

# Sustaining Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Theme: Monitoring & Evaluation as Learning: Rethinking the  
dominant paradigm

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## Editor's notes

Almost universally donors, development organizations, project managers and development practitioners want to see better monitoring and evaluation. But this does not come easily. Why is this the case and what goes wrong? This issue of SLSA offers the building blocks of an alternative M&E paradigm<sup>1</sup> that aligns more closely with practice and the realities of how people create knowledge, make sense of their situations and adapt to change. Such a paradigm focuses on individual, group and organisational learning, a perspective which has been absent in conventional approaches to M&E.

Our thanks to Jim Woodhill, Director of the Capacity Development and Institutional Change Programme at Wageningen University and Research Centre in the Netherlands for writing this issue. This material is a summary of his book chapter "M&E as learning: Rethinking the dominant paradigm" in Jan de Graaff, John Cameron, Samran Sombatpanit, Christian Pieri and Jim Woodhill eds. *Monitoring and Evaluation of Soil Conservation and Watershed Development Projects*. World Association of Soil and Water Conservation. Science Publishers, New Hampshire, USA

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<sup>1</sup> The perspectives are based on the author's reflection on some ten years experience with M&E in the following contexts: M&E consultant for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and co-author of IFAD's manual on M&E – Managing for Impact; developing performance reporting and learning approaches in PLAN International; regional planning, M&E facilitation for the World Conservation Union; and participatory M&E issues in watershed management and Landcare in Australia.

## Introduction

To varying degrees, most development practitioners now agree that M&E should incorporate more participatory approaches, that learning lessons is important, that more emphasis is needed on providing management information and understanding outcomes and impacts, that M&E must be linked with planning, and that multiple accountabilities are critical - to beneficiaries, partners and donors. These elements should make M&E more useful<sup>2</sup> but outdated assumptions and practices continue to hamper the development of such learning-oriented innovations. The current gap between theory and practice can only be resolved by shifting the perspective from indicator - and data - driven M&E systems to learning-oriented systems.

The idea of organizational learning and the value of facilitating learning within communities, project teams and professional groups has become well recognized (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Bawden, 1992; Senge, 1992). But learning remains a misunderstood concept, simply equated with training by many in development. The idea of learning that underpins the M&E paradigm outlined here is quite different and embodies learning not only as the accumulation of knowledge or skills but rather as the ability to constantly improve the efficacy of action.

## The key functions of M&E

M&E can be viewed as an integrated process of continual gathering and assessing information to make judgments about progress towards particular goals and objectives, as well as to identify unintended positive or negative consequences of action. We refer to the "M&E system" as the complete set of interlinked activities that must be undertaken in a coordinated way to plan for M&E, gather and analyse information, report and to support decision making and the implementation of improvements.

The alternative paradigm of M&E being outlined here presupposes that any M&E system needs to fulfil the following purposes:

- *Accountability* – demonstrating to financiers, beneficiaries and implementing partners that expenditure, actions and results are as agreed or are as can reasonably be expected in a given situation.
- *Supporting operational management* - providing the basic management information needed to direct, coordinate and control the human, financial and physical resources required achieve any given objective.
- *Supporting strategic management* – providing the information for and facilitating the processes required to set and adjust goals, objectives and strategies and to improve quality and performance.
- *Knowledge creation* – generating new insights that contribute to the established knowledge base in a given field.

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<sup>2</sup> See Patton (1997) in relation to the concept of utilisation focused evaluation.

- *Empowerment* – building the capacity, self reliance and confidence of beneficiaries and implementing staff and partners to effectively guide, management and implement development initiatives.

## A critical look at six trends for M&E theory and practice

**1 The logical framework approach**, on the surface, embodies much good common sense. It involves having clear objectives and how they will be achieved, making explicit the underlying assumptions about cause and effect relationships, identifying potential risks, and establishing how progress will be monitored. However, in practice, the logical framework approach also introduced some significant difficulties for those planning and implementing development initiatives including lack of flexibility, lack of attention to relationships, problem-based planning, insufficient attention to outcomes, oversimplification of M&E, and inappropriateness at programme and organizational levels.

While the core ideas behind the logical framework approach can be used in flexible and creative ways, this is very rarely the practice and even the basic mechanical steps are often poorly implemented.

