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# Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning approaches in an adaptive management context

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# 1 Introduction

Conventional methods of programming dominated the management styles of previous decades, which relied on implementation of pre-designed projects with little room for flexibility or deviation. These traditional forms of management operated best in environments with predictable causal chains, where projects were underpinned by closed, controllable and unchanging systems. It has become increasingly important to evolve from this management approach for several reasons. First, donors such as DFID are increasingly investing more in fragile states where projects operate in unstable and unpredictable environments that impact heavily on what is possible to achieve. Further, an over-reliance on pre-designed projects have informed practitioners that understanding changing contexts is an important factor for success. There is evidence that programmes that succeed in a fluctuating political environment are those that are locally led, problem driven and politically informed, working in an adaptive and entrepreneurial manner in support of changes that reflect local realities (Wild, et al., 2015). This shift makes adaptive management the preferred approach in complex situations.

Working adaptively means being mindful about how the context is changing and being able to respond to those changes. This requires a systematic intake of information and frequent feedback. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning systems are therefore an essential component of adaptive management. Further, because the likelihood of failure is high when working in contexts where adaptive management is necessary, it is important to be able to learn and improve on project implementation as it proceeds. This requires an assessment that can determine the merit and worth of particular approaches – generating deeper knowledge – and help to guide the project direction.

This paper addresses the question: *‘Which MEL approaches have been identified as suitable for use with flexible and adaptive programming (especially in a private sector context)?’*

Key findings of this review include:

- Practitioners are increasingly looking at adaptive management as an alternative to the conventional forms of management that we know operate well in a predictable environment.
- There is a growing body of literature on MEL in adaptive management, but this is still nascent.
- Adaptive programming is about principles and process, not a single approach or method. Internal incentives, for example, could play a larger role than particular MEL methods.
- Monitoring should be synchronised with the pace of change.
- System level indicators should be used to monitor the change in context.
- Process level indicators to measure relationships and networks should be included.
- It is appropriate to focus on honest inquiry rather than accountability.

Methodologically, this paper reviews existing peer-reviewed and ‘grey’ literature (e.g. consultancy reports and donor documents). It has also benefitted from interviews with selected experts.

Section 2 addresses the principles necessary to conduct MEL in an adaptive management context, by a) providing an overview of the issues and context required when planning monitoring frameworks and b) a look at principles when designing an evaluation. Section 3 finishes with a list of methods and examples of how they have been used in an adaptive management setting.

## 2 Principles when conducting MEL in an adaptive context

Current interests in flexible and adaptive programming have developed as alternatives to conventional interventions that had a pre-determined linear process and a tight reliance on compliance for monitoring of inputs. Here, the response would look at complexity through an iterative problem-solving method that allowed actors to understand the complex challenges and then negotiated a way forward to find a politically sound solution. There have been various closely related responses with different names under different institutions, such as Doing Development Differently (ODI), Problem Drive Iterative Adaptation (Centre for International Development, Harvard) and Development Entrepreneurship (The Asia Foundation). For the purpose of this paper, we will use the umbrella term, **adaptive management**. Though different, these responses share applicability in common.

While there is a growing body of literature focused on evaluation in adaptive management settings, the literature on monitoring in complex programmes and contexts is still nascent. Evidence suggests there are no specific monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches to use in adaptive management (Valters, Cummings and Hamish, 2016; Dyer, forthcoming). Two prominent reasons for this are:

- Adaptive programming is about principles and process, rather than focusing on a single framework.
- Internal incentives within an organisation may be more central to whether adaptive programming can work than the selection of a particular method.

While additional interviews with various stakeholders for this paper have confirmed that no specific approaches were used when designing the initial monitoring, evaluation and learning systems, it was recommended that certain principles should be applied to existing MEL approaches (Tanburn, 2016; Kathage, 2016). This paper will expand on those principles in the next section. Following this, specific MEL approaches with the applied adaptive principles will be showcased. While there have not been many documented cases discussing the practice of monitoring and evaluating explicitly in an adaptive management setting, cases from the private sector development have been prioritised.

### 2.1 Monitoring

When using adaptive management techniques, monitoring becomes increasingly important as it provides the feedback mechanism to take in information about the context from participants. The purpose of a strong monitoring framework is therefore to obtain enough information to be aware of changes in the political and economic context, and for the progress of the intervention to then be able to adapt appropriately. While the monitoring system requires enough information to be useful, it should also be light enough to keep the operational team nimble.

