

UNPACKING THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: RESOURCE GUIDE 4

Developing a MEL Approach

Louise Clark and Marina Apgar, Institute of Development Studies

This resource guide is one of a series of four developed to support researchers in international development with key monitoring, evaluation and learning processes, such as Theory of Change and logframes for proposal and project design.

Exploring the different components of MEL systems and the practical implications for implementation

This resource guide will provide an introduction to:

- the different elements of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), exploring the overlaps and gaps between the three processes
- the role of a theory of change and logframe in designing and operationalising an effective MEL system
- a selection of evaluation approaches to understand how project activities (the interventions) are contributing to change (outcomes and impact)
- the importance of learning and reflection in project cycles and how a process oriented and reflexive use of theory of change can provide a framework to support project adjustments and adaptive management.

Balancing accountability and learning

MEL should aim to strike the right balance between learning and accountability. On the one hand, documenting and harnessing the learning around assumptions about how change unfolds to support a process of continuous adjustment and improvement. On the other hand, to monitor and so to communicate – to funders, partners and other relevant stakeholders – if and how the project is making progress towards achieving agreed goals.

The theory of change and logframe (see resource guides 1,2 & 3) are two tools which are foundational to a MEL approach and can support both learning and accountability goals. The theory of change provides a road map of what the project hopes to achieve and a framework to revisit the assumptions made to capture and act upon learning. The logframe is more closely linked to accountability and is used to structure reporting systems and assess performance.

These two goals of MEL are often felt to be in tension – as accountability focuses on delivering what was promised and learning requires embracing uncertainty in project design. Funders are increasingly embracing the importance of adaptive management, and the need to balance learning with accountability, and some are going as far as calling for all implementers to be accountable for learning. A strong consensus is emerging that adaptive approaches not only improve decision making in complex environments, but also raises the quality of programming in the face of long and uncertain pathways to achieving change downstream. Theory of change and logframes inform different elements of the MEL systems in different ways. It is important to be clear on the distinction between each of the components, as explained in Box 1 and below.



Box 1: Definitions of M-E-L

Definition of MEL

- Monitoring – tracking and processing data to understand and report progress against an agreed set of indicators
- Evaluation – assessment of the achievements and changes resulting from your work to understand the processes that led to change and your contribution
- Learning – facilitation of feedback loops to reflect on how well we are delivering our activities and whether we are delivering the right activities to make adjustments and improvements

Monitoring

Monitoring is central to ensuring that the project is being implemented according to the project design and that it remains relevant to the ever-changing dynamics of the context. It is an ongoing process that uses systematic collection of data on specified indicators of performance to provide project managers and the main stakeholders with evidence of progress against predefined outcomes and achievement of objectives.

It provides information on the extent to which an intervention is achieving its intended results. Monitoring should be an ongoing sense making process that helps project managers learn in order to improve and adapt the project as it proceeds. Design of monitoring systems should also consider data storage and management to ensure that data systems are compliant with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Evaluation

Evaluation is the systematic assessment of an ongoing or completed project or policy to provide evidence of what it has achieved and how. It is often used to make a judgement on the merit, worth or value of the design, implementation and results of an activity, policy or project.

A broad classification of evaluation includes a distinction between formative or summative forms:

- *Formative evaluations* are learning oriented and provide information that is credible and useful, enabling learning to feed into the decision-making process of recipients and donors (as noted below in support of adaptive management). These may occur at the mid-term (halfway through or at a critical juncture) in the project life cycle, with the aim of improving the project’s design and performance or may occur throughout.
- *Summative evaluations* tend to be conducted at the end of a project and often focus on a series of evaluation questions framed to determine the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of activities or interventions. Evaluations should focus not only on the extent to which anticipated outcomes were achieved, but also identify any unintended (positive or negative) outcomes.

The field of impact evaluation has long debated terminology and focus, a commonly used definition of impact is the OECD-DAC definition as “...positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.” This broad definition calls for hybrid models of evaluation. For example, a developmental evaluation approach can run throughout the project life cycle, providing ongoing feedback to help improve implementation and may be combined with a baseline and endline evaluation to also measure the net effect of the project.



Data collected for monitoring purposes should contribute to any evaluation of the project, whether an interim evaluation for learning purposes or a final, summative impact evaluation. However, monitoring data are rarely sufficient to meet evaluation purposes and additional data will need to be collected to reflect on how the project has contributed to changes at the outcome and impact levels.

