

Dealing with complexity through “actor-focused” Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation (PME)

From results-based management towards results-based learning



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The authors take full responsibility for the content of and the arguments made in this paper.

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Huib Huyse supported the Thematic Learning Programme as the second HIVA expert, both in terms of the research methodology (action-research) and the actual content of the programme. He is head of the sustainable development research group at HIVA, and coordinates research on emerging trends in global development, and studies various aspects of the work of development actors, including M&E, capacity development, civil society, and education and development.

Eugenia Boutylkova, also a convenor in this Programme, participated in facilitating learning activities, coaching organisations and coordinating the PME of the programme. She is captivated by the simple complexity of PME and the ways in which this can be used to improve the quality of development programmes and interventions and truly learn. Other interests include human rights, democratic governance and migration & development.

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List of Acronyms

AR	Action Research
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CIKOD	Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development
CSI	Client Satisfaction Instruments
CSO	Civil Society Organization
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
FMO	Farmers' Marketing Organisations
HIVA	The Research Institute for Work and Society
LFTW	Light For The World
MSC	Most Significant Change
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OM	Outcome Mapping
PME	Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
PMEL	Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
PSO	PSO Capacity Building in Developing Countries
TLP	Thematic Learning Program
VECO	Vredeseilanden
WCH	WarChild Holland

1. Introduction

This paper reports the results of a collaborative action-research process (2010-2012) in which 10 development organisations (nine Dutch and one Belgian), together with their Southern partners, explored if and how a variety of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) approaches and methods helped them deal with processes of complex change. These approaches include Outcome Mapping (OM), Most Significant Change (MSC), Sensemaker, client-satisfaction instruments, personal-goal exercises, outcome studies, and scorecards.

The study has been supported by PSO, an association of Dutch development organisations that supports capacity-development processes. The Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA) at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) provided methodological support.

The collaborative-action research took place on two interconnected levels. At the first level, individual organisations engaged in their own action-research processes in order to address their organisation-specific PME challenges. At a collective level, we wanted to draw lessons from across the individual cases. The overall aim was to find out if and how the various PME approaches piloted in the cases had helped the organisations and their partners to deal with complex change processes. We tried to answer this question by exploring how the PME approaches assisted the pilot cases to deal with the following four implications of PME in complexity: 1) dealing with multiple relations and perspectives; 2) learn about the results of the programme; 3) strengthen adaptive capacity; and 4) satisfy different accountability needs. These four questions constitute the main analytic framework of the action research.



A PME approach in this paper refers to the PME methods, tools and concepts and the way they are implemented within a specific context of a programme or organisation. A PME approach also encompasses the underlying values, principles and agenda that come with its methods, tools and concepts. **A PME system** refers to the way that PME approaches and PME related activities are practically organised, interlinked and implemented within a specific context of a programme or organisation.

Part of the uniqueness of this paper stems from the fact that it is based on the “real life” experiences of the ten pilot cases, where the participants took charge of their own individual action-research processes with the aim of strengthening their PME practice. The results presented in this article are based on an analysis across the 10 cases. It is the result of close collaboration with representatives of the different cases through various rounds of revision. A group of external advisors also gave input in the cross case analysis. Extracts of the different cases are given throughout the results chapter to illustrate arguments made. More detailed information about each case can be found in the individual case reports, which are available at:

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



The paper is structured as follows:

Chapter two positions this paper within the current PME debate and provides a theoretical underpinning to the study.

Chapter three describes the methodology of the collaborative-action research and gives an overview of the cases involved and research questions explored in the study.

Chapter four presents the results of the study. This chapter is structured according to the four collective research questions. It explores how the various PME approaches piloted across the 10 cases have helped to strengthen:

1. Relationships, roles and responsibilities
2. Learning
3. Adaptive capacity
4. Accountability

Chapter five summarises the main PME practice conclusions and recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers to help organisations and programmes to deal with processes of complex change.

2. Setting the Scene

2.1 Positioning this paper in the current PME debate

A number of recent trends in international development have contributed to raising PME on development organisations' agenda.

First, over the last decade, there has been a growing international call for results-based management, whereby development actors are asked to be accountable for and demonstrate achievement of "measurable" results (Paris Declaration, 2005, Accra Agenda for Action, 2008 and High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, 2011, Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness in Istanbul, 2011). Many organisations try to strengthen their PME systems in response to this call.