Britt (2013) suggests that performance monitoring can work in a similar way to complex-aware monitoring. The goal of performance monitoring is to 'reveal whether the desired results are being achieved and whether implementation is on track'. Here, the monitoring framework is not about compliance, but intended results may be refined or revised as implementation progresses and unexpected results emerge.

When choosing a monitoring method, the following should be considered:

- Monitoring should be synchronised with the pace of the transformation. The intensity of the monitoring needs to be guided by the trajectory of the change,

the observations of staff in the field and the implementation plans (BEAM Exchange Module 6, 2016).

- Method selection may be dependent on the pace of change. For example, extensive surveys may not be appropriate for quick and rapid change, but may be more appropriate for regular fixed intervals. Meanwhile, informal observations may be better at identifying and understanding key trends (BEAM Exchange Module 6, 2016).
- System level indicators should be used to monitor the change in context (Britt, 2013).
- Process level indicators should be included. These focus on the arrows between the results frameworks, such as outputs and outcomes. Examples include measuring strengths of relationships and networks (DCED, 2015).
- The purpose of the monitoring framework needs to be focused on honest inquiring rather than accountability and the indicators need to be useful to the programme, thereby creating a purpose to collect them (Guijt, I., 2008).

## 2.2 Evaluation

Because monitoring is typically focused on tracking progress on an ongoing basis, it has been distinguished from evaluation activities in traditional forms of management. However, in adaptive settings, the conventional distinctions between monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are less distinct than in other contexts. Monitoring may take up a larger amount of resources and may require looking at the outcomes and impact that the programme is achieving. Monitoring data is often a key source for evaluation research (O'Sullivan, 2016). This means evaluations should meet the following criteria:

- Consider how the results of the evaluation will be used and by whom, focusing primarily on learning purposes.
- Match the evaluation design to the purpose and timescale, bearing in mind that a very quick and light assessment may be more useful than a more detailed, rigorous assessment.
- Ensure that evaluations link back to programme design by involving practitioners and participants in the process and facilitating their use of the findings.
- Start planning evaluation early in the programme, as the objectives and indicators may change regularly.

## 3 MEL methods used for adaptive management

### 3.1 Logframe

Logframes have routinely been used in conventional management systems. However, some practitioners believe it is the way the logframe is typically used that has been holding back effective learning and adapting (Vowles, 2016). This is because heavy reliance on the tool embedded in pre-designed projects has made it difficult to use, as these projects have become static, inflexible and deeply focused on accountability. Adjustments can be made in terms of the conventional use of the tool to make it more conducive to forms of adaptive management (DCED, 2015). These involve:

- Including process indicators: these focus on what occurs between the results frameworks, such as outputs and outcomes. Examples of process indicators are strengths of relationships or feedback loops.
- Ensuring the logframe is a living document: to document learning, project teams must be able to make adjustments to their plans.

One example of a programme using the logframe to structure monitoring in an adaptive management setting is **The Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED)**. The DCED is a forum for learning about the most effective ways to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals by creating economic opportunities and jobs for the poor. DCED has developed the DCED Standard to help practitioners to articulate a hypothesis and systematically set and monitor indicators to determine whether events have occurred. This is particularly relevant to those programmes implementing sophisticated programmes within complex market systems.

The DCED Standard is a practical framework for private sector development programmes to monitor progress towards their objectives. According to key informant interviews (Tanburn, 2016), this Standard was built to ensure the flexibility and nimbleness of DCED members. Any monitoring framework can serve as a box-ticking exercise, but a focus on honest inquiry and learning is required (Guijt, I., 2008). The DCED Standard accomplishes this in three ways (DCED Standard, 2015):

- Indicators to define change: The DCED Standard looks at the programme's results framework and scores if there are indicators that describe the change they are hoping to achieve. The indicator can be qualitative but it must primarily focus on process-level change.
- Capturing wider changes in the system of the context: The DCED Standard requires collecting of systemic change data. The programme looks at documenting and assessing results at systemic level, thereby looking at wider contextual factors.
- Evidence of changes in programmatic decisions based on observations: The DCED Standard examines if any significant decisions have been made in the programme on the basis of observations collected in their monitoring data. The more significant the change, the higher the score.

