



# Adaptive MEL at the heart of project implementation

## *From fact to truth*

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## Context

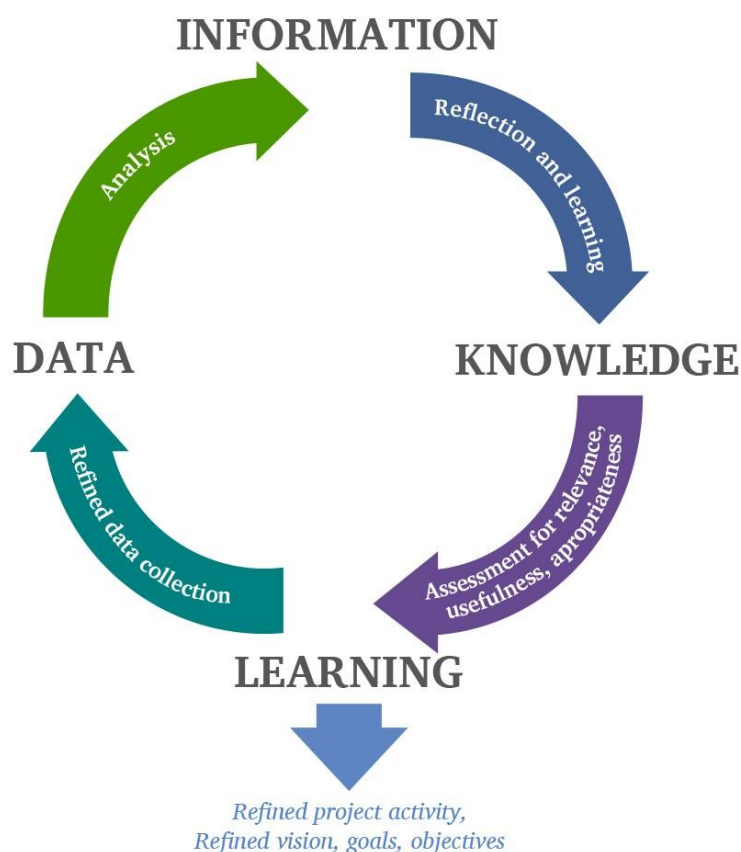
Adaptive management and its enabler, adaptive monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), require of project management a more complex, more meaningful and more iterative response to “traditional” levers of project implementation, as I discussed in the first paper in this mini-series on adaptive management.<sup>1</sup>

Adaptive management and adaptive MEL are more flexible, more “accommodating of unexpected change” and more “learning-focussed” than traditional approaches. There is a commitment to explore the more complex, more meaningful and potentially more change-enabling structures of successful project implementation. This is done primarily by examining, understanding, critiquing and responding to the linkages and interactions between these structures in iterative fashion.

In this paper we examine the components of this approach that are most enabling in the project implementation/delivery phase.

## Enabling a flexible learning system

The data capture, data analysis, reflection and learning system put in place within a project can best be described as the food that energizes and gives real meaning to project implementation – beyond simply implementing activities. Its role is best captured by the simple diagram below:



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<sup>1</sup> How can we strengthen research and knowledge systems in the Global South? Using adaptive monitoring, evaluation and learning in programme design, Femi Nzegwu, August 2018, INASP - [www.inasp.info/publications/adaptive-MEL-programme-design](http://www.inasp.info/publications/adaptive-MEL-programme-design)

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Project (or activity) data is systematically tracked, collected and stored in a database designed to capture and make available data generated within the project for real-time use by team members. The process, in theory, is a seamless one. The data collected is analysed to yield information. This information, when examined and reflected on, yields knowledge. From this newly acquired knowledge we learn; the knowledge places value on the usefulness, the relevance and appropriateness of the data and, by implication, the project activities. Are we on track? Is a change of direction indicated? It also assesses the value of the system designed to collect the data. In other words, is the right type of data being collected for purposes of the project's objectives?

An effective MEL framework that positions learning and adaptation as core components of a project, and for which the project becomes accountable, is a major instrument through which adaptive management can occur. It forces

practitioners to address the need to consider and respond to varying types and theories of knowledge and learning occurring throughout a project. The MEL framework allows us to gather together a range of knowledge and learning about the project we are implementing. More importantly, it enables us to consider what the combined learning "truly" mean in the human, social, economic, political, equity and inclusive context of the project. The MEL approach and its imperative to transcend superficial insights are powerful driving forces for true learning, true adaptation and true change.

