



PRACTITIONERS FORUM
ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING AND
MONITORING, EVALUATION & LEARNING

JUNE 5-6, 2018

The Makati Shangri-La Hotel | Philippines



The Asia Foundation

The Australian Embassy - The Asia Foundation Partnership in the Philippines

COALITIONS for **CHANGE**

MEL in Adaptive Programming:

Expanding the State of the Art

The Asia Foundation and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) hosted the Practitioner's Forum on Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning in Adaptive Programming in Manila June 5-6. This gathering brought together more than 50 practitioners and advocates of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) in Adaptive Programs from all over the globe. These practitioners, with experience funding, managing, and implementing adaptive and complex programs, were imbued with purpose. How do programs learn to adapt and adapt to learn? How do programs produce meaningful outcomes in a complex and rapidly changing environment?

The Forum didn't arrive at any answers, nor did it devise new techniques for measuring results. What it did do, innovatively and uniquely, was to identify common issues in Adaptive MEL, and to facilitate knowledge exchange from many of the world's leading thinkers in this space. The Forum analyzed what *can* work in certain situations. And in this way the Forum provided a snapshot of the Adaptive MEL, arguably advancing it.

The Forum highlighted gaps in the traditional M&E approaches for adaptive programs. In complex environments where programs need to respond to change, MEL is no longer just a promising alternative to traditional M&E, but one of the pillars of adaptive programming. Change is constant, and MEL requires day-to-day sensing, probing, and responding. This is the essence of Adaptive MEL: learning informs decision-making at all times. Programs must embrace learning and ensure that learning permeates the system and processes of program management.

The Forum also generated interesting discussions among the participants. For example, participants wondered why we order the acronym [MEL and not MLE](#)? Why does the L come at the end? The challenge is that learning is a proactive sensing function of M and

should not be relegated to *after* E – as in the case of MEL. This implies a passive, episodic, and reflexive process, or makes learning seem like an afterthought.

Another key discussion point noted that it is easy to agree upon the need to learn and adapt. It is more difficult to agree on ‘how’ to adapt. This is especially true in navigating political environments effectively and managing diverse interests and expectations across partnerships. Human agency and strategic relationships are important components in this [process](#).

The Forum highlighted the trap of the so-called “MEL and adaptive programming mystique.” MLE is a process and a means, not an end, and should be grounded in practicality. A compelling and coherent narrative of ‘aid effectiveness’, whether from the perspective of an implementer, a donor, a community, or a community of practice, is still a critical component of any monitoring system. Assembling this narrative requires evidence and voice: compelling stories of transformation, and credible connections through contribution and attribution. Accountability, after all, is non-negotiable.

Learning cultures are essential. The challenge is to build and sustain them.

Culture informs practice. How then do we build and sustain a culture of learning? The Forum brought together practitioners from KOMPAK (Indonesia), Knowledge Sector Initiative (Indonesia), and Governance Reform Facilities (Papua New Guinea) to discuss just this.

As discussed in the Forum, program monitoring is day-to-day and brings learning opportunities, daily, to [program thinking](#). Even in adaptive programs where learning is encouraged and practiced, a primary challenge persists in building the [learning culture](#) – or in most cases, courageously reversing the lack of it. (See also: [Speer Tolovata’s MEL for Local Solutions in Programming in PNG](#))

Why is this so? A powerful reason cited in the Forum was ‘[the people factor](#)’, encompassing mindsets, interests, skills, ways of doing things, and trust issues that hinder the culture of learning to thrive. Another culprit is capacity, foremost a combination of human, technical, organizational, and financial resources. For example, one question that buzzed around the forum was the budget required for adequate MLE support.



Various programs noted spending of 5% and lower, when, ideally, MLE spending would be closer to 20%. Another factor in reversing the lack of learning culture is the appetite among donors and partners for learning and adaptive programming. Demand continues to remain low, even as new forms of accountability have emerged as a result of learning. Is the onus ultimately on the funder of the program to allow for more adaptability?

So how about failure?

How should failure be interpreted and negotiated within the frames of political and social accountability and in the context of problem-driven, politically smart, and opportunity-seizing adaptive programs? How much tolerance can donors and governments exercise for programs that seemingly do not immediately deliver? How far can we let things go, and how can we change? How open and safe is the space to abandon what does not work and pivot to new opportunities and openings? How does a donor justify to its board or taxpayers that it invested in something that didn't work? And how can a logical framework and the process of approvals be treated more adaptably?



Source: Chris Roche, 2018 Practitioners Forum

There are no easy answers to these questions. As Forum participants diagnosed, failure is both a construct and also a condition of adaptive programming. Failure is instructive. What is truly important is to correct course, and to change and to change fast.

How risks, opportunities, and trade-offs are defined, identified, negotiated, and distributed among partners matters in the discourse of adaptive programming. As different projects shared experiences, many identified that implementers need the flexibility to address adversity quickly, and they need to tell a compelling and evidence-based story to make their case.