Another programme that builds adaptive monitoring through their results framework is the **State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI)**. SAVI is a demand-side governance programme operating in ten states in Nigeria. They support civil society groups, media houses and State House Assembly elected representatives through informed and credible evidence. As a result, SAVI's partners promote more responsive and accountable responsible state governance. SAVI's monitoring tool is the key to adaptive programming. It is essential to internal learning and adaptation, rather than being used merely as an accountability tool. SAVI included an output in a Learning, Evidence and Advocacy Partnership (LEAP) component dedicated to 'policy influencing'.



Here, the aim was to insure the initiative was working on public sector reform and to share the lessons learned with Nigerian organisations and government bodies. To ensure that thinking and acting politically was central to the decisions taken by front line staff and partners, SAVI staff conducted their own political economy analysis and were mentored by political scientists, instead of contracting them. This exercise helped to analyse the power relations. Further, by conducting their own exercise, the systems allowed staff to 'learn by doing' and created an enabling environment for adaptive programming. State teams were then able to make decisions regarding which partners to support and how these informed the overall Theory of Change. A key lesson learned was that teams were now able to implement an adaptive management programme for working with DFID, which allowed SAVI to have the space and time to develop a programme approach and partnerships that worked. There was little pressure from DFID for high-level results and programme visibility (Derbyshire and Donovan, 2016).

SAVI's analysis had one particular outcome indicator – measuring tangible examples of state government actions in response to citizen demand influenced by SAVI partners. This became the key indicator of programme effectiveness and these examples, in turn, became the basis of results for case studies that were used for external communication purposes.

## 3.2 Theory-based evaluations

Theory-based evaluations, such as Realist Impact Evaluations, explore causal links in a programme theory while testing their underlying hypothesis. They help to establish whether linkages between interventions and intended impacts are plausible. O'Sullivan (2016) advocates for using theory-based evaluations as a key element in the design for market system programmes, as they provide a coherent framework to explore different causal pathways to test empirically. Further, theory-based evaluations provide a way to look at the different factors in a complex environment that necessitate using an adaptive management framework. It is important to bear in mind that theories of change and logframes come from the same conceptual family. Key principles when using theory based evaluations in an adaptive management setting are as follows:

- Linear progression is unlikely and theory-based evaluations can help map out complicated hypotheses of causal pathways.
- The Theory of change needs to be updated regularly, based on hypothesis-testing and observations.
- Work in a consultative manner: different stakeholders will have different perspectives of causal mechanisms. These different viewpoints can be revisited when implementation progress and information from the field is available to clarify matters.

The **Kenya Markets Assistance Programme** used a theory-based evaluation to gather data from the dairy hubs to better understand performance against the key metrics. Based on the data gathered, including milk volumes, sales revenues, memberships and access to uptake, the theory-based evaluation helped the programme engage in conversations about business performance and growth (Adam Smith International, 2013). Over time, it became clear that the lack of transparency among sellers was the barrier to increasing uptake in services, rather than the high prices. This helped to revise both the theory of change and output indicators.

The **Market Development Facility** develops a learning culture by focusing on attitudes behaviours at the core of the organisational culture. MDF's goal is to create additional employment and income for poor women and men in rural and urban areas through sustainable and broad based pro-poor growth. It is managed by Cardno Emerging Markets. It does this by negotiating partnerships with strategically positioned private and public sector organisations. For example, MDF often use Scrums to promote frequent discussion within the team (Miehlbradt, 2015). Scrums are now used as a business management tool

to help managers complete complex projects through improved teamwork, communication and coordination. Information from Scrums can be used to tweak existing theories of change (key informant interviews, 2016).

### 3.3 Outcome mapping

Outcome mapping is a methodology for planning, monitoring and evaluating development initiatives in order to bring about sustainable social change. As a method, it is useful in monitoring adaptive environments, as it focuses individuals, groups and organisations who work to influence behavioural change. It monitors the use of behaviour change and strategies to support those changes, and monitors the internal practices of a programme to determine how it can remain effective. Outcome mapping comprises twelve steps, but key components can be used to tailor a specific monitoring approach (Smutylo, 2008):

- Activity logs: these are used to document the activities, while strategies are used to influence the behaviour changes.
- Boundary partners: there are used to denote individuals, groups or organisations that the programme interacts with directly and with whom it anticipates opportunities for influence.
- Progress markers: these constitute a set of statements describing the gradual progression of changed behaviours in the boundary partners.
- Impact logs: these are journals for collecting data and observing possible impacts.