**2 The demand for accountability and impact.** In all countries there is now much greater scrutiny of the use of public funds for development and environmental programmes.

### *Box 1 Who are we really accountable to?*

It is not only upward accountability that is important. Some development organizations are now putting much more emphasis on transparency and accountability towards the people they aim to serve and their implementing partners. ActionAid International is one of the better known examples (David and Mancini, 2004). During annual reflections, expenditure is openly shared with partners and local people and the question 'Was it worth it?' is discussed openly as the basis for mutually agreed cost reallocation. This process has become a powerful symbol of ActionAid International's intent of transparency and has improved relations along the entire aid chain.

Increasingly governments want to know the ultimate results of investments made. 'How have people's lives changed for the better?' or 'How has the environment actually been improved?' are recurring questions. Simple highly summarized and ideally numerically formulated information is demanded. Yet, the nature and complexity of much development work makes it extremely difficult if not impossible to produce meaningful information in this form.

**3 Quantitative indicators only please.** Those who argue 'keep it simple' in setting up M&E systems overlook the importance of understanding why a particular result is occurring or not. Quantitative indicators can tell what is happening that was anticipated, but fail to answer the question 'why?' and do not capture the unexpected. The 'why' question is fundamental if appropriate improvements are to be identified and

implemented. To understand why certain changes are and are not occurring requires a level of critical analysis that depends upon qualitative information and well facilitated dialogue. Furthermore, in any change process unforeseen changes and problems will inevitably emerge. Thus M&E systems based on predetermined indicators will logically fail to give the information necessary for responsive management (Guijt, in press).

**4 Participatory approaches** have emerged in the M&E field with much interest in participatory monitoring and participatory impact assessment which draw on many of the visual PRA tools (Estrella et al., 2000; IFAD et al., 2001). Meaningful participation implies much involvement in and control over the development process by those benefiting from or directly involved in implementing development initiatives. This challenges top-down planning and upward-accountability that characterises the M&E of much development administration, and is a key rationale for a more learning-oriented paradigm.

**5 The discovery of lessons learned.** Development initiatives are increasingly focusing on capturing 'lessons learned' or identifying 'good' and 'best' practices and producing these as knowledge outputs. On the whole, however, lessons are of poor quality (see Box 2) (Patton, 2001; Snowden, 2003) and will only yield real benefits if much more attention is given to understanding underlying knowledge and learning processes.

*Box 2. Poor quality lessons (Guijt and Woodhill, 2004)*

- The lesson learned does not have a generalised principle that can be applied in other situations. It is simply a description of an observation, or a recommendation that lacks justification.
- The lesson has not been related to the assumptions or hypotheses on which the intervention has been based and so lacks a meaningful context.
- The lesson is an untested or inadequately justified assumption or hypothesis about what might happen if something is done differently. In other words it would be foolish to rely on the lesson without it first being tested.
- The lesson is either too general or too specific to be useful.
- The lesson has not been related to existing knowledge, hence it is unclear whether it represents a repetition of existing understanding or offers a fresh insight.

**6 Everything for nothing.** Most projects or organizations have well-qualified accountants, bookkeepers and financial managers backed up by accounting software and adequate computer facilities, while the capacities and resources for monitoring the deliverables and impacts are often significantly less. Yet, monitoring the results and understanding reasons for success or failure is without doubt a more complex and demanding task than keeping track of finances, and in the end even more important in terms of overall performance. While there is no detailed research on the subject, it has become generally accepted that a 5 – 10% investment in M&E is reasonable. In many situations it would not require a very significant improvement in performance of the development initiative, for there to be a substantial return on such an investment.

## The basis for an alternative paradigm

Given these limitations, a fundamental shift is required to ensure that M&E becomes a learning process for development actors to be able to improve performance. The following eight points provide a basis for an alternative M&E paradigm.

### **1 Learning from a constructivist perspective**

A constructivist perspective means focusing on how adults learn and on how groups, organisations and communities create shared understanding and meaning. An important foundation for the design and facilitation of such learning processes is the model of experiential learning developed by Kolb (1984). In essence, Kolb argues that there are four dimensions to experiential learning: having an experience; reflecting on that experience; conceptualizing from the experience; and then testing out new ideas/concepts which lead to a new experience. Paying attention to these four dimensions of experiential learning has proved enormously helpful to facilitating the processes that enable individuals, organizations or communities to improve their performance and respond to change.

