Monitoring, Evaluating & Learning (MEL)

Contents

6. Monitoring, Evaluating & Learning (MEL)

Introduction

Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of capacity development interventions is recognized in the Long-term Strategic Framework (LTSF) as a key strategy to improving capacity development. This involves developing and implementing adaptive management systems for M&E of biodiversity capacity development efforts to learn from what is happening by assessing whether the intended capacity results are being achieved in an impactful and sustainable manner, to identify and correct mistakes, and to capture and share good practices and lessons learned.

This module looks at the processes and tools for conducting measurement exercises and the importance of integrating learning at all stages, both to ensure that what is being done is effective and for enabling sustainable capacity to come into place. It explains how to demystify the formulation and use of indicators to help you in your M&E processes. The module also sets out what you will find to be the benefits and challenges of combining M&E with learning and bringing them together effectively. The key message is to use M&E practices not only for accountability but also to elicit learning that will contribute to ongoing improvement in the quality and effectiveness of capacity development practices.

6.1 Overview of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

In the past M&E were considered the main ways to understand whether capacity development strategies, programmes and projects and were working. It is now understood that learning is an equally important dimension — not just to measure progress, but as the means to ensure that practices adapt, improve, and lead to sustainable change. Learning is an essential element of the adaptive management approach discussed in Module 5. Table 6-1 gives an overview of monitoring, evaluation and learning in practice, their differences and the links between them.

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Box 6-1: Guidance from the LTSF

Section F: Monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks should be incorporated into capacity development strategies, plans and programmes from the start

Monitoring, evaluation and learning are crucial for improving the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of capacity development efforts. They help to assess if things are on the right track and facilitate timely intervention, if necessary, to achieve the intended outcomes. They also facilitate identification of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of ongoing or past interventions and the generation and application of knowledge, good practices and lessons learned to inform future interventions.

To ensure effective monitoring, evaluation and learning, it is necessary to:
(a) Formulate the results hierarchy and indicators through an inclusive, participatory and gender-responsive process with the key stakeholders, especially indigenous peoples and local communities and youth, who will be involved in long-term implementation;
(b) Establish capacity baseline assessments, disaggregated for relevant groups, before activities start;
(c) Incorporate reflection and learning activities into project planning, using relevant tools;
(d) Utilize monitoring and evaluation methods and tools that produce long-term comparable qualitative and quantitative data, especially when working in complex systems;
(e) Enhance the collaboration with and between institutions that can support learning processes.

Table 6-1: Overview of monitoring, evaluation and learning

	Monitoring (M)	**Evaluation (E)**	**Learning (L)**
Purpose	Tracks interventions, progress and results while they are happening, providing real-time information for timely adjustments of ongoing interventions	Assesses overall performance, effectiveness and impact, providing a comprehensive understanding of results and areas for improvement	Generates insights from the interventions to inform adapting and improving methods to enhance results and make change more sustainable
Frequency	Continuous/ongoing throughout the programme or project	Periodic - mid-term, end-term, or after completion (sometimes called ex-post)	Ongoing, integrating reflection moments into monitoring (not just data collection) and embedding learning in evaluation processes. Can also be stand-alone activities.
Focus	The implementation of activities specific to an intervention	The impact and effectiveness of the overall intervention	Reflection, adaptation,

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			innovation, future action
Process	Gathering data on specified indicators	Systematically assessing both quantitative and qualitative information, including indicator data, to determine the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of an intervention.	Using the data and insights gathered from M&E to inform decision-making and improve capacity development strategies
Data Type	Most usually quantitative (numbers, indicators, checklists)	Mix of quantitative and qualitative (evidence, stories, comparisons)	Uses all data types to generate knowledge, sense-making and meaning
Users	Managers, implementers, stakeholders	Donors, policymakers, managers, implementers, stakeholders, beneficiaries	Everyone involved: individuals, teams, communities, organisations
Key Questions	Are we doing things right? Are we doing the right things? Are we progressing as planned? What needs adjusting now to improve performance or respond to change?	Did we achieve our objectives? What worked well, what didn't, and why?	What did we learn from implementation and results? What should we replicate, adapt, or stop doing in future interventions in order to improve the outcomes?

