

POLICY BRIEF

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EMPOWER CSOs TO BETTER MONITOR AND EVALUATE THEIR PRO-POOR AGROFOOD VALUE CHAIN ACTIVITIES

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in agrofood value chains require monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that feed hungry people must know the difference that delivered food and/or meals make to the hunger status of recipients. This knowledge is crucial for both CSOs and state and non-state agencies that CSOs depend on for assistance. It can also be used for operational innovations to increase beneficiaries. Furthermore, agencies that support CSOs in cash, or kind, demand evidence as to what this support achieves. It is increasingly evident that the existence and performance of CSOs that produce and distribute food rests on their ability to monitor and evaluate the way in which they carry out such commitments.

It is against this backdrop that this policy brief explores options to empower CSOs to ensure their pro-poor agrofood value chain (or systems) activities are better monitored and evaluated. Insights in this brief are derived from a National Development Agency (NDA) study¹ that surveyed 335 CSOs in agrofood systems across the nine provinces of South Africa¹. To make sense of the lessons outlined in the

above-mentioned NDA study, it is useful to sum up some fundamental principles of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) that CSOs and government could find helpful.

This policy brief focuses on the importance of strengthening M&E activities and systems of CSOs to enable them to assess the work, outcomes, successes and limitations of CSOs' operations along agrofood systems. This brief highlights key findings from the NDA study¹ and recommends policy actions to strengthen agrofood value chain M&E systems for CSOs.

M&E for pro-poor agrofood value chains: What, why and how?

The terms "monitoring" and "evaluation" are often used together. While closely linked, they are two different processes involving different activities. Monitoring is ongoing and entails documenting and tracking the performance, progress and results of project activities against desired objectives, while evaluation is periodic and determines the achievement of project goals. Decisions to upscale, reduce or maintain activities are based on evaluation results.

¹Insights and recommendations discussed in this Policy Brief are drawn from an NDA (2023) study titled "Sustainable Food Value Chains as a pathway out of poverty: A case for South Africa". NDA commissioned HSRC to conduct the study, which assessed how agrofood value chains can be made more sustainable, used as a pathway out of poverty, and to address food and nutrition insecurity in South Africa, with the contribution of CSOs. A survey of CSOs in agrofood value chains and key informant interviews that informed the research report were conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Surveyed CSOs were sampled mainly from NDA and Department of Social Development databases and are spread across all phases of agrofood value chains: farming, agro-processing, food distribution and consumption, with some involved in raising awareness through sharing nutritional information.

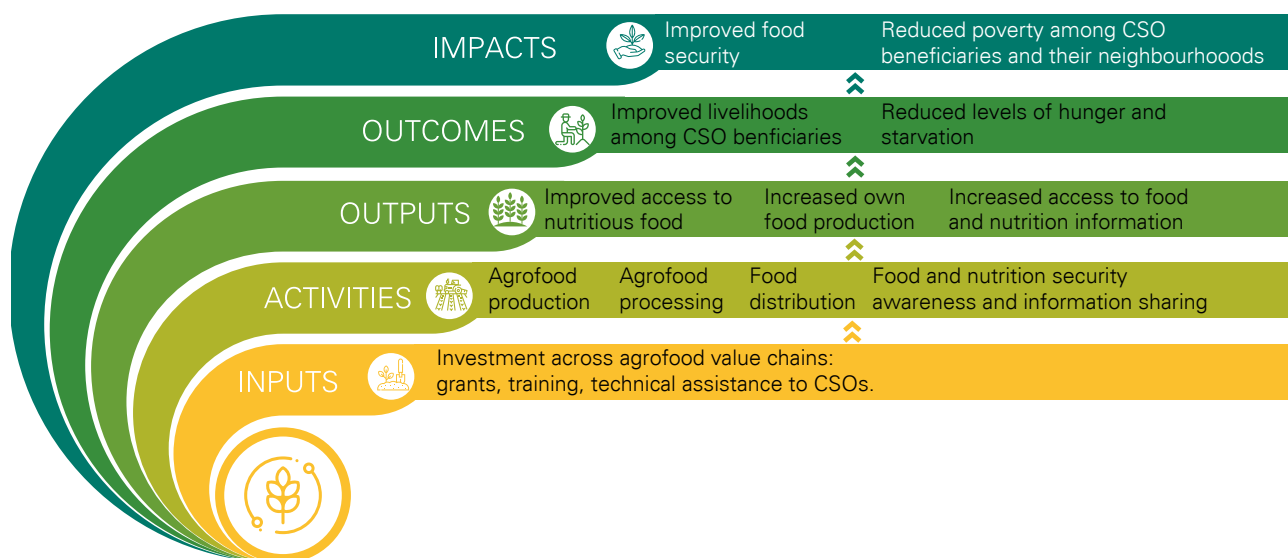
M&E systems have become a universal requirement of the international donor community supporting CSOs in various sectors. They are intended to help CSOs markedly strengthen systems and competences necessary to support their beneficiaries and to provide evidence of the impact made by the CSOs through the support they receive.²

