Defining the value added of using Outcome Mapping in complex scenarios

Supporting real-time, results-based learning

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"Outcome Mapping is an approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation that responds to the results agenda through results-based learning instead of technocratic results-based management… Outcome Mapping can no longer be ignored as an important part of practitioners toolkit."

OMideas is an Outcome Mapping Learning Community (OMLC) initiative to generate new knowlegde around the use and development of the OM methodology.

The papers in this series are authored by members of the OMLC, a global community of OM users dedicated to mutual learning and sharing of experiences around OM.

Taking advantage of the growth in organisations and programmes implementing Outcome Mapping, the Outcome Mapping Learning Community commissioned a study to explore to what extent OM was perceived useful for helping programmes that are supporting complex change processes, to become more effective and to meet the learning and information needs of different programme stakeholders.

The study finds evidence that OM can provide programmes with a flexible actor and learning centred planning, monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) approach, that can help them to learn from results within their spheres of influence and to adapt their strategies and plans accordingly. In addition, the study shows that OM can help organisations to become more accountable and adaptive. The study concludes that OM is a PM&E approach that responds to the results agenda through results-based learning instead of technocratic results-based management. However, reaping the benefits of OM requires shifting perceptions of the meaning and value of regular PM&E practice. Instead of relying on an eventual evaluation for deeper learning about programme results, dealing with complexity through OM requires more ongoing or 'real-time' actor-focused and learning-centred PM&E practice involving programme staff and other programme stakeholders.

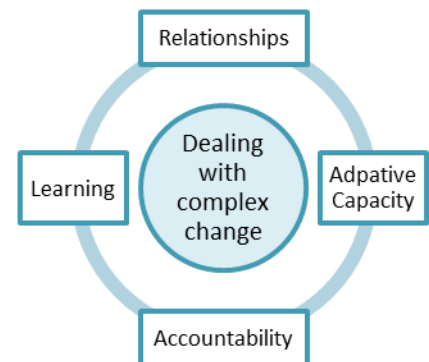This brief summarises the findings from the study. It first explores the

Figure 1: The analytical framework showing the four considerations for dealing with complex change.

usefulness of OM around the following four implications of complexity for PM&E: 1) dealing with multiple actors, 2) learning about development results that cannot be predicted, 3) satisfying different multiple accountability needs and 4) strengthening adaptive capacity in order to remain relevant. It then summarises the main principles of OM and necessary conditions that determine OM's potential for helping organisations to deal with complex change.

The full study can be downloaded from www.outcomemapping.ca.

Why this research?

Outcome Mapping is reaching an important turning point. With an increasing number of OM applications worldwide in multiple sectors, a growing Outcome Mapping Learning Community and an ever increasing number of references to OM in PM&E literature and manuals, OM can no longer be ignored as an important

part of practitioners PM&E toolkit. OM has been particularly attractive for programmes that support processes of social change that are known to be complex (Smith et al, 2012). In such cases, actors in the field are faced by the limited relevance of dominant results-based PM&E approaches that assume linearity, predictability and control (Stern et al, 2012). OM focuses strongly on changes in behaviour or relationships of people or social actors with whom a programme works directly (i.e. outcome level) instead of changes in state such as improved income or increased health at impact level. This is one of the reasons why OM is believed to offer a more complexity and learning oriented approach to PM&E. While there is a growing body of anecdotal evidence about the advantages and challenges associated with OM, systematic research on how and why OM is perceived as useful for strengthening results based management remains limited. The OMLC therefore commissioned a study to explore to what extent OM was perceived as useful for helping programmes that are supporting complex change processes, to become more effective and to meet the learning and information needs of different programme stakeholders. The data reviewed for this research included a web survey with 43 respondents, 15 in-depth interviews and two case studies of OM used in practice.

Q1: To what extent is OM perceived as useful for dealing with multiple actors?

A contributing factor to the complexity of social change processes is that multiple actors need to be involved to tackle the problem at hand. Hence, programmes that support complex change are built around actors that may hold different understandings of the programme's objectives, how to achieve these, and what the roles and responsibilities are of each of these actors (Jones, 2011). It is therefore important for a programme's PM&E system to help clarify expectations, roles and responsibilities of the various programme stakeholders involved and strengthen relationships between them.