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## Adaptive MEL in action in a higher education project in East Africa

In the previous paper in this series, I discussed how we are using an adaptive MEL approach in a new project with higher-education institutions and other partners in east Africa.<sup>2</sup> For this project, we designed a low-budget forms-based, virtual database, capable of storing the data being generated by partners and adapted to working off line in a range of environments with differing internet capacity. We designed the database at the start of the project based on the indicators we had identified, in the first instance as the key measures of progress towards project objectives. We were always aware that these indicators would be subject to review. We did not quite anticipate how quickly and for how long this process would occur!

The first stage was a definition and refinement of what the constituent elements of the indicators meant but this was not straightforward; it was one thing to define this in the indicator reference sheets but quite another to operationalize it. For example, what did we mean by "quality" of output resulting from a student placement, faculty study periods in

industry, the production of student or teacher portfolios? What did our ratings of high, medium and low mean in this context? Who would be involved in making such a decision? Six months into the project, the database is still being refined. Some indicators have been less challenging than others and the "unpicking" process makes clear the specific data that needs to be collected. Nevertheless, with each iteration we become clearer on what we mean by our indicators and how best to capture data to measure against them, and how meaningful they are as markers of the achievements and learning resulting from our project.

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As mentioned earlier, in developing this bespoke database we had a modest budget to work with. However, the revisions to indicators, forms and format proved more challenging, inching our budget upwards. Additionally, the availability of technology does not immediately translate into its use. Getting familiar with its workings, feeding back bugs in the system and addressing these is an ongoing task, although, thankfully, diminishing in scope with time.

An operational, effective and efficient data system that does not consume most of one's budget is fundamental to being able to capture, work with, learn from and respond to what our data tells us. But there are other related and equally crucial elements. We have identified three of the most crucial in our own experience – **partnership**, **ownership** and **purpose** or **vision**.

## Keeping a finger on the pulse of partnership

What makes for great project implementation? Find the ingredients of what makes for a great partnership and you have 90% of your answer. For our approach to successful project delivery, we have distilled four key elements of a successful partnership: respect, trust, voice, and equality of engagement. In our earlier paper, we referred to the adaptive process as a marriage, requiring the commitment of all. Partnerships, in particular, lend themselves to this analogy. The elements that make them work are not dissimilar to those that make more personal relationships successful.

### *1. Respect for each other:*

One of the most easily discernible elements of a partnership that works is the level of attention paid to the wishes, feelings and rights of partners. It is, in reality, a true acknowledgement of the equality of relationship between the people, even if this is not always evident in the way the project is structured. For example, only on rare occasions will a Southern partner organization become the financial lead in a consortium or indeed share equally in the resource allocation – for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, in a healthy partnership, mutuality of engagement and transparency demonstrate the level of regard each partner has for one another and their talents and skills and capabilities, as well as an awareness of shortcomings. This allows for the expression of successes and challenges, easy and difficult conversations, agreements and disagreements to be equally expressed, albeit with sensitivity and tact. There is an openness and sharing of all information relating the project. And there is a liking for one another in these partnerships and an easiness of relationship that conveys friendship within the context of the professional.

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Our attempt is not to paint an overly rosy picture of some “challenge-free flotation” through the project delivery experience! As all who have run multi-layered, multi-partner, multi-country, complex projects know, there are real, risk-laden and significantly challenging issues that arise throughout project implementation. However, in spite of these many potential pitfalls, a well-honed partnership does learn to grapple with these difficulties and endures.

It is equally discernible when these traits are absent. The “partnership” exists as an entity, but members are often “uncovering” information about the work of one another. Conversations differ from one forum to another about the same subject depending on who is in the room because not all has been disclosed to everyone – and there are varying levels of intelligence about “what is going on within the project”. Predictably, at “partnership” meetings the list of challenges always outstrips what people feel they have done or are doing well.

### *2. Trust in each other*

Respect, of course, relates very closely to our next element – trust in one another, that is partner for partner and, of course, for the partnership as an entity. This includes trust to share information, decentralise points of power and decision making, express and demonstrate confidence in colleagues, “flatten” reporting lines and respond to mistakes – the things that go wrong – in a way that builds confidence and empowers.

### 3. *Space to voice truth*

Where are the spaces in which we as partners give voice to appreciation and concerns? How does it happen – in the side lines or frontally in full view of everyone that should be party to the discussion? And how do sensitive conversations take place, how are these handled? Does candour trump sensitivity? In other words, within the context of giving voice to truth, there is also the need to be aware of when to suspend transparency for a partner's sensitivity and to enable them maintain their own sense of dignity.