### **2 Recognising dynamic environments and uncertainty**

Accepting the reality of dynamic environments and uncertainty has dramatic implications for the way in which planning, management and M&E processes are conceived. Most significantly, management must be highly responsive and adaptive. Regularly checking that goals and objective remain relevant and constantly adjusting and refining implementation strategies in response to changed circumstances and new insights. Classically, many development initiatives are contracted to an 'implementation' team with contractual payments based on the delivery of pre-determined outputs. Much of the aid administration system is still structured around this model. If dynamic environments and uncertainty are acknowledged, then the classical model of development intervention (and related M&E processes) will be recognised as a recipe for failure and must give way to more adaptive models. Simple methods like annual stakeholder reviews, including funding agencies, can help to jointly revise objectives and strategic directions.

### **3 Moving from external design and evaluation to internal learning**

Combining a constructivist perspective with dynamic environments and uncertainty, implies shifting from external design and evaluation of development initiatives to effective processes of internal learning. Therefore, those implementing and benefiting from an initiative will carry greater responsibility for its strategic guidance. This calls for far-reaching changes to the way in which development initiatives are designed, managed, contracted, monitored and evaluated. The external expert-oriented processes of development initiative, design and evaluation must cede to ongoing internal learning process with key stakeholders (see Box 3). While external experts can add much value to development initiative formulation and evaluation activities, it is ultimately those most directly involved who are in the best position to improve development performance.

*Box 3. Initiating Collaborative Monitoring in Mafungautsi, Zimbabwe (Mutimukuru et al, in press)*

In developing a locally embedded monitoring approach for joint forest management, the facilitation team first surveyed the context to find existing monitoring processes on which they could build and to understand power relations. The team then produced a framework of how collaborative monitoring could be initiated and facilitated locally. This was discussed with the Forest Commission officer, who had been identified as the best entry point as his support was critical as a key stakeholder in the resource-sharing project. They decided to work with existing organizations rather than create new ones. After agreeing on the way forward with the FC officer, discussions were held with many key informants (local resource committee members, traditional leaders, long standing chairpersons of other nearby resource committees, members of the newly formed monitoring sub-committees and resource user groups). These focused on the different understanding of monitoring, which was used as the basis to negotiate a shared, operational definition of monitoring. Findings from these discussions were then shared in community meetings for feedback. All the local stakeholders (including the traditional leaders, the resource user groups and women's groups) were present. They agreed roles of the different key actors in implementing the monitoring process to avoid conflicts and duplication of roles.

#### **4 Managing for impact**

The ability to implement and effectively utilize the potential of M&E results depends to a very large extent on management style, interest and capacity. Accepting the above points about dynamic environments, internal learning and a concern with realizing impact, logically leads to the idea of 'managing for impact' (IFAD, 2002) or what others refer to as managing for results (see Box 4). A managing for impact model can be viewed as four interlinked elements (IFAD 2002).

- *Guiding the strategy* – taking a strategic perspective whether an initiative is heading towards its goals (impacts) and reacting quickly to adjust the strategy or even the objectives in response to changed circumstances or failure.
- *Ensuring effective operations* - managing the day to day coordination of financial, physical and human resources to ensure the actions and outputs required by the current strategy are being effectively and efficiently achieved.
- *Creating a learning environment* – establishing a culture and set of relationships with all those involved in an initiative that will build trust stimulate critical questioning and innovation and gain commitment and ownership.
- *Establishing information gathering and management mechanisms* – ensuring that the systems are in place to provide the information that is needed to guide the strategy, ensure effective operations and encourage learning.

At the heart of this model are the 'people processes' that enable the necessary information to be gathered, good decisions to be taken, and individuals and organizations to give their best. Potential learning events and incentives that can contribute to this are: partner meetings, participatory planning workshops, annual reviews, staff performance appraisals, informal discussions, social gatherings, rewarding good performance, and participatory impact assessment. Despite the vast knowledge about effective non-hierarchical management techniques and extensive array of participatory, learning- oriented methods and tools that can be used, only a fraction of

this knowledge and the available processes are employed in most development initiatives.