A programme that uses outcome mapping to monitor impact is the **Climate Development Knowledge Network (CDKN)**. CDKN works to support the poorest and most vulnerable countries in influencing global climate change negotiations, by providing legal and technical support to inform national policy and negotiating positions. They facilitate training and capacity-building for climate negotiators, support planning for international talks and key meetings, along with facilitating meaningful participation in them, and improve negotiators' access to information about key climate change issues. High numbers of challenges are present when constructing an M&E framework for multilateral negotiations.

In response to the challenges, CDKN has produced an M&E framework for their negotiations support. This framework has foundations in the theory of change and outcome mapping. CDKN is particularly innovative, as it uses six negotiations to support dimensions of change as indicators for outcome challenges as progress markers. Progress markers have been identified within the indicators as 'expect to see', 'like to see', and 'love to see'. Between five and 15 progress markers have been developed to characterise change within each dimension. From each progress marker, CDKN determines whether there is evidence of change, no evidence available or evidence of no change. CDKN gathers and examines evidence from various sources and then charts the number of groups who have witnessed changes according to the 'expect to see', 'like to see', and 'love to see' indicators (Hamza-Goodacre, et al., 2013). The monitoring system has recently been given an A++ rating from DFID's evaluation team (Key informant interview, 2016).

A second example of monitoring using outcome mapping is a 'political will' monitoring tool designed by the **Research and Policy in Development (RAPID)** team in ODI with Save the Children UK. The political will tool uses outcome mapping progress markers to measure changes in political will in the country offices. Using adaptive learning techniques, the political will marker is measured systematically every quarter, forming a makeshift 'thermometer' of political will. This thermometer of political will gives the country offices information to determine if their current advocacy tactics and strategies are making effective changes to the environment (Tsui and Tilley, forthcoming).

### 3.4 Mixed-methods approaches

Mixed-Method approaches can be useful in determining the 'why' question from qualitative methods. This approach is valuable in adaptive management settings because it allows flexibility for collecting different types of data.

The **BEAM Exchange's** operational guide for Making Markets work for the Poor recommends using mixed methods approaches for dealing with monitoring system-level change and tackling complexity and unpredictability. Bamberger et al. (2010) describe how to strengthen monitoring systems through the use of mixed-method approaches in real-world complex scenarios. One weakness of many conventional impact evaluations designs is that the pre-test/post-test comparison groups only collect data at the beginning and end of the project. By combining statistical and qualitative analysis, a mixed method design can test multiple hypotheses to enhance the operational and policy utility of the evaluations. Mixed methods can measure both the context and the process of the analysis, explaining variations of performance.

To ensure that a mixed method approach works, the BEAM Exchange has two principles. First, the approach must be able to measure across the chain of causality by gauging systemic levels of change. Second, it must be able to recognise the interconnectedness and uncertainties of markets. Designing a monitoring system that is able to capture, interpret and, finally, quickly act on information (BEAM Exchange, 2015).

Various Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P) programmes use mixed methods to triangulate evidence. **PROFIT**, a Zambian organisation, uses mixed methods to provide value in making up for the unanticipated failure of a data source. Their strongest source of data, the household survey, was rendered obsolete due to changes in the location of project interventions. However, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used to help bridge the gap in the loss of data (Ruffer and Wach, 2013).

### 3.5 Outcome harvesting:

Outcome Harvesting is a participatory method that enables users to identify, verify and make sense of the outcomes with or without reference to predetermined objectives. The method focuses on learning rather than accountability, as it primarily engages with the main users of data to make decisions or take actions. Outcome Harvesting employs system thinking concepts as it considers multiple perspectives about who and what has changed, when and where change has occurred and how the change has been influenced. Relationships between actors are considered when there has been a plausible contribution. Users of outcome harvesting start with what they know has been working for what they are currently doing. Then, the user conducts a harvest of outcomes to record what has changed. The output of the harvest process will result in a set of short narratives centred on the change that has occurred in the organisations the programme has been working with. After collecting evidence of outcomes (positive or negative), the monitoring works backwards to establish a plausible cause-effect explanation of how the project or intervention has contributed –directly or indirectly, partially or wholly, intentionally or unintentionally – to each change (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2012).

**Saferworld** have been piloting this approach to monitor their Advocacy and Policy work. They designed an 'evidence box' to help collect and harvest evidence of their outcomes and the advocacy team then created a way to systematise reporting by developing a matrix to track six types of evidence linked to five stages of success: a) improve credibility, b) enhance relevance, c) advance access to decision-makers, d) increase support for message and e) to accelerate policy change. Outcome harvesting has helped Saferworld to see how they have been managing, through the stages, to determine progress towards their policy change (Church, 2016).