Elements of an M&E framework for pro-poor agrofood value chains

A typical M&E framework would include project inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and overall objectives or impacts along the agrofood value chains and, in this case, through the work of CSOs.

It should bring out what resources CSOs require to conduct their activities and the results thereof. Results should include expected outputs and outcomes, and ultimately the impact. "Impact" refers to long-term effects of an intervention, reflecting significant change (negative or positive) in conditions, while outcomes reflect the short-term results of an intervention's outputs.³ Figure 1 illustrates elements of an M&E system for CSOs aimed at achieving pro-poor agrofood value chains. While a discussion on various M&E designs is beyond the scope of this brief, it is important to point out that an M&E system is not always linear or as easy as Figure 1 depicts.⁴

Figure 1: AFVC M&E for CSO



Source: Authors' compilation

Table 1 summarises what is needed in each stage of M&E implementation, including what is to be monitored and evaluated. Table 1 also summarises examples of different models of M&E while Figure 1 is the technical log-frame of M&E.⁵

Table 1: Summary of M&E implementation

Programming phase/stage	Monitoring	Evaluation
Implementation process	Records of CSO beneficiaries, resources received, food produced, technical assistance and training provided	Baseline data on records of CSO beneficiaries, resources received, food produced, technical assistance and training provided
Inputs	Finances, agrofood resources, non-food resources, personnel, training, beneficiaries	
Activities	Provision of agrofood value chain services to beneficiaries	
Outcomes	Number of beneficiaries accessing services, number of beneficiaries producing own food, number of beneficiaries who become self-reliant	Improved livelihoods and reduction in hunger and starvation resulting from CSO activities
Impacts		Impact of CSO activities in agrofood value chains on food security, sustainable livelihood and poverty in the community Impact of the external environment on intended goals of CSOs

Source: Authors' compilation

CSO M&E activities: Research findings/insights

Evidence of CSO M&E activities (methods/applications)

Table 2 shows information on reviews by CSOs disaggregated by the agrofood value chain segment and by whether they conduct assessments (formal or informal) or not. Approximately 90% of CSOs in each agrofood value chain conduct some form of assessment of their activities.

More than 55% of CSOs in each segment conduct formal assessments, about 30% conduct informal assessments, while only approximately 10% do not conduct any review. CSOs in farming conduct more formal assessments (60%) than those in agro-processing and distribution, with 55% and 58%, respectively.

Table 2: Self-reported formal/informal assessments by CSOs

Assessment type	Farming		Agrofood processing		Food distribution	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Formal assessment	79	60,31	110	55,28	86	57,72
Informal assessment	40	30,53	64	32,16	51	34,23
No assessments	12	9,16	25	12,56	12	8,05

Source: NDA Dataset (forthcoming)

Table 3 analyses reviews conducted by CSOs across all nine provinces. The province with the highest proportion of CSOs conducting assessments is North West with 100%, followed by Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo each with about 97%, while Eastern Cape has the lowest at about 72%. A look at the types of assessments conducted reveals that Gauteng CSOs conducted the most formal assessments with 87%, followed by Northern Cape with 73%, while North West has the lowest proportion of close to 5%. Limpopo has the second highest proportion of CSOs that conduct assessments (after North West), however, only a third of the CSOs conduct formal assessments. This shows that conducting assessments does not always mean formal assessments are more likely to be undertaken. Overall, it is uncommon for CSOs not to conduct assessments as results show that only in three provinces (Eastern Cape, Free State and Northern Cape) at least one out of five CSOs do not assess what they do.