Figure 2 shows that a large majority of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that OM has helped them in clarifying the expectations and responsibilities of programme stakeholders and in strengthening trusting relationships. The results from the interviews and case studies and the responses to the open survey ques-

tions allowed us to identify three possible explanations for the positive response rate in the survey:

- Through its concept of 'spheres of influence', OM provides a practical framework that is helpful to develop an actor focused theory of change which is characterised by a specific focus on the roles, responsibilities and expectations of the various programme actors involved in the programme. However, maintaining the clarity obtained through OM about roles, responsibilities and expectations and then meeting them can be a challenge and requires a considerable effort during subsequent monitoring cycles.

- OM's focus on outcomes as changes in the behaviour of the boundary partners was felt to make a lot of sense to people and stimulated conversation and dialogue between programme stakeholders. Furthermore, the diagrammatic representations of actor focused theories of change that visualise relationships were helpful to stimulate conversations among programme actors and also helped programme teams to explain the programme.

- OM, through its potential to stimulate social interaction and dialogue, can contribute to building trust among programme stakeholders.

Figure 2: OM and dealing with multiple actors and relationships (N=43)
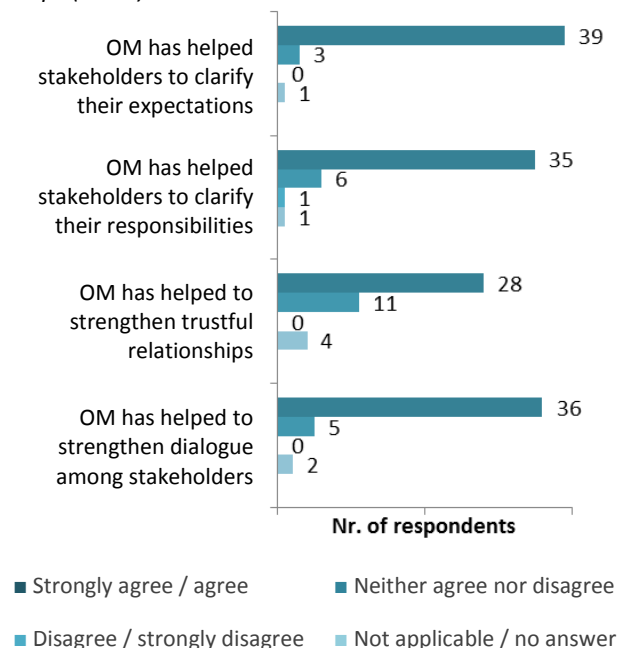
Q2: To what extent is OM perceived to be useful to strengthen learning about a programme's development results?

A second implication of complexity for PM&E is that effective PM&E approaches need to enhance learning. Learning is essential when dealing with complex change because in unpredictable and nonlinear contexts, it is not useful to predict outcomes and then try to control the implementation of predetermined plans to achieve these outcomes (Mara, 2011, p. 328). Instead, it is necessary to receive speedy feedback about a programme's effects in the face of uncertainty in order to learn quickly if a programme is moving in the right direction (Rogers 2008).

Figure 3 shows that respondents to the web survey widely agree with the statement that OM was useful in stimulating learning at output level (37 out of 43 respondents strongly agree or agree) and outcome level (41 out of 43 respondents strongly agree or agree). A somewhat smaller number of respondents found OM useful for learning at impact level with 29 out of 43 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing to this statement. Respondents who gave no answer or who responded 'not applicable' in several cases explained that they did not have enough experience with the programme to have insight in the programme's learning process.

