Breaking the Mould

Alternative approaches to monitoring and evaluation

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MONITORING & EVALUATION

ALNAP

ALNAP is a global network of NGOs,
UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/
Crescent Movement, donors, academics,
networks and consultants dedicated
to learning how to improve response
to humanitarian crises.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
ABM	Agent-based modelling
CSH	Critical systems heuristics
DEPA-MERL	Developmental Evaluation Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
HOME	Home-based Outreach Chronic Disease Management Exploratory study
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
RTE	Real-time evaluation
SD	Systems dynamics
SNA	Social network analysis
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ZAP	Zambia Accountability Programme

Key to design features

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Introduction

A recent ALNAP Scoping Paper found that the principle use of information generated by monitoring systems in many humanitarian agencies is to compile reports for donors (Warner, 2017). Using that same information to inform project-level decision-making and learning sometimes looks like an after-thought. This will come as no surprise to some. Traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems have often been criticised for focusing too heavily on donor accountability at the expense of the types of reflection and learning that can improve project-level decision-making (Ramalingam et al., 2019). This echoes longstanding concerns about the limited use of evaluation systems both inside the humanitarian sector (Hallam and Bonino, 2013) and outside of it (Patton, 2008; Raimondo, 2018). And it mirrors wider questions about when and how evidence of all forms is actually used in decision-making (Tanner, 2016; Powell et al., 2019).

In truth, the question of how M&E is or can be used is not straightforward. Just as learning and decision-making systems can be formal and informal (Tanner, 2016), evidence-use can be direct or indirect, explicit or implicit (Raimondo, 2018). We can think of use in terms of mechanistic impact: a report read leading to a decision made. Or we can think of wider learning and long-term knowledge-building over time (Borton et al., 2018), which may impact future decisions in quite complex and subtle ways. This point is all the more pertinent in the humanitarian sector, where tacit knowledge – the hard-won lessons of experience, filtered through the beliefs, instincts and value structures of individual aid workers – plays such a big role (ALNAP, 2003).

There are mounting calls to improve our understanding of the ways M&E systems can feed into this tacit knowledge base, and influence project-level decision-making and learning over time. This is, in part, a result of the growing interest in new, more flexible approaches to programme design and implementation. 'Adaptive management' is an approach to humanitarian action which accepts that no amount of information during project design will ever be good enough, so we must rely on continuous analysis and adaptation to allow a project to respond to local context, changing needs and evolving knowledge as the project unfolds (Booth et al., 2016; Ramalingam et al., 2019; Obrecht, 2019).

To better mesh with adaptive management approaches, Simister (2018a; b; c) and O'Donnell (2016) argue that M&E systems need to be more flexible so they can cope with intentional project changes during implementation. Giordano (2017) and Rogers (2017) add that such systems also need to support continuous programme change by fitting into rapid cycles of planning, monitoring, evaluating and learning. Arguably, this will require fully embedding M&E within planning and implementation teams, and providing information that encourages continuous experimentation, testing and re-testing of approaches as programme activities are implemented and situations evolve.

Some organisations have begun to look at options to meet this need. The Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) programme is currently identifying innovative evidence-based approaches to adaptive management (Wild and Ramalingam, 2018). The Response Innovation Lab (RIL) has developed a toolkit that includes tailored M&E guidance for innovation (RIL, 2018). And the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has published work on complexity-aware M&E as part of its Collaborating, Learning and Adapting programme approach (USAID, 2016). It will be interesting to see how these approaches move forward in the next five years, and the extent to which they are picked up and applied across the humanitarian sector.

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M&E specialists in sectors as diverse as health, education and social innovation have been tackling similar issues for some time. Approaches such as realist evaluation, outcome harvesting, developmental evaluation, soft systems methodology and others have been trialled and used in a range of different contexts since the late 1990s. Bringing similar innovations to humanitarian M&E will not happen without overcoming a range of challenges in the way things are currently done, but the cost of continuing with 'traditional' M&E is equally problematic. It is important, therefore, to think in terms of what can be done, not what cannot.

The quantity of project-level evaluation in the humanitarian sector has risen significantly over the past 20 years (Darcy and Dillon, 2019). But the impact of this work on decision-making has repeatedly been questioned (Sandison, 2006; Hallam and Bonino, 2013). The status quo raises questions, therefore, about the value for money of evaluation at the project level.

In some ways, the call for adaptation-ready M&E reflects common concerns about what good M&E should have been doing all along. Our hypothesis is that by sharing learning and examples of success from some of the more innovative approaches on the market, we will enhance the potential use of M&E systems for real-time project-level decision-making and learning across the board.

This paper looks at a range of M&E innovations that are designed specifically to provide input to ongoing iterative decision-making and learning at the project level. It identifies three key areas for potential innovation: 1) timing of M&E data provision; 2) flexibility of M&E frameworks to evolve with programme change; and 3) approaches to integrate diverse perspectives on project implementation in a meaningful way. It then looks at a collection of approaches currently being used in each of these three areas through a series of 'practice examples', considering the key lessons learned. Finally, the paper discusses the major opportunities and challenges for applying and scaling up the use of these approaches inside the humanitarian sector.

Photo credit: OSOCC.

Process and method

This paper is one part of a series of research products developed by the ALNAP Secretariat on monitoring of humanitarian action. The series began with a scoping paper that describes current practice and associated challenges (Warner, 2017). This work helped identify a range of issues for improvement within the monitoring systems observed. In 2017/2018, the ALNAP Secretariat consulted its members to select the critical challenges that require further research. Four issues were identified:

▪ Limited ability to measure outcomes in a meaningful way.

▪ Capacity constraints regarding the capture and use of qualitative data by monitoring teams.

▪ An absence of tools for sharing good monitoring practice within and across organisations.

▪ Limited use of M&E information to support project decision-making and learning.

Each of these issues was investigated further through independent research components. The outputs and related resources are available on the ALNAP website at alnap.org/me

Photo credit: Edward Echwalu/ECHO.