Table 3: Percentage of self-reported formal/informal assessments by CSOs, by province

Province	Valid observation (N)	Formal assessment (%)	Informal assessment (%)	No assessment (%)
Eastern Cape	39	61,54	10,26	28,21
Free State	48	52,08	27,08	20,83
Gauteng	31	87,10	9,68	3,23
KwaZulu-Natal	29	62,07	34,48	3,45
Limpopo	37	32,43	64,86	2,70
Mpumalanga	42	42,86	45,24	11,90
North West	22	4,55	95,45	0,00
Northern Cape	30	73,33	6,67	20,00
Western Cape	40	60,00	25,00	15,00

Source: NDA dataset (forthcoming)

Information sources used by CSOs to identify beneficiaries

This section looks at how CSOs identify their beneficiaries and reveals the relationship CSOs have with other stakeholders. Table 4 shows word of mouth (which includes walk-ins) is the major source of main beneficiary identification used by CSOs, followed by self-maintained databases of CSOs, irrespective of the agrofood value chain the CSOs operate in. However, a closer look shows that at least one in every two CSOs in farming and food distribution segments identify their beneficiaries through word of mouth. For CSOs involved in agrofood processing, there is not much difference in the proportion of those that rely on self-maintained databases and those that rely on word of mouth, at 45% and 47%, respectively.

Table 4: Main information source to identify CSO main beneficiaries

Recipient information source	Farming		Agrofood processing		Food distribution	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Word of mouth	80	57,97	100	46,73	81	51,92
CSO own database	42	30,43	96	44,86	60	38,46
Other info sources	16	11,59	18	8,41	15	9,62

Source: NDA survey (forthcoming)

M&E as accountability to stakeholders that support CSOs

M&E tasks by agencies that support CSOs' agrofood value chain activities include evaluating if CSOs use funds to pursue their intended objectives and goals. Agencies supporting CSOs' activities can also conduct M&E to assess the outcomes and impact CSOs have on their beneficiaries. Both are achieved if there is necessary data for M&E.

Reliable data: A necessity for M&E of government support to CSOs

South African government databases on CSOs that operate along agrofood value chains are not up to date, which makes the accurate evaluation of CSOs' work impossible¹. Without well organised databases that comply with systematic and standardised information management procedures, it is not possible, from the government's side, to conduct any monitoring or evaluation of both the state's support to CSOs and the contribution of CSOs to poverty reduction. Furthermore, without reliable and verifiable information on the support given to CSOs by the government, and the activities CSOs accomplish using such resources, it is difficult for the government to show how it has improved the lives of the poor through its support to CSOs. Findings from the NDA study show that government agencies that support CSOs only collect once-off information about CSOs, but do not have procedures and mechanisms for the regular tracking of activities.

CSOs' M&E policy actions and recommendations

This section outlines what needs to be done to strengthen and bolster the M&E capabilities of CSOs and provides concise recommendations for a CSO M&E pro-poor system for agrofood value chains in South Africa.

1. Define fit-for-purpose indicators and criteria to monitor and evaluate the agrofood value chain activities of CSOs.

- CSOs should collect data on M&E indicators that prioritise measurable changes in quality-of-life outcomes of direct recipients of food assistance and communities in general.
- Entrench M&E systems in CSO goals to encourage a sense of ownership of M&E among staff members and volunteers.

2. Strengthen coordination of M&E policies and practices for standardised reporting on CSOs activities.

- Foster collaboration of M&E units across CSOs for peer learning, sharing experiences and strengthening the functionality of M&E systems.
- CSOs must use M&E tools that are compatible with, and can complement, M&E systems of state and non-state agencies that support their activities.

3. Invest in capacity strengthening of CSOs so that they can effectively collect and use M&E information.

- Annually identify and assess the M&E capacity needs and capabilities of CSOs.
- Capacitate CSOs' staff and volunteers to ensure correct data collection and analysis, as well as optimal use of M&E tools and techniques.

4. Government agencies that support CSOs should design and implement bottom-up systems for quarterly monitoring CSO agrofood value chain activities.

- Providing financial and technical assistance to CSOs must be tied to fit-for-purpose, equipped and functioning M&E activities.
- Measure, monitor and evaluate effectiveness and impacts to inform future agrofood systems' design and funding decisions.
- The NDA needs to work with CSOs, relevant government departments and other key stakeholders to define indicators that measure and track meaningful agrofood value chain factors.

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