Second, increasing calls for local ownership and leadership and donor harmonisation (ibid) have contributed to more indirect modes of aid delivery, resulting in long implementation chains, partnerships with governments and civil society, and bottom-up approaches (Stern et al, 2012). These developments, whereby local actors take responsibility for their own development and where donor organisations have less control over the achievement of results, have created specific challenges for PME that are often very context-specific.

Third, after more than two decades of implementing a results agenda, success stories remain limited. Development actors continue to face problems in implementing results-based management approaches in a way that contributes to improved analysis, planning and decision-making. Instead, they are often mechanically used for accountability and control purposes (Vähämäki et al, 2011). The notion that development is something that can

be technically managed and controlled seems to continue to prevail in many organisations. A growing number of organisations are now looking for PME approaches that can help them to advance the analytic and responsive-to-change notions of results-based management within their programmes, however.

Fourth, the need to demonstrate results can lead to risk-averse behaviour and focus on results that are more tangible and easy to measure. Consequently, organisations that work towards less tangible change, such as gender equality, governance, empowerment, and civil society capacity development, find themselves struggling to measure results using established monitoring and evaluation tools (Stern et al. 2012). This challenge is well illustrated by former USAID president Andrew Natsios (2010), who notes that: "... those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable." In response, organisations dealing with more complex transformational change are looking for complimentary PME approaches that can help them to plan, monitor, and learn from results that are less easy to measure.

Fifth, results-based management can be approached from different theoretical perspectives. The most dominant is often referred to as a scientific or positivist worldview, which assumes that change occurs in a linear fashion, with causal relations between inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts that can be known. Associated PME approaches rely on solid theories of change that are ideally developed through empirically testing hypotheses for change. Examples include logical frameworks, monitoring through

SMART indicators, theory-based evaluations, and impact evaluations with experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Influential proponents of experimental designs for impact evaluation include the poverty action lab J-PAL, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3IE), and the Evaluation Gap Working Group, who authored the “When Will We Ever Learn” report.

Results-based management can also be approached from a more complexity-oriented theoretical perspective, however. Such a perspective is rather critical of the scientific approach, especially when confronted with complex processes of social change (Stern et al, 2012; Mowles, 2010; Hummelbrunner, 2010; Batliwala & Pitman, 2010; Ramalingam, 2008; Eyben, 2006). A complexity perspective accepts that in complex change processes, the relation between cause and effect is rather unpredictable, and unexpected results often occur. Such PME approaches take into account perceptions as much as they do objectively observed and measured changes in state. Examples include OM (Earl et al, 2001) which focuses on assessing behaviour change, MSC (MSC) (Davies et al, 2005) and utilisation-focused and developmental evaluation as proposed by Michael Quinn Patton (2008, 2011).

This paper underscores the importance of working towards results, and more widely, of strengthening results-based thinking. The findings of the action research do, however, confirm the problems with results-based management approaches that follow a logic of linearity, predictability and control when dealing with complex social-change processes. Linear planning models with detailed operational plans over several years and uniform indicators are less useful in complex change contexts. Instead, we seek to explore

if and how PME approaches that draw on a complexity perspective can help organisations and programmes dealing with complex processes of social change to strengthen learning about the results they obtain, and to improve planning and decision-making. We will start this exploration by explaining our understanding of complex change and its implications for PME.

2.2. Unpacking complex change

In this section we explain our understanding of complexity in the context of this study. We do this by describing two characteristics of complex change that we identified from the literature and our practice as having important implications for PME practice. These characteristics are “emergence” and the occurrence of “multiple actors, perspectives & relationships”.

Emergence

Emergence is an important feature of complex change. Change is emergent when the relationship between cause and effect within the change process is not linear (an effect is not necessarily proportional to the cause) or predictable. Mowles (2010) draws on insights from mathematical modelling of complex social phenomena (Hedström 2005) and theories of complex responsive processes (Stacey 2007) to explain that in social interaction, the effect of what someone does will be determined by the history of, context surrounding, and power within a particular setting. This is used to explain how seemingly small differences between locally interacting agents can have unpredictably large population-wide effects and local interaction can shape larger social patterns. This also helps to explain why similar activities (causes) can sometimes have

dramatically different effects. Eyben (2006) refers to the possibility of “butterfly” actions having a major effect, while major actions can have very little effect on continuously changing complex social systems. Change is furthermore influenced by a wide variety of contextual factors beyond the control of any intervention (Forss & Shwartz 2011).