*Box 4. How Managing for Impact shifts M&E paradigm and practice*

The Agricultural Resources Management Project in Jordan had limited M&E responsibilities during Phase I to project staff, and external IFAD experts; with the M&E Coordinator being primarily responsible for designing M&E systems and tools and overseeing their implementation. Consequently, M&E was mainly for accountability purposes and viewed with suspicion, as was the M&E Officer. Following a Managing for Impact training and facilitated review of the M&E system, the project team decided to look into the possibility of establishing a "Participatory Learning & Empowerment Facilitation Team." The team was to be composed of individuals representing both project implementation staff and beneficiaries, and responsible for tasks such as:

- The development/strengthening of Participatory Planning Monitoring & Reflection (PPM&R) system
- Regular reflection on the PPM&R system based on experiences
- Identification of innovative tools and methods for participatory PPM&R
- Implementing PPM&R & learning processes
- Relevant and appropriate training to key stakeholders as and when necessary
- Identification, documentation & sharing of project lessons & experiences

## **5 Types and sources of information for learning and management**

M&E can only be useful if it answers the question **why** has there been success or failure. Many donors recognise this and are rejecting activity reporting, instead asking for results and impact reporting. Taking this one step further into the arena of improved next steps, requires addressing the questions of **so what** are the implications for the initiative; and **now what** will be done about the situation.

## **6 Integrating action learning into development initiatives**

Many development initiatives contain an experimental element or at least are based on one or more assumptions about which there is not entire clarity or consensus. In this case, valuable lessons can be learned to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of implementation of similar endeavours. If an initiative aims to contribute new insights to existing theory and practice, then it must be established and resourced in a way that makes this possible. This may include working in partnership with a research institute, giving staff time to write research articles and encouraging participation in seminars and conferences

## **7 The politics of critical reflection**

M&E that engages stakeholders in critical reflection and brings greater transparency to the actions and performance of difference groups can threaten the status quo of existing political relations and power dynamics. Critical reflection is often not welcomed by some (Klouda, 2004). An individual or organisation can fear that his/her/its position and credibility will be affected by transparency about their performance or being too frank about the performance of others. The consequences to the individual or group doing

the critical thinking must be acceptable and there must be no fear of retribution from others.

For M&E to be effective under these circumstances, those who are to introduce learning elements must have a solid understanding of the power dynamics and politics of the situation. This understanding will help them introduce the process in ways that can build trust or to accept the limits of what is possible in contexts where open and transparent M&E processes are not (yet) politically feasible.

## **8 Capacities, incentives and resources**

Someone responsible for M&E has conventionally been someone who can collect, synthesize and report data. The picture of M&E being presented here calls for a very different set of skills and abilities. A 'new paradigm' M&E person needs to be a skilled process facilitator who can build trust and who is sensitive to the politics of the situation. They need a good grounding in participatory methods and tools and qualitative approaches as well as the more classical M&E skills of being able to develop good indicators, monitoring methods and data collection and synthesis processes. The capacity issue is not only with M&E specialists but also with managers or leaders of projects, organizations and communities. Many in positions of authority find it difficult to even conceive of what a learning-oriented M&E system might look like much less have the capacity to bring it about in their organisation, project or community.

To put in place any effective M&E system requires a careful look at the incentive structures at all levels. What are the incentives for a manager to be more open and to admit mistakes? What are the incentives for a field worker to report failure that might reflect poorly on their performance? What are the incentives for a development NGO to report on genuine lessons learned and problems they have had to their donor rather than giving only the good news? M&E that can lead to learning and constructive improvements requires an incentive structure and a culture that reward innovation and openness about failure, it also requires norms and procedures that ensure the transparency of performance.

## **Conclusion – designing M&E as learning systems**

Certainly solid learning requires solid information – no insights without evidence. But an exclusively technical information and external accountability-oriented approach needs to be replaced by an actor-specific learning approach that enables different individuals and groups to continually improve their performance, recognising that they are working in highly dynamic and uncertain contexts. The challenge is to design effective learning systems that can underpin management behaviours and strategies to optimise impact, rather than simply delivering predetermined outputs.

A learning system is characterized by the following:

- Clear and ongoing analysis of the stakeholders involved, their information and learning needs and their power relations.
- Creation of a set of norms and values and level of trust that makes transparency of performance and open dialogue about success and failure possible.