Importantly, evaluation requires more than collection of data, it requires considerations of research design and analysis. A selection of evaluation approaches are presented in the box below; these overlap and complement each other.

Evaluation design should always start with an exploration of the evaluation question to be addressed and only once this is defined then proceed to match an appropriate design. Annex 1 provides an overview of some of the most relevant evaluation approaches to consider when thinking about how to evaluate research impact.

Learning

Learning is a crucial element of the MEL approach, particularly in light of the highly volatile and shifting contexts in which many development research projects are undertaken. An adaptive management approach is the process in which data collected through monitoring and the evaluation and learning insights that result, are discussed with project staff – and perhaps other stakeholders – in periodic meetings to reflect on progress and changes in context and to establish whether activities, indicators and criteria for success need to be changed.

Continuous feedback is important to ensure that projects are responding to a range of political, economic, social and even environmental factors (contextual assumptions) as well as acting on learning about how change happens (causal assumptions). A strong learning system enables projects to adjust and improve implementation strategies and to contribute to the evidence base of what works and why.

A process orientation and reflexive use of Theory of Change provides the learning infrastructure to support ongoing reflection and analysis such that learning about causal assumptions can be harnessed and used. Theory of change as a process acknowledges the complexity of change, and the wider systems and actors that influence it. By periodically stopping and questioning the underlying assumptions about how and why change might happen, interventions are located within a wider analysis of how change happens.

This requires a structured process of **iterative learning cycles** in which ToC is used at the outset to plan the interventions and propose pathways to impact, indicators and monitoring activities. At specific moments in the project cycle, key staff and stakeholders come together to reflect and evaluate if and how change is happening in order to document and harness learning as it emerges.



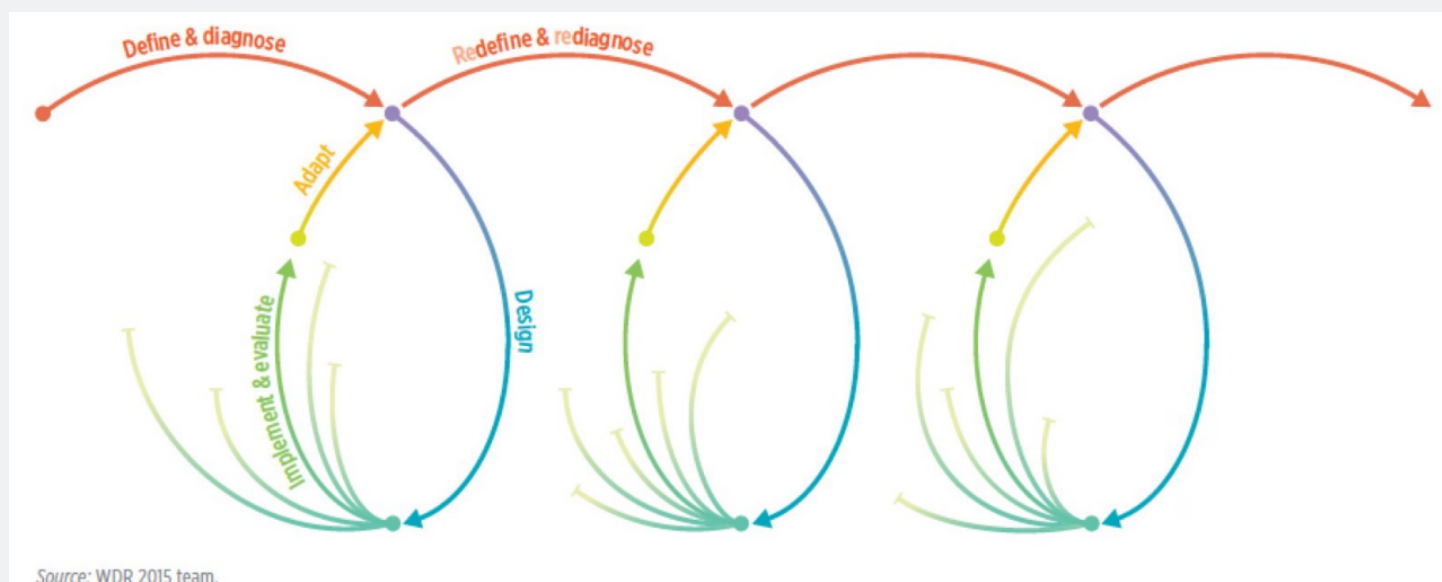


Figure 1: Iterative Learning Cycles. Source: WDR 2015 Mind, Society and Behavior (<http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/487191482349881446/Chapter-11.pdf>) Reproduced under CC BY 3.0 IGO.

