Working Paper 2

A Learning Approach to Monitoring and
Evaluation

Katy Oswald

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Katy Oswald

Summary

This paper draws on literature from monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and organisational learning, with two case studies to explore how M&E could be better linked to organisational learning. Two insights from the organisational learning literature are that (1) organisations learn through ‘double-loop’ learning: reflecting on experience and using this to question critically underlying assumptions, and (2) that power relations within an organisation will influence what and whose learning is valued and shared.

This paper identifies four incentives that can help link M&E with organisational learning: the incentive to: learn why, to learn from below, to learn collaboratively, and to take risks. Two key elements are required to support these incentives: (1) establishing and promoting an ‘evaluative culture’ within an organisation and (2) having accountability relationships where value is placed on learning ‘why’ as well as on learning from mistakes. Together these elements move us towards a ‘learning approach’ to M&E.

The paper outlines two case studies of programmes that have attempted to move towards a ‘learning approach’ to M&E, highlighting the practical opportunities and constraints to linking M&E with wider organisational learning. The paper concludes that a ‘learning approach’ to M&E requires trust both within organisations and in accountability relationships between organisations. The paper recommends further exploration of the synergies between M&E theory and practice and the burgeoning literature on relationships for development that explores how trust is developed and sustained through relationships.

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Contents

Summary and author notes	3
1 Introduction	5
2 Insights from Organisational Learning	5
3 Incentives and disincentives to link M&E Systems with wider organisational learning	7
3.1 Supporting the incentive to learn why	7
3.2 Creating incentives to learn from below	7
3.3 Supporting the incentive to learn collaboratively	8
3.4 Creating incentives to take risks and learn from mistakes	8
4 Implications for a ‘learning approach’ to M&E	9
4.1 Using Outcome Mapping to support learning – Attempting to apply theory to practice: A case study of ‘AWARD’, CGIAR	10
4.2 Attempting to institutionalise learning: A Case Study of ‘Managing for Impact’ (M4I), IFAD	13
5 Conclusion	14
References	15
Figures	
Figure 2.1. Single-Loop and Double-Loop Learning	6

1 Introduction

The Agricultural Learning and Impacts Network (ALINe) has identified a number of weaknesses of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in agriculture. These include: a failure to specify what M&E is for and to facilitate its use, a lack of stakeholder participation and responsiveness, too much of a focus on inputs and outputs and not enough on outcomes, too little focus on the trajectories for impact, not enough focus on flexibility and learning, and not enough use of findings (Haddad et al. 2010: 9). Research undertaken by ALINe suggests that a major driver of these shortcomings is the failure to address the multiple purposes of M&E explicitly. These purposes include improved delivery, providing upward and downward accountability, refining strategies, empowering stakeholders, and providing global public goods in the form of knowledge and understanding. A failure to address all these purposes can lead to information gaps and misaligned incentives (Ibid.).

This paper responds to the failures of much of M&E to focus on flexibility and learning. As part of the planning phase of the ALINe programme, the author explored synergies in theory and practice between organisational learning and M&E. The aim was to ascertain whether these two fields may prove mutually supportive to improving learning through M&E. Both organisational learning and M&E are vast and contested disciplines in their own right; this paper will not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of both literatures, rather it will suggest ways in which insights from organisational learning theory and practice could help to support incentives for learning through M&E. Section 2 identifies some of the key insights from theory and practice in organisational learning that might improve our understanding of how organisations learn. Section 3 explores organisational incentives and disincentives to linking M&E with wider organisational learning. Section 4 discusses implications that may be helpful for organisational leaders and programme/project managers who wish to make a link between M&E and wider organisational learning, suggests an evolution towards a ‘learning approach’ to M&E, and provides two case studies of programmes that have attempted to use a ‘learning approach’ to M&E.

2 Insights from Organisational Learning

Many writers make a clear distinction between monitoring and evaluation, but it is useful to see them not as two distinct functions, but rather as two sides of the same coin. A useful analogy is to think about driving a car. The driver constantly monitors the speed, but is also evaluating whether the speed is appropriate for the surroundings and the speed limit². M&E can be understood as an integrated process or system in which experience, information and knowledge are collected through various methods and reflected upon to assess progress and make better decisions towards particular goals and objectives (Guijt 2008). In this sense, M&E mirrors the learning processes that individuals undergo: by monitoring and evaluating one’s experience, reflecting on it, and subsequently analyzing those reflections, an individual then takes action which becomes a new experience for further reflection. This is, fundamentally, the way in which humans learn as individuals, but it also has implications also for organisational learning. Organisational learning theory recognises that organisations can learn independently of the individuals within them. One can facilitate processes of organisational learning through rules (formal and informal), procedures, culture and structures within an organisation (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999).

