



STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

... for Monitoring and Evaluation in a
Complex Organisation

Monitoring and evaluation can be relatively straightforward processes within simple projects, and there are well established procedures that can be applied. However, as this Evaluation and Learning Brief highlights, M&E systems are much more difficult to design and implement at the level of complex organisations. The key here is to strive for balance between an M&E system with too much rigidity, which suits head offices but allows little room for flexibility at field level, and one with too much flexibility, which may lead to a loss of coherence throughout the organisation. Danish Refugee Council currently operates a system that has less central coherence than most similar-sized organisations; however with recent changes to the DRC MEL System the balance appears to be shifting.

Introduction

Since 2013 the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has aimed to strengthen its formal approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). The goal was to have better defined MEL processes across DRC programmes. A recent external Review of the DRC MEL System, conducted by the author of this Brief, found that DRC now has a global MEL system in place with the potential to provide global consistency in programme MEL. However, like many other large organisations, DRC faces a number of challenges with the organisation's ability to feed global, systematic learning into programme development. This Evaluation and Learning Brief takes a look at the some of the common challenges faced when strengthening M&E in complex organisations and at the end highlights a few key findings from the DRC MEL System Review.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning within projects

It is virtually impossible to do any kind of development or humanitarian work without carrying out at least some monitoring, evaluation or learning. MEL includes thinking and reflecting on what a project or programme is doing and what is changing as a result. Staff may also spend time looking at the external environment - what is happening around them - and thinking about what else could be done or what could be done differently. Visiting partners, talking to staff or beneficiaries in the field, recording conversations, observing the behaviours of different stakeholders or even reading local newspapers can all be seen as types of informal MEL. These activities are indistinguishable from basic management tasks. Sometimes, that is all that is required and there is no need to develop a more formal or more complex MEL approach.

Danish Refugee Council Evaluation and Learning Brief

The Evaluation and Learning Briefs aim to share and highlight key findings from evaluations and research that is supported or commissioned by the Danish Refugee Council.

To comment, contact
Monitoring and Evaluation
Adviser, Mikkel Nedergaard:
mikkel.nedergaard@drc.dk

To subscribe: [www.drc.dk/
evaluationandlearningbrief](http://www.drc.dk/evaluationandlearningbrief)

Danish Refugee Council
Borgergade 10, 3rd
DK-1300 Copenhagen
Denmark
T +45 3373 5000
E drc@drc.dk
W www.drc.dk

“A COMPLEX PROGRAMME OR ORGANISATION IS NOT JUST A LARGE PROJECT. AND IT CANNOT BE TREATED AS SUCH FOR MEL PURPOSES.”

However, for large projects and programmes, and for most work receiving external funding, a more formal approach to MEL will normally be needed.

If a project or programme is relatively simple there are well-established procedures that can be used to help design a MEL approach. The first step is to develop a plan for the project. It usually involves the development of a set of objectives including outputs (the deliverables of the project) and outcomes (the changes to which the project hopes to contribute). The next step is to develop indicators (the evidence that will help show whether changes are happening) and to identify the tools and methodologies that will enable the project to collect that evidence. At this point a baseline is often conducted to enable comparison of later change with the initial situation.

During the course of a project or programme information is collected and staff analyse the information on a regular basis. These analyses are used to inform decision-making and sometimes to develop reports for different stakeholders. At the end of the project a formal review or external evaluation is often carried out, which feeds into planning within future projects. In such circumstances, a MEL system may be a relatively straightforward affair that imposes few burdens on project staff beyond basic requirements.

There are times when work is not so simple, and the MEL system will need to be more complex as a result. Generally, the more complex a project or programme, the more the MEL system needs to be tailored to particular needs. For example work in some areas is inherently difficult to measure, and there may be contested views about what constitutes success. In areas such as governance, capacity development, conflict resolution and empowerment it is often difficult to find indicators that allow performance to be easily assessed. In these cases the indicators, the tools through which they are collected, and the type of analysis may need to be much more sophisticated.