This paper tackles the last of these four challenges. It is based on lessons shared by ALNAP members through an engagement paper and consultation via the ALNAP Evaluation Community of Practice; scoping interviews with key informants in the development and humanitarian sectors; and a literature review of over 60 papers selected from peer-reviewed journals, academic publications, M&E practice notes and grey literature from the humanitarian and development sectors. Data collection focused on:

▪ Collecting examples of 'non-traditional' M&E approaches being applied in the humanitarian, development and social innovation sectors.

▪ Identifying lessons learned for each approach from M&E teams, commissioners and users.

▪ Identifying challenges and opportunities for application within the humanitarian sector.

The paper outlines, firstly, what 'non-traditional' M&E approaches entail, focusing on three areas of concern: 1) timing, 2) flexibility and 3) perspectives. Secondly, the paper reviews a selection of non-traditional approaches that seek to overcome challenges in these three areas. The reviews include summaries of each approach, why they can be useful, and consideration of challenges and opportunities in applying them to humanitarian M&E.

The reviews are supported by seven 'practice examples' of how the tools have been used to date and relevant resources for readers who want to know more. Finally, the paper provides concluding remarks on how humanitarian organisations could take these non-traditional approaches forward in future practice.

Photo credit: Edward Echwalu/ECHO.

Unpacking the arguments for innovation

1 Unpacking the arguments for innovation

Calls for innovation in M&E systems all point to the need to improve their usefulness for project-level decision-making and learning. And they typically cut across both monitoring and evaluation systems. A core theme running through the innovations outlined below is the desire to apply more frequent evaluative thinking to the realities of project-level decision-making and learning. This speaks to a perceived need for simultaneous measurement and assessment of project processes and results in real-time. Indeed, some authors have argued that reconsidering the division between the measurement (monitoring) and assessment (evaluation) functions would be beneficial (O'Donnell, 2016; Green, 2018). For this reason, the paper looks at innovations in M&E that draw from evaluative toolkits but that can be applied to daily monitoring and measurement tasks.

Unpacking the arguments for innovation in M&E points to three distinct areas for change: **timing**, **flexibility** and **perspectives**.

1.1 Timing

A common theme in more recent arguments for M&E innovation is the fluid and ongoing nature of decision-making (Tanner, 2016; Powell et al., 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2019). Advocates of adaptive management, in particular, see decision-making as a continual process throughout the implementation of a project or programme. This has obvious implications for the timing of any evidence products aiming to influence programme decisions:

> Adaptive programming is typically characterised by multiple decision points at different frequencies. This involves combining more rapid feedback mechanisms with those that measure longer timeframes. Monitoring, review and learning processes, process evaluation, developmental evaluation and real-time evaluation methods must be considered and combined in intelligent ways to meet these diverse needs.
> Ramalingam et al. (2019: 6)

One could of course argue that all humanitarian action requires a great deal of ongoing decision-making and course-correction just to deliver in the chaos of humanitarian crisis. Indeed, the difficulty of aligning evaluation and decision-making cycles is one reason why timeliness has been cited as a factor in under-utilisation of evaluations (Hallam and Bonino, 2013). This was borne out a decade ago in the growth of real-time evaluation (RTE) tools (Cosgrave et al., 2009) and remains a common theme of more recent calls for increased investment in RTEs (Schenkenberg, 2018).

But the call for M&E tools that suit the ongoing nature of iterative decision-making goes beyond reviewing progress more frequently. It is a request for a suite of information tools that enable more than appraisals at discrete moments in the project cycle, and instead move towards a continuous flow of information on project performance and relevance to need.

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"...the call for M&E tools that suit the ongoing nature of iterative decision-making goes beyond reviewing progress more frequently.."

Photo credit: Omar Abdisalan/UN Photo.

1.2 Flexibility

Ongoing iterative decision-making and learning entails a responsiveness to change as contexts shift and implementation unfolds. The scope of that responsiveness is critical, and so are the assumptions behind it. Obrecht (2019) outlines five areas of flexibility in the case of projects that intentionally deploy adaptive management approaches: delivery, targeting, product delivered, service provided, and strategy followed. O'Donnell (2016: 3) makes it clear that adaptive programmes start from an 'assumption of uncertainty about what will work to address the challenge', which are then 'characterised by a flexible approach involving testing, monitoring, getting feedback and – crucially – making course-corrections if necessary'.

This has significant implications. It means that M&E systems need to do at least three things well:

1. **Respond to adaptation that is both wide in scope and continuous in nature:** Adaptation-ready M&E needs to be comfortable with significant and continuous project change. This means providing performance information and assessment even when the project goals change from the original intervention logic. Assessing a project only against the intended outcomes expressed in the initial design documents will limit the potential use of the M&E outputs for ongoing decision-making and learning (Obrecht with Bourne 2018; Obrecht, 2019). So, flexibility is needed within the M&E systems themselves.

   But adapting to changes across operational, programmatic and strategic levels is difficult to do whilst retaining the critical distance needed to rigorously assess performance. Balancing the needs of adaptation and rigour are therefore critical for an M&E system seeking to provide useful input to adaptive management processes (Ramalingam et al., 2019).

2. **Support adaptation throughout the project by asking questions and providing information in the right way:** M&E systems need to actively encourage adaptations in programming. At a workshop on adaptiveness and flexibility hosted by the ALNAP Secretariat in September 2018, participants discussed the need to incentivise and encourage changes to programmes. O'Donnell (2016) emphasises the following features of adaptive management: uncertainty about what works during initial project design; willingness to course-correct during implementation; willingness to adapt both tactics and strategy over time; and engaging in sequential testing and multiple experiments. The rhetoric around adaptive management deliberately recasts the role of programme teams as innovators and experimenters as opposed to managers. This points to the need for ongoing learning and assessment (Valters et al., 2016). It mirrors the needs identified by evaluators of social innovation for approaches that can measure real-time results, challenge initial assumptions, resolve initial uncertainty and move towards a process of co-creation between programme and M&E teams (Lam and Shulha, 2014).