Figure 3: Did OM help stakeholders to learn about the programme's effects? (N=43)
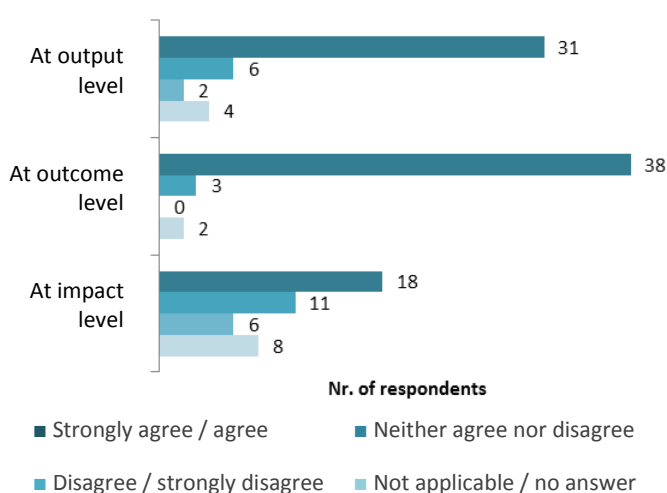
The research identified the following major reasons why OM was perceived helpful for stimulating learning:

- OM opens up a potential result area by focusing PM&E on changes in behaviour or relationships of boundary partners. As these changes are situated outside the sphere of control of a programme implementing team they represent potential programme effects or outcomes. Such outcomes would often be missed before OM was introduced as they would have been considered intangible and too difficult to measure.

- Getting insight in the expected and unexpected outcomes at the level of the boundary partners was shown to be helpful for programme stakeholders to develop a more sophisticated and shared understanding of a programme and its objectives.

- The increased insight in a programme's effects through OM was found to motivate programme staff to become more involved in PM&E but was also found useful for informing the adjustment of programme plans.

- OM offers no guarantee that learning will take place. There is a risk that the initial excitement about the OM framework during the planning stage fizzles out over time and more so if the OM framework is experienced as yet another imposed PM&E approach, or if it is not in tune with donor requirements or if organisational capacity to support implementation is limited.

Q3: To what extent is OM perceived useful to satisfy different accountability needs?

Because of the involvement of many different actors in complex processes of social change, there might be different and not always compatible information needs (James, 2009). Often, donors want the PM&E system to provide information about the changes at the level of ultimate beneficiaries for accountability purposes. Implementing partners or NGOs might want the PM&E system to provide information that helps them to learn about what works and what does not work in order to inform future planning and implementation (James, 2009). Furthermore, forms of downward accountability to beneficiaries (e.g. rights-based approaches) and public accountability towards the wider public are becoming more common.

Figure 4 shows that research respondents perceive OM as a helpful approach to strengthen several dimensions of accountability. A majority of the re-

spondents find OM helpful for satisfying information needs of boundary partners (27 out of 43 respondents) and the information needs of donors (25 respondents). When asked about OM's usefulness to satisfy information needs of the final beneficiaries, there was less agreement. Only 13 respondents strongly agreed or agreed to this statement while 5 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Figure 4: To what extent did OM help strengthen processes of accountability? (n=43)
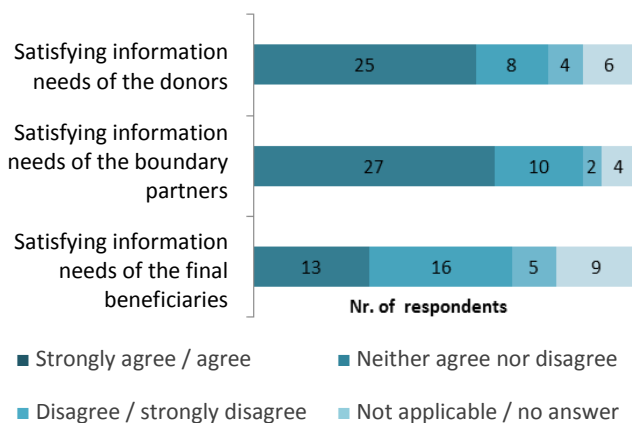
The answers to the open questions in the web survey and the results from the interviews and case studies helped us to explain the trends shown in Figure 4.