Currently, the literature reveals two main perspectives on organisational learning: technical and social. The technical perspective assumes that organisational learning happens through the effective processing and interpretation of information that an organisation finds useful (Huber 1991). However, this perspective has been criticised for making the assumption that people and organisations behave according to rational calculations, while ignoring the political agendas that can influence organisational behaviour (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999). For example, staff may distort information in order to validate previous decisions or support their agendas (Coopey 1995). A social perspective recognises that learning emerges from social relationships and interactions, is a political process, and is dependent on the culture of an organisation (Cook and Brown 1999; Dewey 1938; Nicolini and Mezner 1995). This leads to a focus not only on formal structures and learning processes but also on informal exchanges and relationships between staff, and the value placed on learning and knowledge within the culture of the organisation (Orr 1990). This article takes a social perspective on organisational learning.

Some theorists have posed that organisations learn through ‘double-loop’ learning (Argyris and Schon 1978). This involves not only reflecting and then acting on experience and knowledge, but using such reflection to question critically the underlying assumptions that previous strategies were based on (Argyris 1992).

²I am grateful to Jim Woodhill for this analogy.

The concept of 'double-loop' learning within organisational learning highlights the importance of collective reflection: the need to reflect on and challenge our deeply ingrained assumptions about how the world works (Chambers 2002).

Collective reflection supports learning through the collective and mutual challenging of assumptions (Moon 1999). The critical self-reflection it entails can be challenging to undertake as it risks exposing one's mistakes or appearing to be disloyal to colleagues and friends when critically reflecting on experience (Argyris and Schon 1978; Eyben 2006). It can also prove threatening to senior management if junior staff is allowed to reflect critically on managers' actions and decisions (Guijt 2008). This can be a key challenge when facilitating processes of organisational learning.

Figure 2.1. Single-Loop and Double-Loop Learning

Source: Reproduced with kind permission from Ed Batista, available http://edbatista.typepad.com/edbatista/images/2006/12/Double-Loop_Learning_2_Large.gif (accessed 21 Dec 2010).

Since the social learning perspective understands learning to occur through social relations, this inevitably implies potential for conflict and power struggles, and the need for organisational learning processes to recognise power relations within the organisation (Elkjaer 2003). From this perspective, not everyone's learning or knowledge will be equally valued, and some learning or knowledge might challenge those in power. Furthermore, if we recognise that knowledge is power, individuals and organisations may not wish to reveal knowledge from which they perceive they derive their power. This raises the possibility that important knowledge is not shared or imparted for fear of the loss of power this may entail.

Thus, the above mentioned theories have implications for the organisational structures (both formal and informal) that facilitate organisational learning. These structures need to be both formal and informal, encourage trust amongst staff, allow staff to learn collectively, and support staff to engage in free and honest conversations (Roper and Pettit 2003; Senge 1990). Learning processes also need legitimacy, therefore organisational learning needs to be supported by strong and engaged leadership (Hailey and James 2003; Plaskoff 2003).

Roper and Pettit (2003) acknowledge that much of the organisational learning literature is aspirational, as individuals and organisations struggle to 'unlearn' dysfunctional behaviours that undermine supportive institutional structures for learning. Therefore, this literature would suggest that organisational learning is challenging to initiate and sustain.