Using **After Action Reviews** is a simple way of ensuring the time and space for learning is designed in to the project implementation/reflection cycle. They usually bring together the different key stakeholders to review progress and evaluation findings on how change is unfolding and to ask:

- What is working well? (And why?)
- What isn't working well? (And why?)
- What should we change? (And how?)

Such critical reflection should work at multiple levels of programme implementation to understand if and how a programme is achieving its goals (or not). It also requires using this analysis to refine the theories of change and action that underpin the programme.

To build a culture of learning and critical reflection, where it is acceptable to talk about what is working and what is not, it is necessary to establish processes, spaces and systems that enable reflection and feedback to emerge, be captured and shared, and, if need be, acted on at all levels. Learning systems need to work at multiple levels of project implementation:

- among implementing partners
- between partners and beneficiaries or other interest groups
- between partners and funders.
- between implementing partners and advisory groups / steering committees.

Designing a MEL system

Finding the right balance between all of these elements and turning them into a functional and useful MEL approach will require financial and human resources and some degree of senior management leadership. MEL systems should be expected to evolve throughout the project cycle and be able to respond to emerging needs and opportunities.



References

World Bank. 2015. World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior. Washington, DC: World Bank. [doi: 10.1596/978-1-4648-0342-0](https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0342-0). License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

Annex 1: An overview of evaluation approaches

Evaluation Approach
<p>Theory-based evaluation</p> <p>A broad school of evaluation including multiple approaches that focus on testing and building theory about if, why and how changes happens. As a general rule they require evaluators to make the programme Theory of Change (ToC) explicit at the outset, in order to then test the theory through evaluating if and how change happens in practice.</p> <p>Within the broad approach the methodologies and methods must be selected to suit the specific theories being tested – and enable appropriate data collection and analysis. In this sense, it is not a methodologically driven approach and so requires considerable research expertise.</p> <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weiss, C. H. (1997). Theory-based evaluation: Past, present, and future. <i>New directions for evaluation</i>, 1997(76), 41-55. • Rogers, P. J., & Weiss, C. H. (2007). Theory-based evaluation: Reflections ten years on: Theory-based evaluation: Past, present, and future. <i>New directions for evaluation</i>, 2007(114), 63-81. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ba67/dbe5a4d805e80630e0b702c82e78d03f88ae.pdf • Treasury Board Secretariat (2012). Theory-based approaches to evaluation: Concepts and practices. Toronto, Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/audit-evaluation/centre-excellence-evaluation/theory-based-approaches-evaluation-concepts-practices.html
<p>Contribution analysis</p> <p>A framework for designing theory-based evaluation that takes as its starting point the need to understand how projects contribute to change processes rather than measuring the project's sole attribution to change.</p> <p>The attribution versus contribution debate has been central to the evaluation field and led to development of this approach. The focus of the evaluation is, consequently on if and how an intervention contributes to an outcome so as to capture the broader processes of change the intervention engages with to produce change and so helps us think about why the intervention made a difference.</p> <p>It is not a strictly defined methodology, but rather, is a general framework that includes an iterative process of developing, testing and revisiting specific contribution claims as laid out in the theory of change.</p> <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayne, J. (2008). "Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect." <i>ILAC Briefs</i>(16). https://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/70124 • Mayne, J. (2019) A Brief on Contribution Analysis: principles and concepts. Unpublished. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331159324_A_BRIEF_ON_CONTRIBUTION_ANALYSIS_PRINCIPLES_AND_CONCEPTS • Ton, G., Mayne, J., Delahais, T., Morell, J., Befani, B., Apgar, M. & O'Flynn, P. (2018). Contribution Analysis and Estimating the Size of Effects: Can we Reconcile the Possible with the Impossible? CDI Practice Paper 20, Brighton: IDS https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/14235

Evaluation Approach

Realist evaluation

A specific approach that sits within the theory-based evaluation tradition. It is becoming increasingly common in complex development settings, where there is high uncertainty over how change might happen or where evidence from past evaluations is weak.