- In relation to satisfying upward accountability needs, OM was considered useful in the sense that it helped programmes to enrich their reports to donors. It allowed them to include information about outcomes as changes in the boundary partners. There were also indications that OM was helpful to report better on how outcomes were obtained and how the programme was able to contribute to them. However, monitoring information obtained by OM was not always sufficient to satisfy information needs of donors especially if they required more quantitative information. In such case, OM had to be complemented with other PM&E approaches.

- The fact that OM gives a framework to help clarify roles and expectations of programme stakeholders as well as stimulate the involvement of the boundary partners in the monitoring process was felt by research respondents to contribute to satisfying the information needs of the boundary partners. At the same time, regular

follow up and on-going support for the monitoring process by programme staff is essential for sustaining the involvement of boundary partners.

- There was only limited evidence that OM helped a programme to satisfy downward accountability needs of the final beneficiaries. In those cases where downward accountability was stimulated, other approaches beyond OM were used.

Q4: To what extent is OM perceived useful to strengthen the adaptive capacity of programme stakeholders?

Supporting complex change is a two-way process. That means that any organisation that is supporting complex change processes, will also change (Earl et al., 2001). This is in line with insights of complexity science which suggest that programmes "are involved within a mutually adaptive relationship with their environment" (Mara, 2011, p.327). Being able to change and adapt to the changing context is crucial for organisations or programmes to remain effective and relevant.
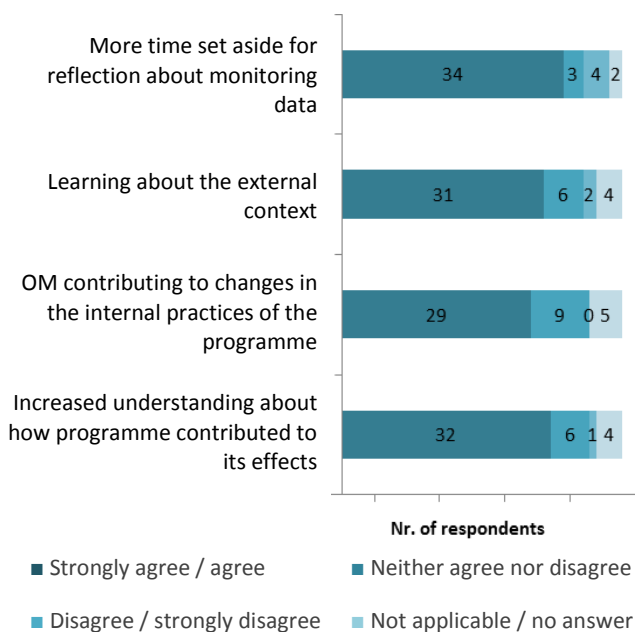
Figure 5 shows that a majority of respondents to the web survey perceive OM as useful for strengthening elements of adaptive capacity of programme stakeholders.

The research allowed us to identify four main reasons that explain the positive response rate shown in figure 5. Firstly, OM was felt to stimulate critical reflection in terms of more frequent reflection meetings and increased quality of the reflection process itself. In addition, OM's contribution to changes in a programme's internal practices was reported by respondents to relate to innovations in PM&E practice through the adoption of OM principles (e.g. stronger focus on learning & capacity development and wider participation in the PM&E process) and tools (e.g. outcome journals as instruments for data collection). Furthermore, OM's added value for helping programmes to learn about the external context was explained by OM's particular focus on effects as changes in the behaviour of boundary partners and its usefulness to help programme stakeholders to discuss and clarify their roles and responsibilities. Finally, the perception that OM helped to increase programme stakeholders' understanding about how the programme contributes to its effects was explained by the fact that

OM contributed to better insights in how the programme was able to influence behaviour change in the boundary partners.

However, from the survey respondents who responded less positively to the adaptive capacity statements and from the results of the interviews and the cases studies it emerged that limited facilitation skills, resources and time to support dialogue and reflection processes remained an important limiting factor. It was not uncommon that strong commitment at the planning stage would fiddle out during the course of the programme resulting in the OM process being mainly in the hands of the ("lonely") PM&E officer. This was compounded in cases where there was rapid turnover of staff and where the OM framework and PM&E system had to be continuously explained during the lifetime of the programme. The perception in some cases that OM based PM&E processes were too involving in terms of meetings and data collection was also mentioned as a contributing factor to this challenge.