3 Incentives and disincentives to link M&E systems with wider organisational learning

There is a specific body of literature which looks at how M&E systems could be better linked with wider organisational learning processes. Some commonly identified disincentives to linking M&E with organisational learning (Preskill and Torres 2001) are as follows:

- Anti-learning organisational cultures can be reactive, not proactive;
- The leadership talks about learning, but doesn't learn itself;
- Communication channels and systems do not support organisational learning or make a link with M&E;
- Information is not willingly or transparently shared because of a belief that information is power to be held by a few;
- Discourse on challenging assumptions and asking questions is not valued, and is dismissed as controversial behaviour;
- Staff do not trust one another;
- There is a fear of making mistakes, and risk-taking is discouraged;
- Independent work is more highly valued in incentive terms than collaborative work for a greater collective good;
- M&E activities are seen as threatening the status quo and authority;
- M&E activities are 'one off' events and are not continuous or grouped to capture learning;
- The involvement of diverse stakeholders in M&E is perceived as being too overwhelming;
- M&E activities are regarded as costly in terms of money, time, and/or personnel resources;
- A fear of change within the organisation may exist; and
- People do not see the value, or are suspicious, of any data collection effort.

However, the literature also offers some helpful suggestions for incentives to encourage a link between M&E and organisational learning. The following sections will explore these suggestions towards improving learning.

3.1 Supporting the incentive to learn why

To effectively link M&E to organisational learning, M&E systems need to help organisations learn how and why an intervention has been successful or not; the inclusion of such questions in M&E processes will facilitate double-loop learning. This requires understanding the complex set of factors that led to a particular outcome and the assumptions on which interventions have been based. Methodological innovations, such as 'Theory of Change' approaches (Ortiz and Taylor 2009) offer ways of building and articulating such an understanding. However, this is often challenging due to development interventions occurring within complex and dynamic environments, with multiple interventions occurring simultaneously, with interactions among many agents and processes, and lacking strong feedback loops (Douthwaite et al. 2003; Horton and Mackay 2003; Rogers 2005, 2008). There is a need to create incentives for mixed and adaptive methods within M&E, which capture both qualitative and quantitative information, acknowledge multiple causal pathways, and are flexible enough to capture surprises and deal with change. The complexity of development also highlights the need for participatory forms of M&E, which can capture multiple perspectives and support the collective reflection required for organisational learning.

3.2 Creating incentives to learn from below

Development organisations can be accountable in different directions. Accountability may be upwards (to donors), horizontal (to partners), and downwards (to beneficiaries). However, many development organisations have distorted upwards accountability where they are ultimately accountable to donors but not the communities they work with (Rebien 1996; Roche 1999). This can result in M&E systems not addressing downwards accountability as well as they address upwards accountability. The distorted incentive appears to value the knowledge and learning that donors demand over the knowledge and learning that other stakeholders value or require; if development organisations placed equal value on stakeholder knowledge and learning, more 'bottom up' learning could potentially be captured.

This distorted accountability is, in part, a result of the difference between for-profit and non-profit organisations. For-profit organisations see a direct link between the customer and the success of the business, and thus are incentivised to engage in organisational learning that values the knowledge and experiences of the customer. Development organisations, on the other hand, are set up to serve communities but often see their core accountability to their donor, which neither receives the organisation's services nor generally is capable of monitoring whether that organisation is adequately serving the community (Power et al. 2002; Rebien 1996; Roche 1999). This is not to say that all upwards accountability relationships will automatically lead to such incentives. However, it does point to the importance of the quality and nature of the upwards accountability relationship in providing the incentives to learn from the bottom up (Benjamin 2008). It also suggests that upward accountability needs to be balanced by horizontal and downward accountability, with systems that build sufficient trust to be able to give honest feedback – often difficult when hierarchy and resource dependence makes honesty challenging (Pasteur and Scott-Villiers 2006). Therefore, we require a broader array of monitoring and evaluation approaches that serve not as an external accountability function, but as a learning function (Horton and Mackay 2003).

3.3 Supporting the incentive to learn collaboratively

The internal structures, rules, procedures and culture of organisations create strong incentives or disincentives to learn through M&E systems (Levitt and March 1988). For example, the systems and structures of an organisation mediate the ability of staff to interact, collaborate, and communicate with each other. If these are integrated, they can create opportunities for mutual learning, but traditional organisational structures often create silos, which may lead to disincentives for cross collaboration and learning (Preskill and Torres 1999). This can be seen in the 'ghettoisation' of M&E systems, where a particular member of staff or department is responsible for M&E, and others are responsible for implementation, with limited interaction and mutual learning. The incentive is for some staff to 'do' and different staff to 'learn'.