6.1.1 Learning as the Heart of Monitoring and Evaluation

The importance of integrating learning into all aspects of M&E of change and development practices is now recognised to the extent that they are often combined and worked on simultaneously, known as monitoring, evaluation and learning - MEL. Together, MEL = evidence + reflection + action.

Figure 6-1: Learning integrated into monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring:
Tracking progress in real-time

Evaluation:
Assessing results and impact

Learning:
Reflecting, adapting and improving

MEL works best when learning is integrated into M&E throughout the life of the initiative.
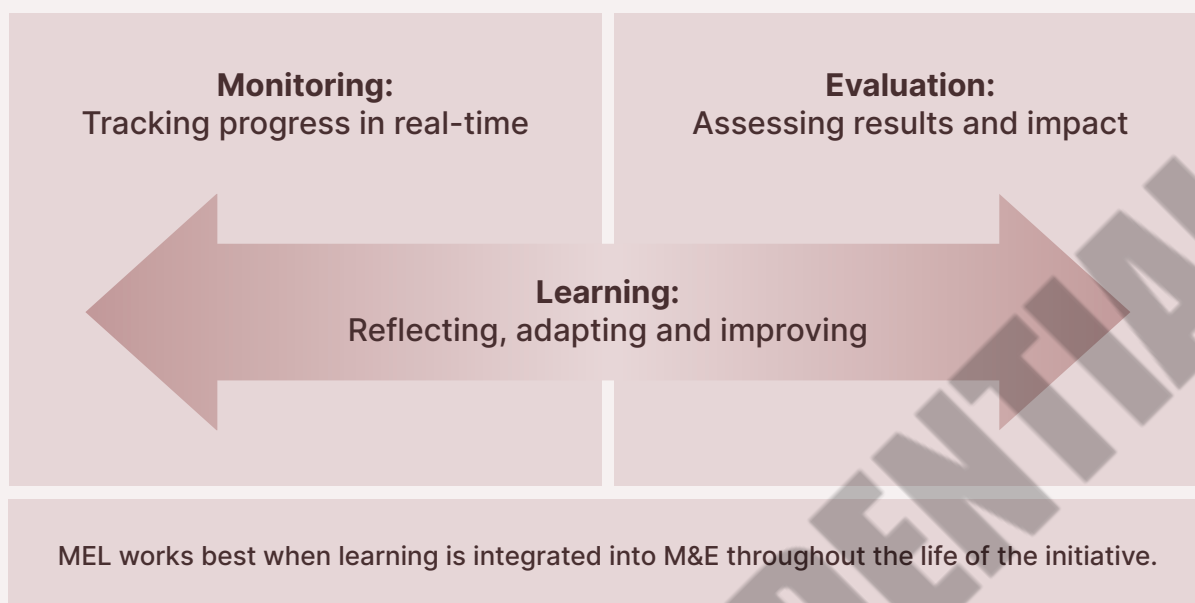
When MEL are fully integrated:

- **Accountability is strengthened** by tracking progress and results for funders, stakeholders, communities;
- **Adaptability is enhanced** by identifying what is working, what is not, and why: so lessons can feed back into ongoing work;
- **Learning is deepened** through shared reflection and knowledge exchange;
- **Change processes become more sustainable** by staying flexible and responsive over time;
- MEL shifts from being a reporting requirement to a **strategic asset; and,**
- Organisations and systems **build resilience** by continuously adjusting and improving.

MEL thus helps to ensure that capacity development is not only happening, but that it is effective and sustainable.

Box 0-1 The benefits of integrating learning into M&E

Embedding learning into monitoring and evaluation goes beyond tracking results, because it helps to explain *why* and *how* change happens. This process-oriented approach is vital for complex, long-term biodiversity capacity development, generating evidence about what works and what doesn't in real contexts.

Too often, however, M&E is treated mainly as a tool for upward accountability to donors rather than as a shared process for reflection and improvement. Reframing M&E as a driver of learning shifts the focus from compliance to collaboration, encouraging honest discussion of challenges and fostering a culture of openness and adaptation.