Figure 5: How has OM helped to strengthen elements of adaptive capacity? (N=43)

Nr. of respondents

- ■ Strongly agree / agree
- ■ Neither agree nor disagree
- ■ Disagree / strongly disagree
- ■ Not applicable / no answer

Conclusions

The metaphor of the human body helps us to explain some important characteristics of OM and conditions that determine the success and therefore the usefulness of OM for helping organisations to deal with complex change.

Head: Agenda and commitment for OM

Spine: Values and principles of OM

Arms: Concepts, methods, tools of OM

Legs: Support and resources for the implementation of OM

The head represents the agenda for the OM process and relates to the question 'why' you do PM&E. Based on the research data we see that a strong learning agenda is an inherent characteristic of those programmes where OM is found useful for dealing with complex change. This learning agenda was characterised by an explicit aim to learn from change at the level of the boundary partners and a recognition that change at this level represents an important result area to learn from. A strong agenda or mandate for OM is essential as it helps to ensure the necessary resources and time for its implementation. Without such mandate there is a considerable risk that the OM process dies down over time.

The spine represents the values and principles that underpin the OM process such as a strong commitment towards participation of programme stakeholders, collaborative learning and social interaction and dialogue. If OM's underpinning principles and values are not nurtured or supported within a programme, OM implementation will be at risk and might degenerate in a mere administrative reporting system with the PM&E person being the only one running behind the process.

The arms represent the concepts, methods and tools that come with Outcome Mapping. An important added value of OM as evidenced by the majority of research participants is the fact that OM comes with practical tools and concepts (e.g. spheres of influence, boundary partners, progress markers, outcome journals) that allow programmes to translate OM's underlying principles and learning agenda into practice. Limited capacity to customize the OM concepts to suit the particular context and to facilitate the OM process emerged as a considerable challenge in the research. Also the lack of specific skills to facilitate processes of dialogue and reflection were seen as a challenge by various research participants.

The legs represent the actual implementation of the OM process and the support and resources that are available for this. If a programme wants to do justice to the social character of the OM approach then there is need to provide programme actors with the space and the means to meet, reflect and enter into dialogue. This requires commitment, time and resources. The strength of the legs will be determined by the strength of the spine and the head. Weak 'legs' (i.e. lack of time, resources and internal capacity to implement OM) were mentioned as a considerable challenge by various research participants. Addressing this challenge however may require some critical reflection about the head, spine and arms as they determine the strength of the legs and contribute to an enabling environment for OM implementation.

Recommendations for practitioners

i.   **Invest in a learning agenda.** OM provides a framework for regular actor- and learning-centred PM&E practice. But OM will not by itself guarantee that this will happen. A strong learning culture and supportive leadership are vital. Also, regular monitoring and learning about a programme's results requires a considerable effort in terms of time, financial and logistical resources. Training may be an important step, but it is insufficient by itself.

ii. **Towards methodological diversity.** The requirements of donors for particular planning and reporting formats (e.g. logical frameworks) should not stop organisations to experiment with OM at an operational level. A majority of research participants indicated that they used elements of OM to complement their logframe-based PM&E approach.

Recommendations for donors

i.   **Adopt a broader definition of results.** This would mean that donors do not only require information about impact (i.e. changes in state or changes at the level of the final beneficiaries) but also recognize changed behaviours or relations among actors directly influenced by a programme, as valuable programme results. In addition, ask for specific accounts of how lessons learned were used for programme improvement or for planning.

ii. When reviewing funding proposals for programmes that support complex change processes, consider criteria that assess whether the proposals are clear and explicit about the various actors in a programme's sphere of control (i.e. who is responsible for inputs, activities, outputs), spheres of direct influence (direct target groups) and spheres of indirect influence (indirect target groups or/and final beneficiaries). Donors can also show explicit appreciation for programmes that are able to demonstrate a deepened understanding of their theory of change over time, even if this means that the original theory of change has to change.

About the authors

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