Integrated management systems can address this by creating incentives for cross-team working. However, such systems must be reinforced by the culture of an organisation. For example, an organisational culture that rewards staff for disbursing funds can create incentives to act quickly and manage multiple projects, leaving little time for learning. Unless learning is equally rewarded and recognised, the incentive will be skewed towards other objectives (Pasteur and Scott-Villiers 2006; Guijit 2008).

Institutional incentives for learning need not be confined to formal structures and approaches; learning happens both formally and informally (Foley 1999). There is a difference between formal learning, e.g. seminars, strategic reviews, training etc., and informal learning, e.g. conversations over coffee, observing others, working with new people, etc. The recognition that learning often happens informally has led to the development of learning methodologies – such as 'open spaces' and 'unconferences' – that attempt to formalise informal learning and also provide safe spaces to discuss issues that people feel less comfortable discussing in more formal or structured settings. These sorts of informal 'spaces' could form part of the institutional structures and incentives that support learning through monitoring and evaluation.

3.4 Creating incentives to take risks and learn from mistakes

In organisations with a hierarchical culture, senior management can regard learning as a potential threat to their authority (Argyris and Schon 1978; Gujit 2008; Schein 1996). Some have argued that the single most important incentive for organisational learning is a 'learning leader' (Hailey and James 2003) – a leader with a positive attitude towards learning who practices learning themselves. 'Learning leaders' form a critical part of a 'learning culture' (Schein 1996) that creates incentives for staff to take risks.

The value an organisational culture places on learning is closely related to the attitude towards mistakes. Organisations evaluate their mistakes in different ways (Korten 1984). If an organisation regards mistakes as failures, staff may hide their mistakes and prevent learning at the organisational level from occurring. However, if an organisation regards mistakes as sources of learning, the incentive is for staff to reflect on, discuss, and learn from mistakes and be less fearful of taking risks.

The literature on organisational learning argues that organisations, and the individuals within them, need to have the space for critical self-reflection on their experiences, their mistakes, and risk taking (Chambers 2002). For this to occur, an organisation must be open and confident enough to encourage a culture of critical self-reflection and dialogue. The capacity to do this is intrinsically linked to institutional incentives.

Reflexivity (sometimes referred to as reflexive practice) involves both individual and collective self-reflection and action (Ibid.). The process is cyclical in that after an action, the act is reflected upon, and the cycle begins again. Reflexivity differs from simple reflection, as it involves not just reviewing past actions but also acknowledging how our own perceptions and assumptions have influenced our interpretation of those actions. It requires ‘double-loop’ learning - the questioning of underlying assumptions, held both individually and collectively, that led to the action.

Spaces and opportunities for self-reflection need to be provided (such as retreats or communities of practice) and facilitated in such a way as to support honest reflection and sharing, where people can be open and make their assumptions explicit (Pasteur 2004). This requires a high level of trust and often requires skilled third party facilitators.

4. Implications for a ‘learning approach’ to M&E

Having reviewed some of the insights from organisational learning and explored the question of incentives and disincentives to linking M&E systems with wider organisational learning, this final section will discuss the implications for developing a ‘learning approach’ to M&E.

Within M&E theory and practice, the concept of ‘evaluative inquiry’ has emerged in response to linking M&E systems to organisational learning (Russ-Eft and Preskill 2001; Preskill and Torres 2001). Evaluative inquiry takes us beyond seeing monitoring and evaluation as discrete acts, separate from other aspects of project or programme management. Instead, it argues that all aspects of the project or programme cycle, from inception onwards, need to adopt an approach that institutionalises learning and reflection. For this to happen, an organisation needs to adopt an ‘evaluative culture’, which has four distinguishing features (Preskill and Torres 1999):

- a) M&E processes are integrated into the organisation’s work processes and performed primarily by organisation members;
- b) M&E processes are continuous and ongoing;
- c) M&E processes depends on the democratic processes of asking questions and exploring individuals’ values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge through dialogue and reflection; and
- d) M&E processes contribute to a culture of inquiry and occur within systems and structures that value continuous improvement and learning.

Preskill and Torres (1999) observed that the organisational systems and structures required to facilitate this ‘evaluative culture’ are those that:

1. Support collaboration, communication, and cooperation among organisation members as well as across units or departments;
2. Help organisation members understand how their role relates to other roles in the organisation and to the organisation’s mission;
3. Recognise and reward individuals and their capacity to learn as the organisation’s greatest resource;
4. Value the whole person and support personal as well as professional development;
5. Use reward systems which recognise team as well as individual learning and performance, and encourages risk-taking; and
6. Demonstrate that the leadership engages in and supports learning.