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3. **Evaluate adaptation by assessing the quality of the decision-making behind it and its results:** Adaptation-ready M&E systems need to be able to support value judgements about the adaptive process itself. If course-corrections and strategic changes in programming are an integral part of humanitarian action, then they must also be the subject of humanitarian evaluation. But assessing the quality of decision-making in a relatively fast-paced iterative programme can be difficult:

> An important first step is to strengthen and be transparent about the types and quality of evidence used for adaptive decision-making. These programmes can be weak in terms of how they capture and share the underlying rationale for decisions, raising inevitable quality control concerns.
> Ramalingam et al. (2019: 5)

While this is by no means a new issue for humanitarian evaluators, it is one that comes to the fore for projects that are intentionally designed to be adaptive. And it doesn't feature prominently in state-of-the-art guidance on evaluation of humanitarian action (ALNAP, 2016) or in consideration of how to apply criteria from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) in humanitarian contexts (Beck, 2006).

1.3 Perspectives

Innovation is also often called for in the integration and understanding of multiple perspectives in monitoring and assessing humanitarian action.

The international development community has increasingly recognised that aid is an inherently political act which cannot be reduced to purely technical questions of how to achieve a 'value-neutral' objective. To this end, the Doing Development Differently policy agenda included a greater focus on locally led solutions that 'turns the notion of "participation" on its head – rather than asking citizens to participate in policymaking, it requires policymakers to see things from the perspective of the citizen (or "user")' (Wild et al., 2015: 37).

This ethos has been carried through in the focus on adaptive management approaches that remain humble about what will work in a given context and that stay open to counter-vailing evidence throughout project implementation (Andrews et al. 2015; O'Donnell, 2016).

Where this consideration is applied to crisis relief, it entails a need for M&E systems that are comfortable integrating multiple perspectives on a project's relevance, performance and impacts. More than simply including affected-population feedback data, this means actively exploring and investigating the often-competing perspectives of different project stakeholders to also include humanitarian agencies and donor organisations as well.
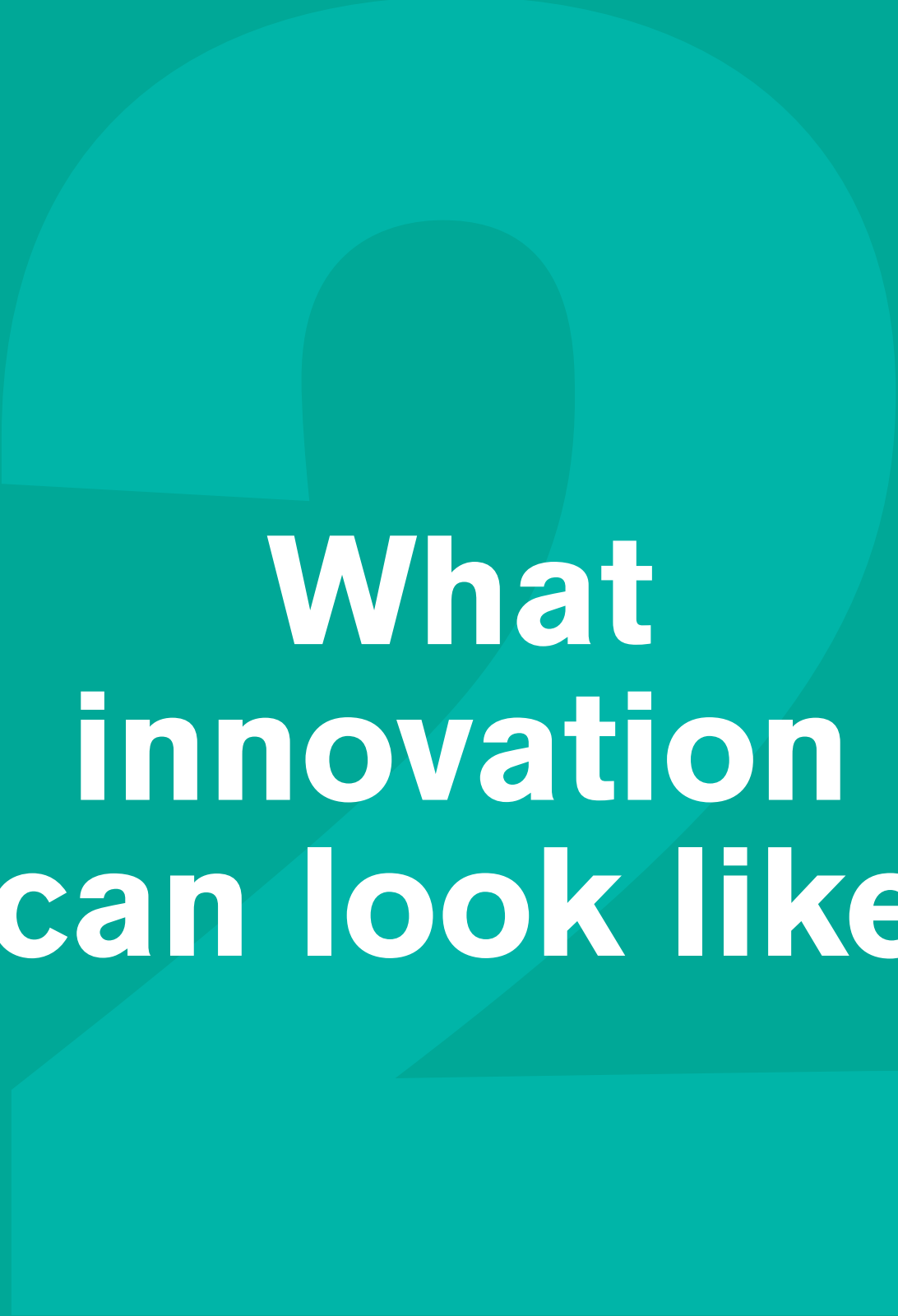
This is, again, something that many good but traditional M&E approaches pride themselves on. Participatory evaluations, for example, involve affected populations not just as providers of information but as co-designers of the evaluation framework and process itself (Guijt, 2014). But the intentional and consistent probing of competing narratives and interpretations of what a project is, what it does, and how it interacts with local contexts, is something that has rarely featured heavily in evaluations of humanitarian action in the past (Christoplos et al., 2017).