By integrating learning into M&E, practitioners not only meet reporting needs under Target 20 but also strengthen implementation across all GBF targets. Learning fosters adaptive

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management, supports better planning, and ensures continuous improvement over time. It also promotes inclusion and reflection — engaging diverse stakeholders, deepening contextual understanding, and turning mistakes into opportunities for growth and innovation.

6.2 Measuring capacity development results

Measuring capacity development results is essential for understanding whether or not interventions are working. This means embedding MEL into all activities from the planning stage.

Why it's challenging
There are a number of challenges for measuring results in complex contexts, especially soft capacities.

- **Sustainable results often take time** and are achieved through multiple methods that address both hard and soft capacities, whereas project and funding cycles demand quick evidence.
- **Capacity development rarely follows a neat, linear path,** especially when tied to political agendas.
- **Soft capacities** (e.g. trust, relationships, learning) **are harder to measure,** yet they are often essential prerequisites for hard capacity results (laws, systems, technical skills) to come into place.

6.2.1 Monitoring and the role of indicators of achievement

Monitoring in capacity development interventions can be defined as:

An ongoing process of systematically collecting and analysing data on specified indicators to inform management and stakeholders on the progress towards and achievement of results.

Indicators of achievement are considered the backbone of programme and project monitoring, providing the measurable signs that show whether activities are contributing to the intended outputs, outcomes, and overall objective (results). They are also important for reporting on progress to donors and other interested stakeholders. They allow practitioners to track progress, identify areas needing adjustment, and make evidence-based decisions about the design, implementation, and adaptation of interventions to improve effectiveness.

Indicators are developed during the drafting stage of a project or programme and are embedded in the logical framework. The levels for which indicators are required are usually determined by the donor's template but they are most commonly developed for the output and outcome levels (see Table 6-2).

Result	Indicators	Risks
Objective:		
Outcome	Indicator(s): Means of Verification: Timeframe: Baseline: Target: Interim targets:	
Output	Indicator(s): Means of Verification: Timeframe: Baseline: Target: Interim targets:	
Activity:		

Table 6-2: Where Indicators of Achievement fit in the results hierarchy

For an indicator to measure change, it must have a **target** that defines the improvement or achievement expected to take place while the intervention is being implemented. Some indicators may also have a **baseline** available. This is a measure used to benchmark the state prior to the start of interventions so that the change achieved can be appropriately calculated. A **timeframe** should be established for measuring the indicator. Results are used to compare with the baseline to determine the extent to which the target is achieved. The **means of verification** outlines where the data will be sourced to measure the indicator, what methods will be used to collect the data, when the data will be collected and the frequency of collection.

Each level can have multiple indicators, determined by the type of activities implemented, the target audience and the intended results. Also, as an intervention is likely to address different types of capacities, it is important to have indicators that reflect both hard capacities (skills, systems, resources) and soft capacities (behaviours, relationships, ways of working) to fully track progress. The Global Environment Facility's (GEF) very helpful *'Framework to Monitor Capacity Development Initiatives'[i]* outlines five key capacity results along with indicators, all of which are relevant for biodiversity initiatives. Table 6-3 below captures these capacity results and presents alternative indicators to those in the GEF framework, illustrating examples at both the output and outcome levels. Use these examples to guide the formulation of indicators that reflect the specific focus and scale of your capacity development intervention.

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Table 6-3: Capacity Results and Illustrative Output and Outcome Indicators (Adapted from the GEF Framework)