We need to keep our finger on the pulse of how well the partnership and therefore the project is working. How well we do this depends on how well tuned our sense of awareness is for those issues, voiced and unvoiced, and the nature of the spaces we create for the many conversations that need to occur regularly throughout the life of the project.

## Local ownership: moving beyond the rhetoric

Ugandan scholar and UNESCO education expert Catherine Odora Hoppers has argued that different and sometimes contesting knowledge systems should be included in dialogues about knowledge and, by implication, learning without having to fit these into Western knowledge structures and standards. She contends that these knowledge systems “can play their role in making a more democratic and dialogical science, which remains connected to the livelihoods and survival of all cultures.” Add to that, “survival of the project”!

An adaptive MEL system implicitly embeds the practice of cognitive justice in its approach. It contends that understanding and incorporating existing knowledge and learning systems, structures, and content are fundamental to success. This includes the stories and histories of the different people that, invariably, impact project delivery and management. These are the local anchors that make ownership comprehensible, relatable, viable, sustainable and transformatory. And this is what translates concept into action, into ownership and into long-term impact.

Ownership is directly related to sustainability. It is a truism to state that people sustain what they are invested in much more readily and easily that that which is grafted on. As “ownership” becomes increasingly popularised it is important that the concept of cognitive justice grows hand in hand. There is an interrelatedness of concepts and actions here that are at once challenging and inseparable in their resulting impact – or lack of it!

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*“People sustain what they are invested in much more readily and easily that that which is grafted on.”*

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## Keeping the vision alive

Vision is a statement of purpose involving the creative imagination and wisdoms and heart of the people involved in crafting it and working towards its realisation. What is the vision of the project and project partners – collectively and individually? Do partners view the project as primarily catalytic with a vision for transformation or change that transcends the project? Is the vision anchored within the context of where the project occurs rather than being grafted on or adopted wholesale from an “external agency” without reference to a national or local vision? There may well be variation in the way a vision is applied or implemented, but the to keep it alive means that it must interface with ownership which interfaces with effective partnership all of which are nourished by relevant and responsive data generation, analysis, learning and application.

## Conclusions

In summation, an adaptive MEL system embeds an approach to data collection and analysis, reflection and learning in an attempt to understand the real impact of a project. The systematic approach to data collection, learning and adaptation that defines an adaptive MEL approach enables the production of top-level, strategic insights regarding the impact of the project for partners and the sector more broadly.

This is done by:

- 1. Investing upfront in helping projects embed an adaptive programme/MEL framework beginning at project design*

Data collection for evaluation runs alongside the project. It is continuous, not a one-time, cross-sectional occurrence that occurs at a point in time, but is continuously mining data that is both useful in the development of the project and enables more long-term and strategic insights on impact.

- 2. Operating an evaluative approach to data collection and engaging in evaluative thinking in an effort to learn systematically from and about the project*

Working to our expected results we systematically try out different activities to achieve the desired outcomes. This is not mere “trial and error”. Rather, at our site of activity implementation, we **try** out our approach, **reflect** on what we achieve as well as the assumptions we are working to, **dialogue** amongst ourselves, **iterate** and **adapt** our activities to get us as close as possible to our desired outcomes and impact. We monitor our results closely, comparing them with the ones we first predicted under our original assumptions. In this way we actually learn and document the difference we are making through our ways of working.

- 3. Identifying the evaluation/learning questions early on, and measure and adapt these in real-time*

We define our evaluation/learning questions – the areas we are interested in working in at the start of the project. By monitoring our results in the way we describe above, we gain a real and deeper understanding of what works and why, as well as what has failed to work and why that has happened. This level of intimacy with our data enables us tweak, alter and adapt our evaluation questions to make them more relevant to the reality of our context as well as our changing project needs. We carry out this level of interrogation at all levels of our results – impacts, outcomes and outputs and we do so within an informed political and social context and regularly reviewed assumptions.

- 4. Conducting a “summary evaluation” approach to ongoing learning*

This is not a new method of evaluation! What is implied here is that the preferred and arguably, more useful type of learning is one that brings together the sum of the accumulated evidence of reflection, learning, evolution and adaptation over the life of the project. This then allows for real, “beyond the surface”, useful, non “tick box” evaluative learning throughout the project’s lifespan – learning that can lead to real impact.