In these situations MEL may become more complex exercises. However, when dealing with an individual project or straightforward programme the task should still be relatively straightforward to manage.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning in complex organisations

By contrast, MEL systems within complex programmes or large organisations, such as DRC, are never straightforward. There

are many differences between a project MEL system and a complex organisational MEL system. Some of the differences are described below.

- **An organisational MEL approach may involve developing broader frameworks within which setting objectives and indicators, carrying out baselines, conducting evaluations etc. will be carried out. In such cases the job of MEL system design is less to identify specific indicators and tools, for example, and more to provide different options and standards for others to develop them.**
- **As the complexity of an organisation increases, knowledge management becomes more of an issue. It becomes necessary to rely more on systems and processes for sharing data, knowledge and learning, and less on personal contacts and relationships. This may involve the development of sophisticated databases or management information systems.**
- **Learning is much more difficult to facilitate at organisational level. It is often necessary to develop formal procedures to ensure that institutional memory is not lost, and that lessons learned in one part of an organisation can be shared, or retrieved when required by others. DRC, as with many large organisations, still relies a great deal on personal relationships to transfer learning. However, this makes the organisation vulnerable to institutional memory loss when key stakeholders move on.**
- **Aggregation and summarisation becomes more of an issue as organisations seek to summarise change across a range of different development interventions in different sectors and locations.**
- **MEL approaches need to consider different levels within an organisation. Projects, partners, programmes, sectors and countries need to be able to operate independent MEL systems that nonetheless engage with each other to create an overall organisational MEL framework.**
- **In complex organisations it is important for MEL resources to be deployed strategically. This means directing MEL resources at those areas that are of most importance to an organisation, rather than spreading resources equally across the whole programme. Within**

“NO ORGANISATIONAL MEL SYSTEM EXISTS THAT CAN GUARANTEE GOOD MEL AT ALL LEVELS OF AN ORGANISATION”

DRC, for example, there may be benefits in investigating particular approaches such as the use of cash interventions for protection outcomes.

- **Above all, the more complex a programme or organisation the greater the need for supporting processes. These include training, induction and motivation for staff, as well as efforts to ensure there are sufficient budgets in place to ensure effective MEL at different levels. Increasing efforts may also be needed to instil a vision or culture within a MEL framework that is conducive to effective data collection, analysis and use. Here the role of an organisation’s leadership is likely to be critical.**

In such cases, MEL may not be simple at all, and considerable experience and skill may be needed to design, develop and manage an organisational MEL system. Whilst the experience of other programmes and organisations may be useful, those tasked with designing an organisational MEL system will frequently need to develop their own independent solutions in response to their own particular needs. An understanding of basic planning and MEL principles and procedures will obviously be necessary. But it will not be sufficient on its own, and the ability to adapt and innovate will be crucial.

Striving for Balance

The key to developing an organisational MEL system is to strive for balance within different aspects of the system. Firstly, there is the balance between imposing common MEL policies, practices and procedures, and leaving flexibility for local-level decision-makers to develop their own policies, practices and procedures in response to their own local needs. Too far in one direction and the MEL system becomes too rigid and bureaucratic to be of any use to local staff or beneficiaries. Too far in the other direction and the MEL system loses any coherence at organisational level – in effect it becomes a set of individual country- or project-based systems that do not interact with each other in a meaningful way.

Secondly, a balance needs to be sought between the MEL needs of head offices and the needs of staff working at different levels of an organisation. This means trying to ensure that an organisational MEL system is capable of delivering in key areas such as organisational learning, accountability

upwards to donors and providing information for marketing and global campaigns; as well as enabling sufficient flexibility for different levels to use MEL to serve effective project/ programme management, resource allocation, verification and control, and downwards accountability to communities and service users. In the author’s experience there are often differences in the understanding of MEL needs and priorities between head office and field staff. This is clearly an issue in DRC, as with many large organisations, and needs to be managed on an ongoing basis.