Capacity Result	Example of Indicators by Result Level	
	Output Level	**Outcome Level**
Capacities for Engagement	Hard Capacity: *Development of stakeholder engagement guidelines or frameworks* Soft Capacity: *Existence of cooperation among stakeholder groups*	Hard Capacity: *Institutionalization of stakeholder engagement mechanisms (e.g., permanent advisory committees)* Soft Capacity *Improved conflict resolution and consensus-building skills within engagement processes*
Capacities to Generate, Access, and Use Information and Knowledge	Hard Capacity: *Development of a biodiversity data information system* Soft Capacity: *Improved understanding among stakeholders of data quality standards and ethical data use*	Hard Capacity: *Integration of information in decision-making processes (e.g., policy development, biodiversity planning)* Soft Capacity: *Improved recognition and integration of traditional and local knowledge in formal systems*
Capacities for Strategy, Policy and Legislation Development	Hard Capacity: *Development or revision of policy frameworks, strategies, or legislative drafts related to biodiversity* Soft Capacity: *Greater openness to integrating scientific evidence and traditional knowledge into policy and legislative design*	Hard Capacity: *New or revised biodiversity-related strategies, policies, or laws formally adopted and operationalized* Soft Capacity: *Sustained collaboration among stakeholders involved in the policy process*
Capacities for Management and Implementation	Hard Capacity: *Number of personnel trained in technical skills* Soft Capacity: *Enhanced problem-solving and adaptive management skills among target personnel*	Hard Capacity: *Trained personnel implement their new technical skills to enact environmental policies and/or regulation decision* Soft Capacity: *Sustained motivation and commitment among staff to achieve long-term results*

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Capacities to Monitor and Evaluate	**Hard Capacity:** *Identification of S.M.A.R.T indicators and means of verification for all result levels* **Soft Capacity:** *Increased confidence in applying M&E tools and interpreting data*	**Hard Capacity:** *Timely completion of evaluations leading to actionable recommendations* **Soft Capacity:** *Strengthened culture of reflection, learning, and accountability within target institution*	

After reviewing the examples of output and outcome indicators in Table 6-3, it is helpful to consider how indicators can be applied across different levels of capacity. Table 6-4 below provides examples of quantitative and qualitative indicators at the individual, organizational, and enabling environment levels. Use this as a reference to identify the most appropriate mix of indicators for your own capacity development intervention.

Table 6-4: Examples of Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators at Different Capacity Levels			
	Individual (e.g., a policymaker)	**Organizational** (e.g., government department)	**Enabling Environment** (e.g., public policies, regulatory frameworks)
Quantitative Indicators (Measures amount and quantities that can objectively be measured. Are most often represented by a number, percentage, or ratio)	• % of participants who completed training on biodiversity planning or monitoring • # of local practitioners applying ecosystem-based management practices	• # of organizations integrating biodiversity indicators into planning or reporting frameworks • # of departments updating their NBSAPs	• # of new or updated biodiversity-relevant policies, strategies, or legal instruments • % of national budgets allocated to biodiversity priorities
Qualitative Indicators (Captures judgements, perceptions, opinions, or levels of satisfaction of changes achieved. Seeks to measure quality)	• Feedback from fisherfolk indicating more sustainable fishing practices as a result of training. • Reflections from IPLC participants indicating greater recognition of traditional knowledge in local decision-making.	• Evidence of improved coordination between departments (e.g., environment, agriculture, planning) • Case studies demonstrating enhanced integration of gender and social	• Reports of increased political will or commitment to biodiversity conservation in national or sectoral policies. • Examples of partnerships between government, private sector,

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		inclusion in biodiversity initiatives.	and civil society that have strengthened biodiversity outcomes.

Practitioner tip:

Be careful not to focus disproportionately on hard capacities simply because they are easier to measure, because this can obscure the full picture of change. Instead, prioritize the aspects and dimensions of capacity that are meaningful to the intervention and for which reliable qualitative or quantitative evidence can be collected.

6.2.2 Aligning to the Monitoring Framework of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)

When formulating indicators, consider aligning them with the monitoring framework of the GBF. This ensures that the data you collect can feed into national and global reporting on GBF targets, helping to demonstrate how capacity development efforts contribute to biodiversity outcomes. Aligning indicators in this way also reduces duplication and strengthens the overall evidence base for implementation.

Box 0-2 Link to GBF Targets

Link to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)

The **GBF includes 23 targets for 2030** (see Figure 1-4 in Module 1), which act as benchmarks for biodiversity-related outcomes. These **targets set the global ambition** (e.g. *Target 3: 30% of land and sea areas conserved by 2030*), while a set of **headline indicators** have been developed to track progress toward each target.