Multiple actors, perspectives and relationships

The emergent character of complex change is often compounded by the influence of many different actors attempting to deal with social issues. This is unavoidable: no single actor or organisation has the capacity to solve complex problems (Jones, 2011). In addition, these actors often have different understandings of and perspectives on the same issue. What is a problem for one may not be a problem for someone else; or the problem might be understood in different ways. Also, different forms of interactions can exist between the actors involved in a social-change process. Collaboration, negotiation, dialogue, influencing, lobbying and conflict are just a few examples of such interactions. Guijt (2008) refers to “messy partnerships” to describe this interplay of different actors. A messy partnership is a convergence of different actors for concerted action driven by a common overarching vision and a perception of value added by collaboration. The various differences that can exist between the actors – such as governance structure, culture, mandate, capacities, priorities and commitment to collective efforts – are the basis of this messiness (Guijt, 2008).

2.3. Implications of complexity for PME

The implications of “complexity” for PME of development programmes have been elaborately discussed in recent conferences (e.g., Evaluation Revisited conference in the Netherlands, 2010), articles (Jones 2011; Ramalingam et al 2008, Rogers 2008); and books (Forss et al 2011; Patton 2011; Williams & Imam 2007; Eyben 2006). This increased attention to complexity in relation to PME stems from a growing recognition that many development interventions are promoting change processes that are not easily managed by certain results-based management tools that follow a logic of linearity, predictability, and control.

Learning from unexpected and intangible results

Learning is essential for PME when dealing with emergence because in unpredictable and nonlinear contexts, detailed long-term planning before implementation (with programme plans based on a linear link between activities-outputs-outcomes-impact with SMART indicators) is rather difficult. The outcomes or indicators predetermined during the programme planning phase may not be useful as targets to measure success or failure in complex contexts. Instead, they may provide us with pointers that can help us learn how we are doing in our programmes or projects and to change course if necessary (Ortiz, 2003).

Our challenge is to organise PME approaches in such a way that they encourage these learning processes. Development organisations face a challenging paradox. On the one hand, they set themselves ambitious poverty-reduction objectives which unavoidably come with all the risks, uncertainty and conflicts associated with such high-level objectives (Eyben, 2006); on the other hand, development organisations

are often pressured by a results-based agenda to claim that their solutions are certain and can be achieved without risk of failure. Such a paradox can lead to a fear of failure, which in turn can deprive organisations of the ability to learn and understand through experimentation (Snowden 2007). Furthermore, there are usually several causes for any observed change (Forss & Shwartz 2011), making it rather hard to attribute such change to specific programme activities (Earl & Carden, 2003)

Opening up to unexpected or intangible aspects of results, context or relationships in situations involving complex human interaction can help to break this paradox (Guijt, 2008 and Mowles, 2010). This is because it allows people to move away from what Mowles (ibid) calls a dualistic way of thinking characterised by a discourse of “how can we stop doing what is wrong and start doing what is right”, “were objectives achieved or not achieved?” and “were projects on target or not?” Such dualistic thinking, which is often stimulated by traditional programme-management approaches that subscribe to a technical and rational discourse, may contribute to leaving out or neglecting contestability, conflict, power and values. This can “tilt power relationships in favour of the donors and managers who sit at a distance from the work” (Mowles, 2010, p767). Within such dualistic lines of thinking, unpredictability and nonlinearity are seen as problematic, and may need to be avoided or contained as much as possible.

Learning to adapt

Supporting complex change is a two-way process. That means that any organisation that is supporting social-change processes will itself also change (Earl et al., 2001). Adaptability to changing contexts is crucial if organisations or programmes are to remain

effective and relevant, and survive. The following four elements of the core capability “to adapt and self-renew” from the ECDPM five core capability framework (5-C model) helps to explain what is meant by adaptive capacity: 1) to improve individual and organisational learning; 2) to foster internal dialogue; 3) to reposition and reconfigure the organisation; 4) to incorporate new ideas; and 5) to map out a path for growth (Baser & Morgan, 2008). While many organisations look to PME to strengthen their adaptive capacity, reality teaches that our PME practice often doesn’t live up to that task. Even organisations that are able to attain the results they set out to achieve risk neglecting their adaptive capacity in the process of being busy.

In such cases it is difficult to change deeply engrained behavioural patterns in organisations, such as a lack of time for reflection (Smit, 2007, Britton, 2007, Roper et al, 2003, Fisher, 2010).

Dealing with multiple actors, perspectives and relationships

The multiple actors, relationships and perspectives involved in complex-change processes mean that the achievement and sustainability of programme results often depend on changes in behaviour or practices by multiple intermediate actors who in turn interact (directly or indirectly) with programme beneficiaries. As a result, a programme’s resources and efforts move through a chain or network of intermediate actors before an eventual effect may be felt by the target group.