Thirdly, a balance needs to be struck between developing an organisational MEL system in a participatory manner and designing a coherent system that binds together MEL work carried out for varying reasons in many different places. There are always going to be tensions that need to be managed in this area. On the one hand it is essential to know how people use existing MEL systems, to thoroughly understand their needs and requirements, and to ensure there is buy-in to a new or updated system. On the other hand, an organisational MEL system ultimately needs to be designed by an individual or small core team as an integrated system, or run the risk of losing coherence in trying to be all things to all people.

No organisational MEL system exists that can guarantee good MEL at all levels of an organisation, as much of the application of a system is down to individual staff. However, provided these three different balances can be achieved, there is no reason why organisational MEL systems cannot be developed that enable good MEL practices to flourish within an organisation.

Flexibility and coherence within DRC’s MEL System

DRC has always had common systems and procedures. However, to date these have tended to be associated with its planning and reporting framework (PRF) rather than MEL processes. Examples include the mandatory Strategic Programme Documents (SPDs) and the requirement to report quarterly against Results Contracts (RCs). Those common procedures that applied specifically to monitoring, evaluation and learning have either been recently discontinued (such as an annual meta-evaluation and a set of aggregated output indicators across different countries) or in the case of annual reviews have become increasingly detached from the organisational MEL system.

From an outsider’s perspective, this means that the pendulum within DRC’s MEL system currently points more in the direction

of flexibility and decentralisation of MEL decision-making than is common in similar-sized organisations. Whilst flexibility and decentralisation are considered good things in themselves, if the pendulum moves too far it can lead to a loss of coherence, and DRC may lose the ability to summarise performance across its portfolio as a result.

DRC has begun to introduce, or is about to introduce, a number of tools and approaches that attempt to shift the balance back towards the centre. These include:

- **The introduction of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Minimum Operational Procedures (MELMOPs) to assure quality of MEL across all DRC projects;**
- **The introduction of Real Time Reviews (RTRs) as a specific methodology to be used following the declaration of a corporate emergency;**
- **The introduction of a new Evaluation Policy to enable better strategic targeting and use of evaluations within DRC;**
- **The piloting of a country level evaluations approach to ensure better medium-term strategic planning and analysis within selected countries; and**
- **The (future) introduction of a set of key organisational evaluation questions to better target learning throughout the organisation.**

Together, these tools and approaches will help shift the pendulum back towards the centre. Time will tell whether this will be enough to enable DRC to better summarise performance across its portfolio, or whether more needs to be done.

Conclusions; The implication for DRC

It is important to recognise that the development of MEL systems within complex organisations is not a particularly well-covered area in development or humanitarian literature. There may be many solutions to different challenges, and a large degree of experimentation is often needed. MEL systems may be influenced by a number of factors including the purpose of M&E, the nature of an organisation, the type of work it carries out, the resources available, and external influences and pressures. Each organisation is different and therefore each MEL system is different.

The implication for DRC is that it needs to constantly innovate and experiment with its global MEL system in order to develop one that is right for itself. Experience from other organisations may help, but ultimately DRC will need to undertake the journey itself. This will involve making mistakes and pursuing blind alleys at times. Yet the reward at the end of the day may be a system that can help support better lives for DRC's ultimate stakeholders – people affected by humanitarian emergencies. For DRC there is a golden opportunity to embed MEL more strongly at different levels of the organisation through the 2020 Strategy process which starts in 2016.

Further reading

Simister, Nigel (2009) *Developing M&E Systems for Complex Organisations: A Methodology*. INTRAC M&E Paper 3.

Simister, Nigel (2015) *Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning System Review*, Danish Refugee Council Progress Report 03.

Visit melmop.drc.dk for more information on DRC's current MEL System.

Credits

This Evaluation and Learning Brief was written by Nigel Simister. Nigel is an Associate of INTRAC. He has worked on the design, implementation and review of M&E systems in complex organisations for over fifteen years, and has written a number of publications on the subject.

The opinions expressed in the Evaluation and Learning Briefs are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of DRC.