Target 20: Strengthen capacity-building, technology transfer, and scientific and technical cooperation for biodiversity

20

Strengthen Capacity-Building and Scientific and Technical Cooperation for Biodiversity

Target 20 recognizes that capacity-building and knowledge-sharing are goals in themselves, not just supporting actions for other biodiversity outcomes. MEL activities should help countries demonstrate progress towards Target 20 while also supporting other GBF targets that rely on capacity.

Aligning capacity development indicators with the GBF monitoring framework ensures that efforts:

- Contribute directly to national and global reporting on GBF targets;
- Avoid duplicating existing monitoring processes; and
- Strengthen the overall evidence base for biodiversity outcomes.

Examples of relevant indicators:
- **Headline/binary indicator:**
  - Number of countries that have taken significant action to strengthen capacity-building and development and access to and transfer of technology, and to promote the development of and access to innovation and technical and scientific cooperation.
- **Component indicator:**
  - Total funding provided to promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies.
- **Complementary indicators (illustrative):**
  - Researchers (full-time equivalent) per million inhabitants.
  - Number of joint scientific publications in key biodiversity databases.
  - Proportion of research budgets allocated to research in the field of marine technology.
  - Volume of official development assistance flows for scholarships by sector and type of study.

Practitioner tip:

When designing capacity development indicators for your project, consider aligning them with Target 20 or any other GBF target relevant to the theme of your intervention. This ensures that data collected contributes both to your M&E needs and to national and global biodiversity reporting.

Guiding questions for indicator formulation
- Which capacity result is this indicator intended to track (individual, organizational, enabling environment)?
- Does it relate to an output or an outcome?
- Does the indicator capture hard capacities (skills, systems, resources) or soft capacities (behaviours, relationships, ways of working)?
- How can soft capacity results be meaningfully documented and assessed?
- Is the indicator SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)?
- Will the data generated be meaningful for decision-making and learning?
- What methods and tools will be used to collect data for this indicator?
- Are resources, time, and skills available to measure it effectively?
- Can it combine quantitative and qualitative evidence where relevant?
- Is the indicator aligned with relevant frameworks, such as the GBF or national biodiversity strategies?
- Can data collected contribute to reporting on GBF targets or SDGs?

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> **Practitioner tips:**
> - In long-term capacity development initiatives, especially in complex contexts, it is not always helpful or possible to formulate indicators for all stages at the outset. Early in the process it may be unclear whether the chosen indicators will capture the most meaningful changes in the long-term.
> - Indicators should be regularly monitored and reviewed. If indicators are found not to measure the intended results effectively, they should be adjusted to ensure they remain relevant and informative.

6.2.3 Evaluation: Assessing Progress, Effectiveness, and Learning

Evaluation builds on information collected through monitoring to assess how well a capacity development intervention is achieving its intended results. It is defined as an assessment, conducted as systematically and impartially as possible, of an activity, project, programme, strategy, policy, topic, theme, sector, operational area or institutional performance[ii].

While a range of established evaluation criteria[iii] can be used, not all are required for every assessment. Evaluators should select the most relevant criteria for the intervention and context. Key criteria are commonly summarized as follows:

- **Relevance:** Is the intervention addressing the right capacity development issues?
- **Coherence:** How well does the intervention fit with other policies, programmes, or initiatives?
- **Effectiveness:** Is the intervention achieving its intended objectives?
- **Efficiency:** How well are resources being used to achieve results?
- **Impact:** What difference is the intervention making?
- **Sustainability:** Are the benefits likely to continue over time?

An evaluation should provide credible, useful, evidence-based information that enables the timely incorporation of its findings, recommendations, and lessons into the decision-making processes of organizations and stakeholders. Ways to address contextual relevance can be incorporated in the questions asked under each heading.

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> ⵗ **Practitioner tip:**
>
> Be open to both pre-determined criteria AND to unexpected results. This point is really important because the complex nature of capacity development in many contexts means that unexpected results will always emerge, and sometimes they will be more informative and interesting than what was expected.