- Design and facilitation of the necessary interactive learning processes that make critical reflection on performance possible.
- Establishment at the outset of clear performance and learning questions (including where appropriate qualitative and quantitative indicators) that deal with the what, why, so what and now what aspects of M&E.
- The collection, analysis and presentation of information in a way that triggers interest and learning from those involved.

A learning systems approach recognises that much learning is already occurring, often in informal ways, and that the individuals involved in any situation usually have considerable knowledge about what is happening. The challenge is to enhance these informal processes and to capture and utilise the wealth of tacit knowledge through effective reflective processes, supplemented by formal processes that optimise the learning.

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## Useful resources

Managing for Impact in Rural Development – A Guide for Project M&E. 2002. IFAD, Rome

(Download from <http://www.ifad.org/evaluation/guide/index.htm>)

Enhancing Ownership and Sustainability – A Resource Book on Participation. 2001, IFAD, ANGO and IIRR. Manila.

(Available at [http://www.iirr.org/bookstore/index.php?product\\_id=34](http://www.iirr.org/bookstore/index.php?product_id=34))

Patton, M.Q. 1997. *Utilization-focused Evaluation: The New Century Text*. Sage Publications Inc., California.

Participatory Planning Monitoring and Evaluation Resource Portal - <http://portals.wi.wur.nl/ppme/>

Facilitating Multi-stakeholder Process and Social Learning Portal - <http://portals.wi.wur.nl/msp/>

## Upcoming SL-related activities/programmes

**Strengthening Managing for Impact (SMIP)** is a regional programme, funded by a grant from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), that is strengthening the capacity of stakeholders of pro-poor interventions to effectively manage for impact. Working alongside a range of service providers, SMIP will use an action learning approach to generate knowledge and lessons and enhance practical skills and organisational capacity. A **ten day training course** will be held in March in East

Africa for service providers interested in learning more about managing for impact. Please contact Mine Pabari, SMIP's Regional Programme Facilitator for further information at [m.pabari@gmail.com](mailto:m.pabari@gmail.com)

Khanya – African Institute for Community Driven Development (Khanya-aicdd) is currently managing an **action-research project** across four countries – South Africa, Lesotho, Kenya and Uganda, to look at models for how community-based worker systems can best be used to ensure poor people have access to services, while empowering communities at the same time. A series of national workshops are being held in each of the four countries to bring together pilot partners, practitioners involved in community-based worker systems, and national, provincial and local government, to share findings from the pilot evaluations and explore the implications for mainstreaming CBW systems in-country. The South Africa CBW Workshop was held on 28-29 Nov. For further information:

- **Lesotho CBW Symposium, 5-6 Dec** contact Mpopo Tsoele at [mtsoele@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mtsoele@yahoo.co.uk)
- **Uganda CBW Workshop, 19-20 Dec** contact Dr Francis Byekwaso at [fbyekwaso@naads.or.ug](mailto:fbyekwaso@naads.or.ug)
- **Kenya CBW Workshop, 21-22 Dec** contact Stephen Mogere at [snmogere@yahoo.com](mailto:snmogere@yahoo.com)

**Past editions of SLSA** - available at [www.khanya-aicdd.org](http://www.khanya-aicdd.org)

20	August 2006	Local and Community Driven Development: Principles and Evolution
19	May 2006	Decentralisation
18	Feb 2006	Local institutions and participatory development
17	Nov 2005	Participatory forest management (PFM)
16	Sept 2005	FAO's work on People-centred development with a livelihoods perspective (PCD-L)
15	July 2005	Shelter and livelihoods
14	Sept 2004	Community-based management
13	June 2004	Learnings about the sustainable livelihoods approach
12	Feb 2004	Sustainable livelihoods and small-scale mining
11	Oct 2003	Sustainable livelihoods and gender
10	June 2003	Community-based natural resources management
9	April 2003	Community-based workers as a model for pro-poor service delivery
8	Feb 2003	Institutional support for sustainable livelihoods
7	Sept 2002	Local economic development and sustainable livelihoods
6	June 2002	HIV/AIDS and sustainable livelihoods
5	March 2002	Social capital and sustainable livelihoods
4	Dec 2001	Rights-based approach to development
3	Sept 2001	Corporate Citizenship
2	July 2001	Community-based Planning

1	May 2001	The sustainable livelihoods approach
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