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In sum, the calls for M&E innovation amount to a range of different requests, each of which have been heard before, but none fully answered. New, adaptive approaches are distinct from real-time evaluation because they seek to provide ongoing information flows not multiple but discrete reporting periods. They are distinct from monitoring because they answer truly evaluative questions about a project's objectives rather than descriptive questions about whether it is achieving its goals (Scriven, 2016). They are distinct from a tightly defined action research proposal because they retain the critical distance and open-endedness of an evaluation (Patton et al., 2016). And they are distinct from participatory evaluation because they require ongoing assessment oriented towards strategic change and adaptation. In short, if this type of innovative M&E is like anything that has gone before, then it is a systematic combination of all of the above that intentionally supports project-level innovation and change.

Photo credit: DDG/DRC.

What innovation can look like

2 What innovation can look like

2.1 Timing: embedded, multi-year and developmental approaches

Multi-year evaluations, as being developed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018), provide extended windows of evaluative evidence and review. This should increase the frequency of strategic reflection about a broad and cross-cutting policy area, in this case, humanitarian – development cooperation. This requires a multi-year data collection and synthesis effort, conducted over repeated evaluation cycles, in order to support 'critical reflection over time to provide real time insights and analysis that inform course correction, as well as providing robust cumulative evidence to inform UNHCR ways of working in the longer term' (ibid: 4). While this approach would not strictly yield continuous data of the type described in section 3.1, it would allow for repeated evaluation cycles that make space for year-on-year reflection points to aid ongoing reflection and learning among decision-makers.

An alternative approach is to embed evaluation cycles within and alongside project implementation. This can be approached in many different ways. In the period following 2010, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) took a strategic decision to embed evaluation into its programming by including evaluation within all programme design, building evaluation capacity within country and programme teams and commissioning evaluations on a decentralised, programme-led basis (Calvert et al., 2014). In doing so, DFID sought to locate evaluation more closely alongside programming, and to better align evaluation deliverables with the programme cycle.

Another way to embed evaluation alongside project delivery is through developmental evaluation (Patton, 1992). In addition to aligning evaluation deliverables with programme cycles, developmental evaluation seeks to provide ongoing iterative reflection and learning for project teams. It seeks to build in multiple points of reflection from evaluative evidence throughout project implementation, instead of focusing on single evaluation products that are then passed to project teams for take-up and use. So, the learning vehicle becomes the evaluation process, rather than the final report.

None of these approaches are mutually exclusive. Indeed, they often explicitly require and support one another. And none of them predetermine the evaluation methodology as such. They all represent attempts by evaluators and commissioners to create an evaluation model that moves beyond the standard practice of conducting an evaluation on a 'one-shot' basis, or on a timescale designed primarily by M&E staff rather than project teams.

Why these approaches help with timing

The traditional M&E cycle is typically defined by a single evaluation with a formal reporting period. That period may line up with end-of-project delivery (ex-post), mid-term implementation (real-time and formative evaluation) or the design phase (ex-ante). But the reality is that humanitarian decision-making is extremely varied and typically ongoing rather than discrete (Campbell and Knox-Clarke, 2019). This makes it hard to line up a singular and formalised deliverable – like an evaluation report – in a timely manner, which results in the oft-cited claim that evaluation products are not used because they are not delivered in a timely fashion (Hallam and Bonino, 2013).

Embedded and longitudinal evaluation approaches elongate the window for collecting and sharing information with project teams and offer one way to overcome this issue. UNCHR (2018), for example, builds repeated windows for sharing evaluation information with decision-makers throughout the multi-year evaluation cycle. Each window involves presentation of robust, triangulated findings and consideration of programme implications and opportunities to learn and adapt.

Developmental evaluation goes one step further by altering the shape of the evaluation delivery cycle. Instead of focusing delivery on report production and dissemination, developmental evaluations often include regular and ongoing meetings to discuss evaluative evidence and to encourage reflection and adaptation on the basis of the evaluative evidence generated. USAID (2017) highlights how developmental evaluation can create ongoing analysis and review sessions with project teams, even on a weekly basis, that provide an evaluative perspective with the frequency of an in-house monitoring team.

Example 1: The Zambia Accountability Programme (ZAP)

ZAP was a development programme implemented by the British Council from 2014 to 2018 using DFID funds. It aimed to build accountability mechanisms across Zambia by supporting effective collaboration among elected leaders, government officials, civic groups and private businesses on prioritised government reform and development problems (British Council, 2019).

The evaluation team was embedded alongside project implementation throughout the programme cycle, with the aim of providing ongoing data rather than discrete periodic assessment following a standard mid-term and final evaluation cycle.

The evaluators established an evaluation framework including regular findings workshops with the key stakeholders. In total, nine different evaluation studies were conducted over the project life cycle, plus two recurring studies. Each study looked at specific areas of the project, with the focus primarily defined by the donor and evaluation team. A sense-making workshop was held for each evaluation, bringing together the donor, implementing agency and partner agencies. These workshops focused on reviewing, validating and interpreting evaluation findings, as well as discussing possible recommendations for action. They also conducted a 'reflection-on-action' review at the start of each new evaluation study, to review changes made since the last evaluation and to address project changes during that time.

Source: Thakrar (2019)

Photo credit: Isabel Coello/ECHO.