6.2.4 Data Sources and Collection Methods

The choice of data sources and collection methods should be guided by the evaluation criteria and the monitoring needs, ensuring that the evidence gathered is relevant, reliable, and sufficient to assess performance and progress. The table below presents a range of methods, along with guidance on when to use them and what to watch out for. Each method can serve different purposes within monitoring and evaluation, and not all methods are required for every intervention. Selecting the right mix of tools helps ensure that outputs, outcomes, and broader impacts are effectively captured.

Table 6-5: Data Collection Methods and when to use them

Methods	When to use	Watch out for	M	E
Qualitative Methods				
Interviews	To assess the knowledge, understanding and perspectives of key individuals	Interviewee bias The need for some information to be triangulated	✔	✔
Case studies	For deep dive into a specific institution, event, or change process	Time-intensive, not good for large scale		✔
* Most Significant Change	For analysing **qualitative** changes, especially anything not predicted at the start	Data generated may need to be triangulated by other methods	✔	✔
* Outcome mapping	For tracking stakeholder behaviour in terms of outcomes	Works best over the long-term	✔	✔
* Stories of Change	For capturing stakeholder experiences in complex situations	Needs to be used with other tools to avoid being dismissed as anecdotal	✔	✔

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** Client satisfaction surveys	Citizen report cards, satisfaction surveys and focus group discussions – a metric often left out of M&E systems	Making sure repeats track changes over time	✓	✓
** Ladder of Change	For stakeholders to do periodic assessment of whether things are getting better or worse	Needs regular repetition to track the changes	✓	
** Rapid Appraisal	Quick and relatively low-cost ways to get information: individual interviews, focus group discussions, observation, mini-surveys, etc.	Will not provide comprehensive information unless triangulated	✓	
Quantitative Methods				
** Cost-benefit, also called cost effectiveness analysis	For assessing if the results justify the activities and resources	Measures everything in monetary values – helpful for talking to donors, but not other types of indicator	✓	✓
** Public Expenditure Tracking	For tracking the extent to which of public funds reach target groups.	Can constrain measurement to monetary considerations	✓	✓
Methods that can be used for both quantitative and qualitative data capture				
Surveys and questionnaires	When data needs to be in a consistent format When there are too many respondents for interviews or workshops	Low response rates not providing sufficient cover of the target group	✓	✓
Document review	To get knowledge and information from what has been recorded about an organisation or issue	Need to be selective about what to review	✓	✓
* Theory-based evaluation	For linking results to TOC, dealing with complexity	Can feel abstract if not well facilitated		✓
** Organisational performance tracking	For measures how capacity is used in organisational performance for multiple areas of functioning	Not a one-off activity, needs regular repeats	✓	✓

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** Tracer studies – longitudinal tracking	For regular measurement exercises conducted over time to track progress	Need to be clear and consistent about the criteria being tracked		✓
** Unexpected results capture	For identifying unintended outcomes	Needs explicit mechanisms, often overlooked	✓	✓

Note:

- Methods marked * have a greater focus on understanding change, learning and adaptation, so can be very useful in the biodiversity context where capacity change is long-term
- Methods marked ** are more specialized to be used when deeper, targeted insights are needed (occasionally used and context specific methods)

6.2.5 Creating a fit-for-purpose measurement system

To be fit-for-purpose measurements need to be meaningful to all actors identified as having a significant interest in the results, especially when working on long-term, incremental implementation approaches that can only be effective through multi-stakeholder engagement. If the assessments of progress made and challenges encountered do not have legitimacy in the eyes of key stakeholders, they may not wish to engage any further.

Key Design Steps

Using the results framework as the starting point, design of the M&E framework and activities needs to include:

- **Agreement on the measurement framework:** align on what will be measured (keeping the focus on aspects that are worth measuring), the tools to be applied, and how different stakeholders will be involved;
- **A selection of participatory tools:** use approaches that capture diverse perspectives, and that are capable of capturing not only predicted but also unexpected results;
- **Ways to validate findings:** share and discuss findings before finalising; and,
- **Regular review activities:** ensure that both long-term and newer stakeholders are all kept up to date with the purpose, process, and products of the measurement activities.