### 3.6 Developmental evaluation

Developmental evaluations look at evaluations focused on supporting a programme to conceptualise, design and test new approaches for ongoing long term improvement, adaptation and intentional change. The evaluator's primary function in the team is to elucidate discussion and facilitate data-based decision-making developmental processes (Patton, 1994). It is especially designed for programmes that do not yet fully understand the causal pathway to change. It does not rely on any method, design, tool or inquiry but simply rests on a few essential principles (Quinn Patton et al., 2015). It has been suggested that this method can be used to evaluate portfolios of programmes (Mackenzie & Hearn, 2016). Key principles are:

- Developmental purpose: the primary role of the evaluator is to support the development of the innovation.
- Evaluation rigour: data should be gathered, interpreted and reported, using appropriate methods and standards.
- Utilisation focus: decision and actions should be made with respect to intended uses by intended users from the beginning to the end of the process.
- Innovation niche: processes of innovation and adaptation should be at the core of the enquiry.
- Complexity perspective: development and change should be interpreted through the lens of complexity theory.
- Systems thinking: evaluators should think more widely than the initiative in question and consider the interrelationships, perspectives and boundaries within the wider system.
- Co-creation: the evaluation and innovation should be developed together so that the evaluation becomes part of the change process.
- Timely feedback: findings and insights should be shared when they are needed, rather than at pre-planned intervals.

The **Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict** (GPPAC) is a member-led network of civil society organisations that work to prevent conflict and promote peacebuilding. In 2006, GPPAC adopted an outcome mapping methodology and integrated Outcome Harvesting into its planning, monitoring and evaluation system. By using Outcome mapping and harvesting, they were able to continue developing by moving away from the 'what is planned needs to be achieved' approach in order to focus more on learning about what is emerging. The network now registers, reflects on and learns from the planned and unplanned developmental outcomes, along with the development outcomes of partner organisations, such as the United Nations, regional organisations, state actors, media and academia.

Based on the outcomes collected, GPPAC was able to modify and change their strategic decisions. For example, one of the outcome harvesting review findings was that GPPAC's outcomes contributed to the mission of 'building a new international consensus' and 'promoting peacebuilding'. It was too early to assess if these types of impacts were occurring. As a result, the evaluators could not conclude if GPPAC's Theory of Change was validated. There was evidence that the strategies were working, the "targeted" social actors were being influenced and that GPPAC was impacting on the system of interacting actors and factors close to the source of conflict. However, there still had not been enough time and information to determine if the outcomes were achieved in a conclusive way. As a result, GPPAC changed the indicators used to report on their outcomes so as to resist the pressure to describe the 'impact' it will achieve over time. It was decided here that GPPAC would not pretend to document changes in the lives of people but would still be accountable for contributing to those changes (Wilson-Grau, et al., 2015).

### 3.7 Qualitative Comparative Analysis

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is a method that is used to establish cause and effect through configurational logic. It investigates the link between a group of conditions and their effects. It can help demonstrate that particular interventions are either necessary or sufficient for the strategy and has been known to demonstrate an outcome. QCA is therefore suitable for drawing out actionable learning, to help establish which interaction of factors has been most significant for making change. Users of QCA can use the information to provide feedback on their causal pathways to comment on the theories of change.

An example of a programme using QCA is the **Climate Development Knowledge Network**. This feeds into their adaptive management processes. CDKN supports decision-makers in designing and delivering climate compatible development by offering research, advisory services and knowledge management to support locally owned climate change negotiators. As the policy arena for climate change negotiation changes quickly, it is essential to have an adaptive model that is able to offer the best technical assistance. By building QCA into the early workings of an M&E system, QCA has confirmed CDKN's existing theories on causal pathways, but also uncovered a few surprises. For example, elements that were previously assumed to be crucial or at least decisive for uptake placed no notable role in causal pathways themselves. These included previous relationships between researchers and policy-makers, close alignment with CDKN strategy at the planning and implementation phase and sustainability planning. CDKN's management team did not consider that these factors did not contribute to anything specific, but they were found not to be sufficient in bringing up the use of CDKN's research. CDKN has therefore now adapted their theory of change and changed the way they strategise and manage their research portfolio (Scholz, Kirbyshire & Simister, 2016).

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