Issues for consideration:

1. **Short project cycles:** Humanitarian funding cycles are often short, which complicates the task of implementing multi-annual M&E programmes. In a context where staff turnover is often high, implementing one M&E system across multiple project contracts can prove complex. But detaching the M&E funding structure from the project funding could theoretically help navigate this complexity. It would also allow M&E teams to establish and maintain evidence hubs to make information available as and when decision-makers need it rather than at discrete moments in the M&E cycle. And allowing a single M&E system to operate across multiple short-term contracts could encourage shared learning between project teams, particularly in protracted crises.

2. **Meeting saturation:** The time investment required from project teams to engage with weekly reflection points should be considered. And embedding an evaluator within a project team is not without financial cost either (as discussed in the following section). But creative options can be looked at by M&E units to reduce these burdens, primarily by reducing the formality of the reflection process and also by finding smart ways to integrate meeting points with pre-existing coordination and review structures (USAID, 2017). This should be considered against the costs of continuing with the current ways of working: if done right, introducing a regular weekly reflection point based around an embedded evaluation could displace current rhythms of reflection and information-sharing in a positive way.

Key reading:

- Calvert S., Gaussen, E., Heirman, J., Ramage, E. and Rider Smith, D. (2014) Rapid review of embedding evaluation in UK Department for International Development. London: DFID (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-embedding-evaluation-in-the-department-for-international-development)

- Patton, M. Q., McKegg, K. and Wehipeihana, N. (eds) (2016) Developmental evaluation exemplars: principles in practice. New York: Guildford Press (https://www.guilford.com/books/Developmental-Evaluation-Exemplars/Patton-McKegg-Wehipeihana/9781462522965)

- UNHCR (2018) Terms of reference: multi-year evaluation of UNHCR's engagement in humanitarian–development cooperation. Geneva: UNHCR

Photo credit: Samuel Ochai/ European Union.

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Developmental evaluation is an approach originally designed to 'assist social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments'.

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2.2 Flexibility: Developmental evaluation

Developmental evaluation is an approach originally designed to 'assist social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments' (BetterEvaluation, 2015). It was originally articulated by Michael Quinn Patton in the early 1990s, in order to evaluate an experimental educational diversity programme in the United States (Patton, 1992). The programme in question evolved considerably throughout implementation, which made traditional evaluation approaches – focused on measuring delivery against pre-defined objectives – both unhelpful and unfeasible. Critically, Patton's response to this evolution was to implement an evaluation approach that fed into this evolution rather than resisted it. He sought to provide 'evaluative information and feedback to [the innovation team], and their funders and supporters, to inform adaptive development of change initiatives in complex dynamic environments' (Patton et al., 2016: v).

In the years since Patton's initial work, interest in developmental evaluation has grown significantly across the evaluation community (Parkhurst et al., 2016). In 2015, USAID launched a developmental evaluation pilot activity – Developmental Evaluation Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (DEPA-MERL) – to test the effectiveness of developmental evaluation for international development projects and programmes. DEPA-MERL defines developmental evaluations as an approach to evaluation that supports the continuous adaptation of development interventions by:

- Embedding evaluators within the project for the duration of the implementation cycle

- Encouraging evaluators to contribute evidence-based reflection to support ongoing project modifications where needed – including potentially significant shifts in targeted outcomes or radical changes in modes of delivery

- Expecting evaluators to document project modifications and the decision-making process as it unfolds

- Deploying various data collection methods to fit project demand, including complexity-sensitive research methods such as network and outcome mapping, contribution analysis, or other approaches based on information needs (USAID, 2015).

Why this approach helps with flexibility:

In theory, developmental evaluation enables a flexible M&E approach by:

a. **responding to adaptation:** by allowing for iterative development of evaluation frameworks and methods alongside project implementation, developmental evaluation is specifically designed to allow for shifts in project objectives and modes of operation.

b. **supporting adaptation:** by embedding evaluators alongside project teams and encouraging frequent reflection on project delivery and appropriateness, developmental evaluation aims to encourage adaptive management during project delivery.

c. **evaluating adaptation:** by logging and diarising decision-making processes, the developmental evaluator should be in a position to map the reasons for decisions made and ultimately provide assessment of their suitability where required.

Example 2: Australia's Home-based Outreach Chronic Disease Management Exploratory study (the HOME study)

ALNAP's review of recent humanitarian evaluations revealed no clear and complete examples of developmental evaluation in the humanitarian setting. The use of developmental evaluation in the international development field is also an emerging area of practice at the time of writing. Nevertheless, many examples can be seen in the social innovation sectors within OECD countries.

One such example comes from Australian attempts to improve chronic disease care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. The HOME study was established to develop and refine a new innovative model of care. A key challenge in this case was the competing priorities presented by successful service delivery and the conduct of the research study itself. By using a developmental evaluation model, the HOME team was able to ensure a responsive and flexible evaluation model that could change throughout implementation to best navigate the tension between service delivery and learning.

The evaluator conducted data collection through workshops and interviews with a wide stakeholder group, sharing the findings with the service delivery team through weekly meetings. This effectively systematised the delivery team's own process for considering real-time performance data and stakeholder feedback. The result was that it helped the delivery team strengthen their approach through iterative development of the care model during implementation. And, crucially, the evaluation helped identify the need to clarify roles and responsibilities between service delivery and the research and learning teams, thereby enabling more collaborative engagement between them.

Source: Patton et al. (2016: 234–251)

Issues for consideration:

1. **Time and money:** Developmental evaluation theoretically requires embedding full-time evaluators alongside project teams throughout the implementation cycle. This raises an important question of finding well-suited evaluators to work in this way. Some of the challenges in this regard are well-outlined in USAID (2017). Beyond the skillset, however, it must be admitted that this approach has financial costs and does require longer contracting timelines than traditional humanitarian evaluation models. The DEPA-MERL pilots had an average cost of between $600,000 and $1.7 million and lasted two years. This is beyond the reach of the average humanitarian evaluation budget at individual project level (ibid.).

   But it is an open question whether this type of approach would in fact be more expensive than the combined cost of the project-level M&E systems currently deployed by humanitarian agencies. Could cost savings be achieved by pooling developmental evaluation resources across projects? Would the embedded approach yield cost savings through reduced start-up and 'onboarding' time for evaluators? And even if this approach does prove more expensive, the question should become one of assessing whether improvements in effective and appropriate delivery are worth the cost.