Whilst the concept of ‘evaluative culture’ can help to create internal incentives for linking M&E systems with organisational learning, it does not address the creation of incentives in the external environment. This requires a shift to organisational relationships that provide incentives for mutual sharing of information and learning (Drew 2002). These are accountability relationships where value is placed on understanding how and why an intervention

has succeeded or failed, where mistakes are regarded as sources of learning, and where the political nature of learning is acknowledged (Eoyang and Berkas 1998; Watts 2005; Guijt 2008; Korten 1984). These kinds of accountability relationships require trust.

An 'evaluative inquiry' culture, when coupled with open accountability relationships, can lay the foundation for a 'learning approach' to M&E. There are several examples of projects or initiatives that have, or are attempting to, move towards a 'learning approach' to M&E. This paper will explore two such initiatives within the agricultural sector. The purpose of these case studies is to show that lessons are being learnt about how monitoring and evaluation can be improved to support learning, but that there are still some significant challenges in the real life application of this approach. This is hardly surprising considering the organisational learning literature itself acknowledges that learning within organisations is difficult to initiate and sustain, therefore when attempting to link organisational learning to M&E these challenges will be exacerbated. These case studies are intended to challenge the reader to consider the practical and structural opportunities and constraints that exist when trying to link wider organisational learning to M&E.

4.1 Using Outcome Mapping to support learning – Attempting to apply theory to practice: A case study of 'AWARD', CGIAR

This section lists both positive and negative findings from the studies (which have been turned into positive statements).

This case study is based on the author's engagement with the 'African Women in Agricultural Research and Development' (AWARD) team over a period of four months (June to September 2009) as part of the ALINe project. The author would like to thank the entire AWARD team for their honest and open engagement with ALINe and their helpful insights and comments on the challenges of developing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation system.

The AWARD project is a six year programme implemented by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR); the project aims to build an effective and transferable career development programme for women in agricultural research and development (R&D) in sub-Saharan Africa. It awards 2 year Fellowships to female BSc, MSc and PhD agricultural science graduates. The project has three capacity building cornerstones: mentoring, science and leadership. It provides the Fellows with a senior mentor, training opportunities (in scientific and 'soft' skills), and scientific placement opportunities. AWARD will benefit 320 women in agricultural R&D in 50 institutions in sub-Saharan Africa; another 580 men and women will benefit through participating as mentors. At the time of writing, the project was in its second year of implementation; the first round of Fellows were mid-way through their two year Fellowships and the second round had just completed their Mentoring Orientation Workshop (MOW).

AWARD chose to use outcome mapping as part of its monitoring and evaluation framework. The AWARD draft monitoring and evaluation framework stated that outcome mapping provides the opportunity to 'track social change during the programme execution in order to facilitate an adaptive management approach and ensure the definition of "good performance" or "good results" is sensitive to culture specific interpretation' (AWARD 2008: 2).

Outcome mapping is a methodology for planning, monitoring and evaluating projects that aim to bring about social change; it measures results in terms of changes in behaviour, actions and relationships that can be influenced by the project (Smutylo 2005). Outcome mapping thinks holistically about how a project intends to achieve its outcomes and recognises the importance of relationships in achieving change. From this perspective, it fits with the systems thinking approach outlined above in that it recognises complexity and the importance of inter-relationships. Smutylo (Ibid.) gives the example of a research team in Kenya that is seeking to improve crop yields by identifying appropriate and ecologically sound practices for small farms (Ibid.). The researchers want to build enduring relationships with the farmers so they can work together to identify and solve problems, so while the ultimate goal is sustainable improvements in crop yields, the involvement of the farmers and their application of the research findings are important in achieving that outcome (Ibid.). Therefore, changes in the farmers behaviour and the relationships they form are important to measure (Ibid.).