6.3 Towards a Learning-Oriented M&E System

Learning is essential for sustainable capacity change. It can be defined as:

> *Any improvement in behaviour, information, knowledge, understanding, attitude, values or skills.*[iv]

More broadly, learning reflects the capacity to:

> *Analyse situations contextually, act on them strategically, and an ability to examine and act on their own values and goals.*[v]

These qualities are particularly critical in complex contexts.

Learning underpins the effective management of change. It spans both the technical aspects of *how to do things* and the more nuanced social and political dimensions of functioning. Put simply, **the ability to learn is both a capability in its own right and a foundational element of sustainable capacity development.** Integrating learning into M&E ensures that evidence is not only collected but also analysed and used to inform adaptation and improvement.

> ***Box 0-3 Learning and culture as the red thread through everything***
>
> Possibly the most important point to highlight about learning is its relationship with culture and how the two combine to be a red thread through everything else about capacity development. Culture is a critical determinant of multiple aspects of learning, especially:
> - How people expect to learn;
> - Who they are willing to learn from; and,
> - The value they place on different types of knowledge and expertise.

For example, young people's responses to traditional wisdom handed down by the elders in society versus new ideas from peers on social media.

The issue of learning and cultural issues discussed in other modules, such as stakeholder mapping, assessment processes, and understanding change. Understanding others' cultures requires an open mind and deep listening skills (see also Module 2 on working with partners). Effective assessment cannot take place in the absence of learning about essentially important cultural issues such as the nature of relationships, and group belief systems that may result in behaviour that is unhelpfully path dependent. The quality of any assessment will always be enhanced by the assessor having gained learning about the culture of those being assessed. Working on the ToC is also an opportunity to explore assumptions, gain new insights and move from single to double loop learning (see below). Learning about issues of the social and political economy can be critical to the success of change initiatives, as is working to surface traditional and shared wisdom.

For example, most leadership development programmes now promote the application of participation as a desirable principal and approach for leaders to adopt. This can be taught through the introduction of participatory techniques, which the emerging leaders might readily learn. But if they are embedded in a deeply hierarchical culture and have never seen examples of this approach in practice, they will be unlikely to use them. It needs double loop learning exercises to explore the embedded assumptions and norms about the rights and value of staff to be involved in decision making in order to change mindsets and ensure that new methods are adopted.

What makes M&E a genuine learning process?

Studies highlight several characteristics of effective practice to meet multiple needs:

- **Inclusive participation:** Involve multiple stakeholder groups, balancing their priorities and recognising that accountability to participants and beneficiaries is just as important as accountability to donors.
- **Accessible methods:** Use approaches that are transparent and easy to understand, so that all stakeholders can engage meaningfully and contribute their perspectives.
- **Learning-oriented tools:** Self-assessment, if well structured, can be a powerful way to foster ownership, reflection, and shared understanding.

M&E become drivers of capacity development when they move beyond reporting to become a **participatory, inclusive, and reflective processes that supports both accountability and learning.**

> *Box 0-4: Learning is more than training or information sharing*
>
> In relation to M&E the focus is on the practices that can be applied to generate and capture learning from activities. Learning for capacity development must be understood **as going beyond training,** study, information sharing, or knowledge transfer to capabilities and **sense-making that expand the options for action.** This concept embraces **culture and context** by recognising that the same information and processes can lead to the creation of different meaning in different cultural traditions and perspectives.

The following example illustrates how organizations can balance accountability and learning in practice.

> *Box 6-6: Example of a dual track approach for M&E and learning from IUCN*
>
> The International Union for the Conservation of Nature has developed a solution for the challenge of working with both accountability and learning, by having two capacity monitoring systems.[vi] A monitoring and learning officer manages the official system, which reports to donors and is seen as the cost of doing business with the international community but provides little of interest or value to the management of the organisation or to its planning for the future. The learning system, on the other hand, is managed by the executive director, who follows it closely. It is mainly informal, personal and collective, with a focus on what is going right and what needs fixing. It operates in a number of sub-systems that feed into collective strategic thinking and into the real decision-making processes of the organisation. The various mechanisms in the unofficial system help both to build the capabilities of managers to address issues and to encourage their commitment to decisions made. They create capacity through an upwardly rising spiral that benefits from interplay among activities.