2. **Organisational culture:** Learning from the social innovation sector suggests that the task of assessing project and organisational readiness for developmental evaluation is not a simple one. The Spark Policy Institute (2017) developed a specific tool for assessing the feasibility and appropriateness of conducting a developmental evaluation. They identify critical issues such as:

- The readiness of organisations to accept project failures as healthy learning experiences

- Openness to changing strategies and objectives during implementation

- Low staff turnover and high commitment to project success.

Humanitarian agencies are typically subject to significant upwards accountability requirements, which can make failure difficult to admit to and learn from (Ramalingam, 2013). Funding structures can inhibit changing strategies during implementation (Obrecht, 2018), while staff turnover in the humanitarian sector is notoriously high.

As such, the feasibility of implementing developmental evaluation in humanitarian settings needs to be carefully considered before investment. It will be critical to ensure that all actors in the humanitarian chain are on board: from donor to implementing agency to affected-population groups. Further consideration of these challenges and others are presented by the DEPA-MERL team in a reflection paper published two years into their pilot activities (USAID, 2017).

📖 **Key reading:**

- Dozois, E., Langlois, M. and Blanchet-Cohen, N. (2010) DE 201: a practitioner's guide to developmental evaluation. Victoria: British Columbia: J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (https://mcconnellfoundation.ca/assets/Media%20Library/Publications/DE%20201%20EN.pdf)
- Spark Policy Institute (n.d.) 'Developmental evaluation toolkit'. Denver, CO: Spark Policy Institute (http://tools.sparkpolicy.com/developmental-evaluation/)
- USAID (2017) Learning from practice: developmental evaluation in practice: tips, tools, and templates. Washington, DC: USAID (https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/15396/USAID_DEPA_MERL_Developmental_Evaluation_in_Practice-_Tips_Tools_and_T.pdf)

Photo credit: Samuel Ochai/ European Union.

2.3 Perspectives: Systems and complexity-sensitive methods

Most M&E systems used in the humanitarian and development sector are based on simplified models of project implementation. Logframe approaches often assume simple cause-and-effect relationships between project activities and outcomes in the affected population, with only passing reference made to the role of external actors and factors. The role of M&E systems deployed at project level is often primarily to assess performance against this simplified model of how aid interventions are supposed to work.

This makes it very hard for M&E data to take account of the complex interactions between project activities, organisational dynamics, agency–donor interactions, host-government interventions, community-led initiatives and household-level responses to crisis. It also makes it tantalisingly easy for M&E teams to miss the unanticipated outcomes that aren't incorporated into the initial logframe or theory of change. But, perhaps most of all, the traditional approach to M&E makes it hard to accurately account for the power dynamics, conflicting perceptions and the evolving nature of interactions among the many different stakeholders and actors involved in humanitarian action (Raimondo et al., 2015).

In the worst-case scenario, this can lead to recommendations to project teams that just aren't suited to the complex situations they operate in; that don't take account of unintended consequences or indeed any changes that fall outside the logframe; and that ignore the conflicting perspectives and shifting relationships between key project stakeholder groups.

'Systems and complexity-sensitive methods' is an umbrella term for M&E methods that seek to overcome this weakness. It encompasses a wide range of research tools and approaches that each have lineage from a diverse group of academic disciplines and subdisciplines now commonly referred to as complexity-science and systems theory. Useful starting points to understand more about complexity-science, systems theory and what they both mean for evaluation are provided by Williams (2015) and Bamberger et al. (2015).

For our purposes, it is worth focusing on the types of tools and methods that can be applied to M&E systems from this wider academic framework. Practice examples 3-7 include a selection of such tools drawn from Raimondo et al. (2015), each of which has potential use to M&E teams seeking to better integrate and explore competing perspectives on project activities.

Why these approaches help with perspectives:

The practice examples are all designed to help M&E teams take account of the complex interactions between projects, organisations and external actors. In truth, many of these methods seek to dissolve the distinction between internal and external actors altogether, instead building a system-wide analysis that understands humanitarian action as just one part of the larger puzzle of crisis and crisis response.

As a result, these tools can help M&E teams to design their approaches in a way that recognises the competing perspectives that can arise between different organisations, population groups, governments and donor organisations. Each of the tools does this in a way that has the potential to generate new types of information of interest to project design and implementation.

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"Critical systems heuristics can encourage reflection on the range of perspectives different stakeholder groups may have on what should be counted as within, and without, a project's remit and mandate."

System maps can provide information about the alignment and interest of the wider universe of project stakeholders. System dynamics can provide information about the factors affecting project success based on a richer analysis of interactions between different parts of the system, including divergent stakeholder perspectives. Critical systems heuristics can encourage reflection on the range of perspectives different stakeholder groups may have on what should be counted as within, and without, a project's remit and mandate. Social network analysis can help identify and track evolving relationships between affected populations and key project stakeholder groups. And agent-based modelling can help to predict the outcomes of individual decisions during project implementation based on information about the perspectives and behaviours of target populations.

Example 3: System maps

System maps provide a visual representation of a system, commonly defined as a 'collection of elements that is organised in some way in order to achieve something' (Meadows, 2008). Typically, systems maps are used to analyse the strength and nature of the relationships between the different elements. Evaluators can use system maps in order to help identify the range of project stakeholders, the relationships between them, and the constraints, mandates and perspectives of each stakeholder group. Alignment to and interest in the project objectives can likewise be mapped once the initial system map is complete, helping evaluators to navigate the wider system in relation to the project under evaluation (Mendizabal, 2010).