Outcome mapping is usually implemented through a participatory process that involves all stakeholders in the design, monitoring and evaluation planning (Earl et al. 2001). The group confirms the changes they want to see (the vision of success); how they will influence these changes (strategies, actions); who they have to influence and work with; and what they will measure (the progress markers) (Ibid.). Data is collected through three tools: an outcome journal to monitor partner actions and relationships; a strategy journal to monitor strategy and activities; and a performance journal to monitor the organisation's practices (Ibid.). Outcome mapping is a 'learning approach' to monitoring and evaluation because a project uses these tools to self-assess, reflect on, and enhance their performance (Ibid.). In a study for the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ortiz (2005) found that outcome mapping can contribute important elements to traditional results-based management, such as supporting stakeholder learning and strengthening local institutions. Outcome mapping as a methodology is time consuming and requires commitment and a great deal of 'ownership' by all stakeholders (especially if they are all involved in the design, monitoring and evaluation planning). This is a challenge that AWARD has had to deal with.

During the monitoring and evaluation presentation at the Mentoring Orientation Workshop in September 2009, the AWARD team specifically emphasised that the purpose of monitoring and evaluation in AWARD is to empower stakeholders. This is based on the idea that 'more empowering methods [of M&E] cultivate evaluative thinking, self-assessment and more appropriate and effective 'objective' evaluations. When rigorously applied these were frequently found to yield more reliable, nuanced and useful results as contexts, perspectives and the complex dynamics of development were better understood and considered' (AWARD 2008: 3). After the presentation, several members of the audience approached the presenter to comment that their assumption has been to expect a technical and boring presentation on M&E that was not of relevance to them as participants. Therefore, they had been surprised when they had heard the idea presented that they would be a critical part of, and empowered by, the monitoring and evaluation system they had. They commented that this appeared to be a different approach to monitoring and evaluation than in other projects they had been part of.

AWARD also explicitly states that it will support monitoring and evaluation practices that 'encourage capacity building through sharing and learning amongst stakeholders; [are] responsive and [allow for] adaptive management for continuous improvement as lessons are learnt; and analyse and synthesise lessons to inform future institutional or development policies and interventions' (Ibid.: 3). It also links the engagement of multiple stakeholders to upward, sideways and downward accountability (Ibid.).

Therefore, AWARD explicitly links a 'learning approach' to monitoring and evaluation with adaptive management, stakeholder empowerment, a better contextual understanding of 'results', and multiple accountability.

In practice, AWARD's experience of using outcome mapping has been challenging. At the time of writing, the monitoring and evaluation framework was not yet finalised, therefore it was not possible to assess whether or not AWARD is actually taking a 'learning approach' to monitoring and evaluation. There was certainly the intention and appetite for such an approach; this case study will end with some recommendations for how AWARD could facilitate this approach. First, it will outline a number of reasons why using outcome mapping has been challenging.

Ownership

Outcome mapping is based on the principle that the outcomes to be tracked, and progress markers to track them, should be formulated and 'owned' by all stakeholders. An attempt was made to engage the AWARD team and the round one Fellows and Mentors in this process by including a session at the first Mentoring Orientation Workshop on outcome mapping. As the author was not present at this workshop, it is difficult to make a judgement on the success of this session. However, based on feedback from members of the AWARD team and the Fellows and Mentors, the session was too technical. There was then a subsequent delay in finalising the progress markers. It was also very time consuming for the AWARD team to engage in the design of the progress markers and, without a full-time monitoring and evaluation coordinator to lead on this, the adequate time was not available. This led to a lack of a feeling of 'ownership' amongst the AWARD team. These challenges were acknowledged by the AWARD team. As a consequence, they have now changed the way in which the monitoring and evaluation session at the Mentoring Orientation Workshop is run; the whole team is now involved in the design of the progress markers and they have recruited a full-time monitoring and evaluation coordinator.

Capacity

Linked to the issue of ownership above, the AWARD team felt that they did not have the time or adequate capacity needed to design the progress markers in year one. This was in part due to the absence of a full-time monitoring and evaluation coordinator. The outcome mapping concept was new to most of the team and consequently, it took some time for the team to gain a proper understanding of outcome mapping and its implications.

Context (applicability)

There is a sense amongst some in the AWARD team that the way in which traditional outcome mapping is designed and implemented is not compatible with AWARD programme and what it wants to measure. Outcome mapping uses progress markers that track progress over time for a specific outcome. This is not supposed to prove attribution but just show how the outcomes a project is aiming for are progressing. It is also based on the idea that you have a starting point and an end 'outcome' that you want to see realised.