Building the narratives (and teams) for transformation.

As noted by the Forum, building the team is as important as building the Theory of Change (ToC) and the Theory of Action (ToA). Admittedly complex tools such as these

are only as useful as those who are implementing them are able to inform, digest, and articulate theories in implementation, and to test and adjust program strategy as necessary to deliver outcomes. How do individuals and the whole team understand the program objectives in the ToC and ToA? Are they able to locate their individual and complementary roles to achieve results? As discussed in the Forum, a team needs to have the right skills, mindset and values to breathe life into ToCs and ToAs, which form part of what is called ‘Theories of People’.

The process of creating the ToC needs to be inclusive and drafted through discussion with partners and program staff, an iterative process that clarifies intent, makes sense of change and complexity, and builds confidence in two areas. The first is the set of evaluative or learning questions to front load the [learning agenda](#) of adaptive programs. The second, which is more meaningful to partners and program teams, is what they ‘expect to see’, ‘like to see’, and ‘love to see’ by way of [marking progress](#)—not really the science of indicators and means of verification, but the process of navigating together what seems to be permissible, possible, and probable in delivering desired outcomes.



Source: Ben French, 2018 Practitioners Forum

Drilling down to systems and practices: what did we learn?

If MLE continues to challenge the way we do development, what are the corresponding shifts in systems and practices necessary to support learning solutions and adaptive responses? Beyond the culture of learning, what are the political, institutional, financial, and other tweaks necessary for continued accountability across a changing context?

This question was directed at donors more than implementers, with the conclusion that the response must be comprehensive and address program design, procurement and contracting, finance, progress monitoring and risk management, and quality aid checks.

There is a natural tension, for example, between fixed, contracted services and adaptive program management. How far will donors embrace flexibility? What needs to change in accountability systems? What's the level of comfort? What's really feasible?

For partners, the way forward is to further simplify systems of engagement for learning, with fewer inflexible manuals and less complexity, and greater informed decision-making in all levels of program operations.

There are also a number of initiatives and innovations at the program level that foster learning and adaptation, including the search for the so-called ‘right fit’ [strategy](#) through continuous testing and recalibrating. Another concept is the use of [administrative data](#) as a tool for program design.

Another emerging trend is in the democratization of access to [data and digital tools](#) to support learning and adaptive programming, including the use of open data labs, drones to capture large community data and images used to determine mining coverage, infrastructure photography by citizens to monitor implementation progress, and the use of timeline apps for program management.

Participations at the Forum also observed that sometimes we just don’t know what the best indicators will look like at the start of the project, as they can often be fuzzy and complex. In this case, leading [evaluative questions](#) and the use of community rubrics might be the best approach. The Asia Foundation’s Coalitions for Change program approaches this topic from the perspective of [‘measures that matter’](#), also appreciating that adaptive methodologies are necessary.

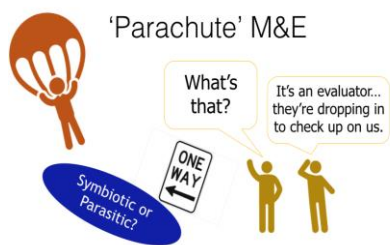
Healthy discomfort remains on the issue of evidence: how much change is ‘enough change’? How ‘good enough’ is enough? How do we [prove](#) what we’ve contributed to an [outcome](#)? What is a compelling story?

New frontiers

The Forum highlighted many emerging and ongoing issues that would benefit from additional scrutiny from the MLE community. Among these are the following:

- ✚ How should management of aid transform itself in light of the promises of learning-induced adaptive programming? Contracting and aid quality checklists, for example, need to be revised to address structures, systems, and practices that reify control rather than flexibility.
- ✚ As programs are socially constructed with inherent layers of power, how do MLE and adaptive programming address or reinforce implicit and explicit power imbalances related to gender, disability, race, class, age or location? How will MLE and adaptive programming promote gender equality and social inclusion?
- ✚ Among the dominant discourses of ‘results-based management’ and ‘thinking and working politically’ is adaptive programming. How does adaptive programming embrace the merits of both while distinguishing itself in theory and practice?

- ✚ Accountability is still framed within the lens of principal-agent relations. What new forms of accountability need to be developed for MLE and adaptive programming?
- ✚ How do we measure 'quality of process' and make sure that learning is inclusive and non-threatening, even as iterative learning and adjustments are inherently political (i.e. donors, governments, partners and communities have vested interests to protect)?
- ✚ How do we get contestability around the significance of a policy change and our contributions to it?
- ✚ What are the ethical parameters for gathering data for MLE and politically smart solutions?



Source: Damien Sweeney, 2018
Practitioners Forum

With luck this Practitioner's Forum might be the final knell of the [parachuted evaluator](#); evaluation as program audit; the consultant who arrives at the end of a project to discover what didn't go well and to report back to a donor. By then it is far too late.