One recent example of a system map is provided by Development Initiatives (2016). It maps the research and evaluation functions in the East African humanitarian community and analyses the relationships between evidence producers and consumers across multiple levels. The advantage of this approach over a standard theory of change or logframe is twofold: system maps allow for a greater level of complexity so that a wider range of agents can be taken into account; and they focus on relationships between project stakeholders rather than causal chains from activity to outcome. This has the potential to allow evaluators to use system maps to explore the different perspectives and constraints of individual project stakeholders, and then to use this to drive the direction of information collection and recommendations tailored to each group.

Source: Development Initiatives (2016)

Example 4: System dynamics (SD)

SD is an analytical approach designed to help model the interaction between various parts of a system. An SD analysis will start by defining the 'stock' and 'flow' variables within a system, before identifying feedback loops.

For example, in a basic food delivery system, the stocks might be the amount of food stored in a warehouse (stock 1) and the amount of food successfully delivered to affected people (stock 2). The flow would be the rate of food delivery to affected people. A feedback loop will occur within this system if increasing the stock of food in the warehouse affects the rate of food delivery by, say, allowing the distributors to increase the number of daily runs. In this case, increasing stock 1 will increase the flow, which will increase the amount of food delivered (stock 2) but decrease the amount of food in the warehouse (stock 1). So, by mapping the feedback loop we see that an increase in stock 1 leads, ultimately, to a decrease in stock 1 (Voyer et al., 2015). Various aspects of humanitarian response have been modelled in a similar way by academic researchers (see Goncalves, 2008; Besiou and Van Wassenhove, 2011).

SD approaches then use a combination of system diagrams and mathematical equations to represent their possible interaction. This allows project teams to understand and explore how effectiveness can be driven – or hindered – by a wide range of contextual factors including the interacting perspectives and viewpoints of different stakeholder groups. It is particularly useful when looking at how a project affects, and is in turn affected by, the implementation context (Befani et al., 2015).

Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011) provide a neat example of systems dynamics being used in an evaluation context. As part of an evaluation of a microloan scheme aimed at providing an alternative source of income for sex workers in a West African mining region, SD was used to explore how the popularity of the scheme would alter depending on different factors. The system was modelled as having three different stocks: the popularity of the project, the number of open loans, and the financial liability of the microfinance institution. The rate of new loans issued was defined as the flow. By comparing a number of different simulated relationships between these variables against the reality observed on the ground, the evaluation team identified some highly useful lessons. Most notably, that improving the performance of the microfinance institution was more effective than increasing marketing coverage to local sex workers, and that uptake of the scheme would improve over time even if no action was taken by the project team.

Source: Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011)

Example 5: Critical systems heuristics (CSH)

CSH is an analytical framework used to assess the choices made during project design and implementation. It starts from the belief that all project designs are based on value judgements about what should lie within and what should fall outside the focus of a project. The purpose of CSH is to unpick and explore these value judgements to gain a deeper understanding of why a project may face challenges in certain areas. It does so by collecting qualitative data on four key areas:

1. The motivation of the project design team.
2. The distribution of power and agency among project stakeholders.
3. The spread of expertise and knowledge across the stakeholders and actors.
4. The legitimacy of the project among the affected populations served by the project.

Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011) cite the same example of a project aimed at reducing HIV/AIDS incidence in a West African mining community as that described in the SD practice example. Alongside microloans, the project provided sex workers with a package of services including education on sexual health risks and access to health services. Monitoring results demonstrated lower than expected results in terms of incidence of HIV/AIDS among the target population, and CSH was used to understand what was going wrong.

The team used the motivation–power–expertise–legitimacy framework to collect qualitative information from key informants to help identify design issues that may have contributed to the problem. Specifically, they identified:

- **Motivation:** diverging assumptions between the design team and the target group regarding the appropriateness of sex work and the use of condoms.
- **Power:** key frontline staff had quite limited control over key aspects of the project, including supply chain planning and distribution models for condoms and drugs.
- **Expertise:** limited involvement of beneficiary groups in the project design meant that key decisions were made without full knowledge of local assumptions and beliefs about sex work and condom use.
- **Legitimacy:** the project focused on street-based sex workers and excluded hotel-based and casual sex workers from the beneficiary group, thereby reducing legitimacy among a key stakeholder group in the spread of HIV/AIDS through the community.

It must be remembered that CSH is an analytical framework. Using it in the manner described above can, at most, point to possible contributory factors in a project's success or lack thereof. Nevertheless, it does provide a useful means to focus critical reflection on the range of perspectives different stakeholder groups may have on what should be counted as within and beyond a project's remit and mandate.

Source: Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011)

Photo credit: Samuel Ochai/ European Union.

Example 6: Social network analysis (SNA)

SNA is a tool for modelling relationships between different actors within a system. Typical approaches to SNA involve using graphing and mapping tools to represent the actors and the strength of the connections between them on the basis of predetermined characteristics. Thus, an SNA of office relationships might map the strength of information flows between individual workers by tracking frequency of emails between them. The resulting map will then give the analyst an understanding of who is in regular contact with whom, and how different clusters of workers coalesce and evolve over time.

Drew et al. (2011) describe the use of SNA in an evaluation of the Global Dialogue on Sexual Health and Well-Being. The evaluators used SNA to visualise the spheres of influence of different organisations and individuals involved in the Dialogue, including the links between individuals and the wider sexual health community. This, in turn, allowed them to better map the full outreach of the programme and thereby to understand where outcomes were most likely to occur. Potentially, this type of analysis can help evaluators break down the sometimes-artificial distinction between 'project stakeholders' and 'external actors'.

Source: Drew et al. (2011)

Example 7: Agent-based modelling (ABM)

ABM is the name for a group of computational tools designed to simulate the interactions between autonomous agents within a system, and the effect they have on that system over time. Common uses of ABM include forecasting forest management outcomes in fire-prone ecosystems or understanding the interactions between traffic-calming measures and driver behaviour. Evaluators can potentially use ABM to help anticipate outcomes based on 'simulations of interactions, preference and characteristics of individual agents' (Raimondo et al., 2015: 39).