AWARD has had to adapt the way progress markers are used within its monitoring and evaluation framework. Firstly, AWARD does want to show contribution. It wants to be able to demonstrate that its interventions have contributed to a particular outcome. Therefore, AWARD needs the progress markers to show this contribution. At the time of writing, the AWARD team was considering asking the Fellows to track their progress on specific interventions (such as the mentoring relationship) and to state which intervention has contributed to a particular measure of progress and what other factors have also contributed. They could also attempt to triangulate more quantitative data with qualitative progress markers, such as 'is there a relationship between the number of times a Fellow meets with their mentor and the progress they make on publications' for example? AWARD needs to be able to learn which interventions are making the greatest contributions and why so it can improve or adapt its programme.

Second, AWARD is not dealing with one homogenous starting point and end 'outcome'; each Fellow starts at a different level. For example, some will have already published, others will have not. Each Fellow will have different goals and different ideas about how they want to achieve progress. This creates problems for designing progress markers that can capture progress which is relative (what is the value-added of AWARD?) and that will look different for each Fellow. At the time of writing, the solution AWARD was proposing was to create a baseline in which Fellows grade themselves using the progress markers at the beginning of the two years, from which individual progress can be tracked and cumulative 'value added' progress can be measured. The team identified some generic outcomes that they expect all Fellows to achieve. These were based on consultation with the Fellows and the personal 'roadmaps' the Fellows developed. They included soft skills and science skills as well as career progression.

Based on the short-term engagement with AWARD, the author recommends that AWARD should:

1. Institutionalise regular sessions to reflect on and make sense of the result, as well as information gathering. This needs to be a space for critical reflection on the information from the Fellow's journals, preferably involving key stakeholders. This critical reflection should look at both the programme implementation (e.g. are the mentoring relationships working and why?) as well as the outcomes (e.g. are the Fellows becoming more visible and why?). These sessions will require a certain amount of analysis beforehand. The large amount of qualitative data collected in the journals will make this a time consuming activity and the AWARD team will need to ensure they have the time and capacity to undertake this.

2. Not lose the informal learning that is already taking place. The AWARD team has developed excellent relationships with the round one Fellows and Mentors and was getting a lot of informal feedback and information from them. This was being acted upon (there were several lessons from the first MOW that led to changes being made in the second for example), but these are not necessarily being systematically captured. A lot of learning happens informally: ensuring that this informal learning is 'captured' alongside the formal learning from the journals will strengthen the learning and the project.

3. Ensure AWARD is learning about how they learn! Outcome 2.2 of AWARD states they will have developed, tested and broadly shared a series of innovative methodologies in order to increase understanding of the best ways to document the impacts of individual and, to some extent, institutional capacity building (AWARD 2008). To achieve this, AWARD needs to understand how it is learning from the innovative methodologies it is using and why. This is important for documentation purposes and also for developing evidence for why these kinds of methodologies are effective and legitimate forms of monitoring and evaluation.

4. Consider formally engaging in an outcome mapping learning community (or Community of Practice). AWARD is developing an innovative monitoring and evaluation system; it could both learn from, and make important contributions to, an outcome mapping learning community. Through engaging with other practitioners attempting to use this 'learning approach' to monitoring and evaluation, AWARD will be able to compare, evaluate and improve their own monitoring and evaluation practice. This will contribute to outcome 2.2.

4.2 Attempting to institutionalise learning: A Case Study of 'Managing for Impact' (M4I), IFAD³

'Managing for Impact' (M4I) was developed in response to a demand within the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) for strategies to produce better and more sustained impacts from development interventions.

M4I has been implemented in Southern and Eastern Africa since May 2006 as a pilot project, designed to embed monitoring and evaluation in management processes in a useful way. It has four key areas of focus:

1. guiding a strategy towards impact;
2. ensuring effective operations;
3. creating a learning environment; and
4. establishing informational and gathering systems.

(Ofir 2009)

Underpinning these areas are ten principles:

1. people-centred development;
2. a shared understanding by stakeholders of theories of change;
3. empowerment of stakeholders at all levels;
4. reflexive learning;
5. appreciating existing strengths and capacities;
6. promoting participatory development;
7. promoting effective partnerships between all stakeholders;
8. a holistic understanding of livelihoods and systems;
9. promoting economically, environmentally, socially and institutionally sustainable interventions; and
10. recognising the importance of leadership and management in learning and participatory approaches.

