associations, academic programs in M&E, and communities of practice can cultivate shared learning and advocacy for best practices (Makadzange, 2022). Equally, an absence of such communities can exacerbate capacity gaps and create reliance on external consultants. Ultimately, the interplay of these contextual factors – political will, funding, stakeholder collaboration, and a culture of evidence use – shapes whether M&E system strengthening truly takes root.

## Gaps and Emerging Insights

A consistent gap in the literature concerns measuring the outcomes of M&E capacity-building activities. While many sources champion holistic and long-term strategies, few offer concrete frameworks for evaluating whether these strategies have indeed strengthened the system in a sustained manner (Masvaure & Chirau, 2020; CLEAR-AA, 2020). Counting the number of training sessions or newly appointed M&E officers only captures outputs, not outcomes. Researchers increasingly call for outcome-based indicators that track changes in how data are generated, used, and integrated into policy decisions (Masvaure & Fish, 2022).

Another frequently mentioned challenge is the imbalance between monitoring and evaluation. Multiple references highlight that governments often institute elaborate monitoring frameworks – focusing on compliance and indicator tracking – yet fall short on conducting rigorous evaluations that generate deeper insights (Chirau et al., 2022; Matsiliza, 2019). This imbalance can limit organizational learning and hamper the broader objective of evidence-informed policymaking. Strengthening the evaluation function requires stronger institutional and political commitment, not just technical know-how.

Further, many sources point to fragmentation in M&E systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries where donor-funded projects proliferate. Without coordination, these projects risk creating parallel data systems, duplicative indicators, or short-lived capacity-building efforts that dissipate once donor funding ends (Chirau, Masilela, & Dlakavu, 2020). The shift from short trainings to holistic, long-term strategies – one that includes policy integration, alignment with national priorities, and robust local leadership – is thus an emerging trend in the literature.

Finally, a noteworthy insight is the importance of balancing demand and supply of M&E information (Chirau et al., 2022; Kanyamuna, 2021). Strengthening the “supply side” involves training evaluators, creating data infrastructure, and establishing robust metrics. Equally essential is energizing the “demand side” by ensuring policymakers and stakeholders actively seek out evaluation findings, value their utility, and incorporate them into decisions. This balance underscores that M&E systems are not merely technical apparatuses but social systems requiring buy-in from diverse actors.

## Conclusion

In direct response to the research question – “How are M&E systems strengthening approaches defined and conceptualized in the literature?” – the overarching consensus portrays M&E systems strengthening as a holistic, multi-level, and contextually embedded undertaking. Sources such as CLEAR-AA (2020) and Chirau et al. (2022) emphasize capacity building at the individual, institutional, and national levels, while concurrent themes highlight the pivotal role of institutionalizing M&E within governance structures. Definitions converge on the notion that strengthened M&E systems are those which integrate seamlessly with budgeting, policy formulation, and implementation, underpinned by political support and robust legal frameworks. An enabling environment – encompassing political will, financial investment, and stakeholder collaboration – ensures continuous growth of these systems and fosters a culture of evidence use. Thus, M&E strengthening is not merely about technical skills or data collection but about creating sustainable structures, policies, and demand conditions that guarantee consistent, meaningful use of monitoring and evaluation findings.

The implications are manifold for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Policy integration emerges as a lynchpin, indicating that without legislative mandates and clear policy linkages, M&E systems may remain peripheral. Equally, capacity measurement stands out as a critical gap, pointing to the need for innovative frameworks and indicators to assess long-term effectiveness of interventions beyond counting trainings or short-term outputs. Future research could delve deeper into methodologies for gauging how M&E influences government decisions at various levels, as well as ways to adapt capacity-building models to local contexts. Strengthening the demand side of M&E – ensuring that policymakers, civil society, and citizens value and actively seek data – also warrants further exploration, given that a balanced supply-demand dynamic appears key to sustainability. In turn, these deeper studies and new strategies can help refine the conceptual understanding of M&E systems strengthening and propel more evidence-informed governance in diverse settings.

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