In these situations, simply asking 'what works' is not sufficient. It is best placed to answer evaluation questions that emphasize what works 'for whom' and 'in which contexts or conditions' - this necessarily implies a central focus on building understanding (and theory) about how change happens.

Its distinguishing feature is the focus on generative causal mechanisms which are triggered by interventions that lead to patterns of outcomes- these are often behaviour change mechanisms such as self-efficacy.

The evaluator is required to specify the mechanisms within the theory of change, explore how contextual factors have influenced the intervention or relevant stakeholders to then identify outcome patterns, which may vary across different groups of people.

The resulting 'CMO' (causal mechanism-context-outcomes) configuration is examined and subjected to 'systematic tests' using data collected to see if the model explains the programme or project outcomes.

Resources:

- Westthorp, G. (2014) Realist Impact Evaluation: An Introduction, London: Overseas Development Institute, <https://www.odi.org/publications/8716-realist-impact-evaluation-introduction>
- 'Realist Evaluation', Better Evaluation, https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/approach/realist_evaluation

Developmental evaluation

This approach advocates for a more embedded approach to evaluation in the context of developing innovative interventions in complex and dynamic environments.

The role of the evaluator is connected to the implementing team to ensure strong understanding of the project, and the innovation and learning process and its context.

It also ensures that the evaluation can provide ongoing feedback to implementers, and their funders and supporters, during the process.

It therefore asks evaluative questions, applies evaluation logic, and gathers and reports evaluative data, to inform adaptive development of the innovation with timely feedback.

Resources:

- Quinn Patton, M., McKegg, K. and Wehipeihana, N. (eds) (2015) Developmental Evaluation Exemplars: Principles in Practice, New York: Guilford Press
- Quinn Patton, M. Developmental Evaluation. https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation

Evaluation Approach

Participatory Approaches

Evaluation design should consider the level of participation of key stakeholder in all stages of the monitoring and evaluation process, from defining indicators and evaluation questions to methodological design to data collection, analysis and reporting. Participatory evaluation approaches include key stakeholders to ensure that they are able to share their insights and explanations into what changes have occurred and why. The majority of evaluations are driven by donor accountability and may view project participants as key informants or focus group discussants but do not include them further in the evaluation process.

Participatory evaluation approaches aim to create a space to deeply engage stakeholders to help them to shape the design of an evaluation, contribute to data collection and include their perspectives in the analysis and interpretation of data. Participatory approaches can be incorporated into a wide variety of impact evaluation designs and can be both quantitative and qualitative in nature. It is important to be clear on the level of engagement expected from participants, the time implications of this involvement and any support mechanisms needed to build different groups' capacity to participate. Done well participatory evaluations have strong potential to meet the accountability requirements of donor reporting as well as strengthening learning across stakeholder groups and deepening reflections on how a project has contributed to change.

Resources:

- Guijt, I. and J. Gaventa (1998). Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Learning from Change. IDS Policy Briefing. Brighton, UK, University of Sussex. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/PB12.pdf>
- Guijt, I. (2014). Participatory Approaches, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 5, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/750-participatory-approaches-methodological-briefs-impact-evaluation-no-5.html>
- Holland, J. (2013) Who Counts: The Power of Participatory Statistics. Practical Action Publishing

Experimental designs

Experimental designs aim to answer impact evaluation questions focused specifically on if an intervention has worked and to what extent, requiring sole attribution to be proven. They use a counterfactual logic – asking what would have happened in the absence of the intervention – which requires a control group. When the control and treatment groups are assigned randomly this is known as a Randomised Control Trial.

Quasi-experimental designs use the same logic but with a statistically matched comparison group instead of randomised controls. Many social change outcomes that research projects aim to support are, in fact, too complex and interconnected to be isolated sufficiently for a counterfactual logic to be methodologically possible, so these designs are only possible in specific circumstances when impact indicators can be isolated, and intervention designs can be influenced from the outset.

Resources:

- White and Sabarwal (2014) Quasi-Experimental Design and Methods. https://www.unicef-irc.org/KM/IE/img/downloads/Quasi-Experimental_Design_and_Methods_ENG.pdf
- Rogers et al. (2015) Choosing appropriate designs and methods for impact evaluation. https://www.industry.gov.au/sites/g/files/net3906/f/May%202018/document/pdf/choosing_appropriate_designs_and_methods_for_impact_evaluation_2015.pdf