ABM is yet to fully take-off in either the international development or humanitarian sector. Arguably, the skillsets and investments needed to introduce such an approach makes it difficult for most agencies (ibid.). Nevertheless, Diez-Echavarria et al. (2019) looked at the potential use of ABM as a tool to analyse humanitarian decision-making,to 'show how the individual decision-making of various stakeholders in humanitarian settings (e.g. non-governmental organisations, military, governmental organisations, United Nations) affects the overall progress of relief work' (Diez-Echavarria et al., 2019: 275. The advantage of the ABM approach used is that it helps to demonstrate how individual actions and interactions build up to contribute to the overall behaviour of the system. As such, it could provide M&E teams with a useful tool to feed into iterative decision-making, by making predictions of future outcomes following on from decisions made.

Source: Diez-Echavarria et al. (2019)

Issues for consideration:

Each of the practice examples present individual challenges when applying to humanitarian M&E systems. But they also present some common challenges:

1. **Over-abstraction:** System-thinking and complexity theory are inherently abstract domains. While modelling and simulation tools can give us additional descriptive power, they rely on assumptions about actors and their behaviour assumptions about actors and their behaviour that are not necessarily supported by the data (Byrne and Callaghan, 2014). This problem is exaggerated when dealing with systems dominated by human behaviour and decision-making, which so often don't fit the rule. Some of the practice examples given below seek to overcome this problem by engaging directly with embedded norms and values, notably the critical systems heuristics methodology and, to a degree, the alignment and interest mapping described in Mendizabal (2010). Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011) give an expanded discussion of this point.

2. **Skillsets:** The tools presented in the practice examples are drawn from specialised academic fields. Therefore the skills required to use them properly are not always commonplace outside of academia. For instance, the quantitative and computational modelling skills are probably outside the remit of most evaluators working in the field today – so training and recruitment will remain barriers. And quality assurance of such tools will require similar levels of training on the part of evaluation commissioners and monitoring managers.

   In the case of agent-based modelling, the gap between theory and actual evaluation practice is particularly large (Raimondo et al., 2015). Expectations should be tempered by an appreciation of the types of decisions that M&E systems aim to inform, and the degree to which they relate to the complexity of the system in which project teams operate (O'Sullivan et al., 2012).

3. **Data requirements:** Some of the tools (notably agent-based modelling and social network analysis) require fairly large, consistent and granular datasets. To a degree, traditional humanitarian M&E systems already struggle with data consistency and granularity (Dillon and Sundberg, 2019). Nevertheless, humanitarian organisations are increasingly looking to change their relationships to data (Cukier, 2019), and interest in using 'big data' in M&E is beginning to bear fruit (Bamberger, 2016). The data challenge is one worth looking at with fresh eyes as M&E systems and tools evolve.

📖 **Key reading:**

- Williams, B. (2015) 'Prosaic or profound? The adoption of systems ideas by impact evaluation' IDS Bulletin 46(1): 7-16
- Bamberger, M., Vaessen, J. and Raimondo, R. (eds) (2015) Dealing with complexity in development evaluation. London: Sage
- Williams, B. and Hummelbrunner, R. (2011) Systems concepts in action: a practitioner's toolkit. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Photo credit: FAO.

Conclusion

3 Conclusion

The innovations described in section 4 are by no means exhaustive. There are many other 'non-traditional' M&E approaches out there from which we can all learn. But, taken together, they do point the way towards a more flexible and learning-focused M&E approach. An approach which, when applied at project level, has the potential to both support project adaptation and learning, while better integrating with the complex reality of humanitarian action.

As with all innovations, the first challenge is will. There's little point building the capacity to implement innovative evaluation approaches at scale, if reporting and accountability mechanisms don't incentivise learning and adaptation (Ramalingam et al., 2019). Overcoming risk-aversion is not easy, especially when traditional M&E systems – despite their many imperfections – present the primary accountability tool the humanitarian system has available.

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"The age-old tension between results-based management and learning-oriented M&E can kerb innovation in approaches and methods."

It should also be remembered that risk-aversion can come from many different sources. Both M&E staff and project teams alike carry pre-conceptions of what M&E should look like (Green, 2018). The age-old tension between results-based management and learning-oriented M&E can kerb innovation in approaches and methods (Patton et al., 2016). And the evaluation community itself, including commissioning units, will need to simultaneously learn how to 'let go' – by allowing M&E systems to evolve alongside project changes (Simister, 2018a) – and how to provide meaningful quality assurance of looser, more informal evaluation frameworks (Thakrar, 2019). Quality frameworks for adaptive M&E, such as that presented by Ramalingam et al. (2019), are useful starting points.

Once the will to innovate has been garnered, it is essential to encourage both M&E and programme teams to be creative in their approach. Giving project teams more ownership of the study focus than is traditionally the case for evaluation is one part of the story here, as seen in the case of the Zambia Accountability Programme (Thakrar, 2019). Likewise, it would

be useful to explore options for building more informal management and implementation response frameworks to encourage ongoing learning informed by M&E. At its root, this speaks to the need to generate learning systems that can navigate the interaction between formal evidence-based learning on the one hand, and tacit knowledge and intuition on the other (Mendizabal, 2010; Wild and Ramalingam, 2018; Ramalingam et al, 2019).

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"...success will require clear commitment from donors and implementing agencies alike. It will mean going beyond the usual M&E set-up to establish a flexible learning system that's half-in and half-out of the project implementation structure."

In sum, success will require clear commitment from donors and implementing agencies alike. It will mean going beyond the usual M&E set-up to establish a flexible learning system that's half-in and half-out of the project implementation structure. And it will require investment of money, time and skills (USAID, 2017). While this list may sound daunting to some, the cost of continuing with 'traditional' M&E is equally problematic: with under-used and often problematic M&E systems generating significant quantities of project-level data that is often shelved or simply passed up the chain to the donor. For how long should we keep up tradition?

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- Back to the Drawing Board: How to improve monitoring of outcomes
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- Evaluation of Protection Guide
- What is Monitoring in Humanitarian Action?
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