(Ibid.)

The aim is to (a) achieve real stakeholder ownership at all levels and (b) promote adaptive management for decision-making that is based on relevant priorities and credible evidence, in order to improve the sustained impacts of development interventions. M4I is attempting to institutionalise learning and monitoring and evaluation within management processes; therefore, this approach is of interest to this report and the wider ALIne programme.

An evaluation of M4I, carried out in 2009, found that M4I has been difficult to implement (Ibid.). This was due to four factors that are of interest to this paper:

Time and commitment

The focus on learning and participation presents some practical challenges in terms of how organisations learn and the time available for learning. The evaluation found a fear amongst senior managers that M4I's participatory approach, learning emphasis, and focus on context are too resource intensive and cumbersome to implement, especially on a large scale.

³This case study is based on Ofir, Z. (2009) Regional Programme for Strengthening Management for Impact in Eastern and Southern Africa: External Review, IFAD

The ‘ghettoisation’ of M4I

The majority of staff trained in the M4I approach have had responsibility for quite narrow areas, such as monitoring, evaluation, and planning, rather than those with management responsibility across organisational silos. The evaluation found that this had led to M4I being ‘ghettoised’ within the silos of monitoring, evaluation, and planning, and a lack of ‘buy-in’ from senior management, which is exactly what it is trying to get away from (in its third and tenth principle).

Capacity

The evaluation found that the level of understanding and analysis, including integrative skills, required to implement M4I often exceeds institutional capacities.

Power/Culture

The evaluation found that the M4I approach appears to take power away from those in powerful positions due to its participatory approach, its emphasis on empowerment of all stakeholders, and its promotion of effective partnerships. This was found by the evaluation to be very problematic in organisations and cultures with strong hierarchical structures.

The evaluation argues that these factors led to a lack of institutional buy-in at higher levels of management. The current institutional cultures and systems in many organisations do not support the successful implementation of M4I, i.e. there is not an ‘enabling institutional environment’. As the evaluation states, organisations do not change easily and the M4I approach entails significant changes in management practices and institutional cultures. The incentives for these changes are still limited.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the creation of incentives to improve the focus of M&E on flexibility and learning, and in particular, to link M&E with organisational learning. Based on a review of the literature, the author has argued that two key elements are required: 1) establishing and promoting an ‘evaluative culture’ within an organisation and 2) having accountability relationships where value is placed on learning ‘why’ as well as on learning from mistakes. As discussed in the two case studies, institutionalising these elements is challenging as organisational cultures and systems are often not supportive of them, or even counter to them. From the author’s perspective, the potential for an ‘evaluative culture’ and open accountability relationships to thrive is dependent on trust. Trust is required within an organisation for staff to feel supported, to take the time to reflect and learn, and to have the confidence to take risks, as well as learn from mistakes, and to be honest about what has worked and what has not. Likewise, trust is required in accountability relationships to prevent the perception that being open about challenges and ‘failures’ may prejudice further support, in either direction. Trust takes time to develop, and once lost, it can be hard to regain. It seems worthwhile, therefore, for all development organisations, donors and partners alike, to invest in long-term, respectful relationships based on mutual trust. Through such an investment, they are more likely to see M&E findings contributing constructively and usefully to organisation-wide learning processes, and ultimately to improvements in overall performance of the organisation. There is a burgeoning literature on partnerships and relationships for development (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2004; Eyben 2006; Lister 2000) that explores how trust is developed and sustained through partnerships and relationships. There is a need for further exploration of the synergies between this literature and practice and M&E literature and practice. While most participatory agriculture projects tend to apply these concepts to their learning, there is one aspect in which they tend to fail – in reflecting on the process itself, from the perspective of the participants, as opposed to the perspective of the researcher or the development agency. Further, with regard to the papers used for this review, it may be that these processes offer some element of the kind of reflection and feedback loop being advocated by ALIne, but to truly get at the heart of evaluating what farmers think of processes, the ‘right’ questions – for our purposes anyway – are not being asked (at least not explicitly).

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