Translating these principles into practice requires designing M&E systems with explicit learning objectives and methods that foster reflection.

6.3.1 Effective Learning Approaches in M&E

Learning objectives

The most effective way for you to ensure that learning is integral to M&E processes is to integrate it into the design of the capacity development process from the start. You can do this by developing targets and indicators about the learning necessary for capacity to be developed and sustained, i.e. focusing on what needs to be learned to create the product rather than on the product itself.

For example, a waterways management department needs constant and up to date information about pollution levels in rivers. Rather than setting an objective about the product needed, for example,

> *"By the end of X, the waterways management department will have an analysis of pollutants in the rivers."*

A **learning focus** would set an objective about the learning skills needed, for example:

> *"By the end of X, the waterways management department will have the ability to continuously scan and analyse pollution in the rivers."*

Characteristics of effective learning approaches to M&E include:
- **Combining methods to generate both quantitative and qualitative data** that leads to more comprehensive understanding e.g. information obtained through stories or case studies significantly enriches and sometimes explains findings gathered against predetermined indicators.
- Working with all key internal and external actors to **establish dialogue about the links between capacity development activities and what they**

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lead to in ways that promote learning about all the factors that are relevant.
- **Using iterative, continual reflective feedback approaches** to determine what is happening in the capacity development process and why it is happening. This allows for internal recognition of challenges, successes and priorities as they emerge.

-ᆢǿᆢ- Practitioner tip:

Ask **"why?"** Using this question is a very simple and easily applied approach to learning because it can be used anywhere or at any time - in an M&E system without a learning focus, or to integrate learning into accountability mechanisms. In addition to noting what has happened, evaluators and participants in routine monitoring activities can keep probing with questions like 'Why was this activity effective?', 'Why did this intervention not achieve the expected results?' or 'Why was this intervention more successful in location A than in location B?' The answers will contribute a lot to generating learning from both ongoing and periodic review processes.

Key takeaways

- You can use M&E practices not only for accountability but also to generate learning that contributes to ongoing improvement in the quality and effectiveness of capacity development practices.
- But it's important to remember that there are very strong cultural influences on how people learn and from whom, and these should be taken into account when planning activities to generate learning.
- MEL are complementary processes which if used appropriately will ensure you are contributing to continuous improvement in the quality of capacity development practices.
- MEL needs to be integrated into plans from the start. Measurement systems need to be designed with as much care as the planning for interventions.
- Multiple methods can be used to generate both qualitative and quantitative data. You need to be sure that the choices pay appropriate attention to soft capacity issues, not just hard capacity because it is easier to measure.

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Further reading and resources

Documents

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The corporate sector offers some useful guidance on learning from failures. *Facing $17 billion loss, color-coding helped Alan Mulally turn around Ford,* is an interesting article which shows how a very successful business leader transformed a very troubled manufacturing giant by changing the organisational culture about failure, from 'it is a weakness that can't be admitted' to 'it is a strength'. The tool used to do this was a simple traffic light colour coding system.

Other resources

In this short video (2.54 mins) capacity development consultant Irene Guijt introduces the 'sensemaker' methodology, a software tool for monitoring to meet multiple needs, combining the value of stories with large-scale statistical analysis. There is also a longer video (1 hour) where Irene Guijt presents this methodology in more detail during a guest lecture. (Note there is a long introduction –Irene starts to speak 6 minute point).

TED Blog (2013) 8 Talks about Learning from Failure. Available at https://blog.ted.com/8-talks-about-learning-from-failure/ Especially interesting is - Trial, error and the God complex by economist Tim Harford has a very powerful message for all who seek to intervene in the lives of others.

Endnotes

[i] Available at https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/Capacity_Development_Indicators.pdf

[ii] UNEG (2016) UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation in the UN System | UNEG

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