This also means that the influence of a distant donor organisation or international NGO is rather limited, and depends on the actions of these intermediate actors (Earl & Carden, 2010). Simple logic models for PME that assume a

linear cause-effect relation through a results chain (input-output-outcome-impact) face some challenges in multi-actor settings:

1. Abstracted summaries of programme interventions based on linear results chains (as for example in a logical framework) will provide little information about the “messy” day-to-day social interaction of people trying to work with others “which provides the data from which theories about the world emerge” (Mowles 2010, p765). While these abstracted summaries may be attractive to donors and managers as they provide comprehensive and incontestable accounts of what needs to be done and what needs to be achieved, they may hinder the “emergence of novelty” by moving attention away from local interactions in the field. This can lead programme staff to conform to expectations and predictions instead of engaging in discussion and debate, and being surprised by the unexpected (Mowles, 2010; Guijt 2008).
2. It is often difficult to agree on the meaning of activities, outputs, outcomes and impact because “these are not naturally occurring divisions in time and the choice of which category to use to describe an event is very dependent on where the observer is. Your Output might be my Input. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that often it is not very clear where the boundaries of ‘the project’ are” (Davies, 2009, p.8). In addition, actors tend to be abstracted in logical frameworks (Crawford et al, 2005). As a result, the responsibilities and roles of or expectations for different actors within a programme are often unclear.
3. While multiple events can be described at each level of the results chain, it doesn’t describe how events at any one level

interact with each other or with the multiple events on adjacent levels (Davies, 2009, p.8).

4. While linear planning models are only theories describing what people think might happen, these plans are often rigidly followed, as if they were a contract (Guijt, 2010). Changing a plan might be even more difficult when constructed with the participation of many different stakeholders (Bakewell and Garbut, 2005).

In view of the above-mentioned challenges associated with conventional linear PME approaches, development programmes may need to invest in alternative or complementary PME approaches that do not abstract the actors involved in the programme, but rather focus on clarifying and strengthening relationships between these actors.

Dealing with different accountability needs

The existence of multiple programme actors and relationships as discussed above also comes with multiple accountability needs. Donors often want the PME system to provide information about changes at the beneficiaries’ level, for accountability purposes. It is not surprising that this kind of upward accountability is therefore often made a priority, as it is a condition for receiving funding. The survival of many organisations depends on this type of accountability. A more dynamic understanding of accountability goes beyond upward accountability, however, and entails a wider set of stakeholders (Whitty 2008). Forms of downward accountability to beneficiaries (i.e., rights-based approaches) and public accountability towards the wider public are becoming more common. Also, “taking accountability for oneself” can be another meaning of accountability in which

case, accountability is about identity and commitment to one's ideas and strategies (Guijt, 2010). Eyben (2006) refers to Lindblom (1990) to explain that processes of accountability can be strengthened through investing in relationships and fostering mutual responsibility derived from shared learning through trial and error. This is especially relevant in complex contexts as such focus can encourage different actors "to work with each other through mutual communication of their particular knowledge of the system or the problem at hand" (ibid). Eyben (2006) also warns of possible unequal power relations between the different actors in development programmes; in such cases, partners and donors "must see mutual responsibility as an aspiration to aim for, rather than something that is easily achievable" (ibid, p56).

A wider understanding of accountability as described above helps us to recognise the existence of different actors' different and not always compatible information needs in complex social-change processes (James, 2009). Besides donors' upward accountability needs, implementing partners or NGOs might want the PME 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. Furthermore, beneficiaries might have an interest in PME information to make and keep the programme or project accountable to their needs. Some compromise will be needed between these various information needs (ibid) when developing a PME system. The information needed, and its projected use, will determine which approaches and tools are most suitable within a PME system for planning, data collection, data analysis and honest reporting (Simister and Smit, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1 Exploring PME practice through collaborative-action research

In this section we describe the research methodology that was used to explore the various PME approaches piloted in this study. We first explain the choice for a collaborative-action research approach. We then describe the different steps of the research. We also highlight how we addressed issues of validity and ethics, and some of the challenges we faced.

3.1.1 Why collaborative-action research?

A collaborative-action research design was chosen as a methodological framework for exploring the PME approaches piloted by the different organisations involved in this study. The following features typical of action research as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) made such design particularly attractive:

- “Action research (AR) is NOT research done on other people. Action research is research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others”.
- “The action research process is characterised by a spiral process of planning – acting – observing – and reflecting”. Such spiral process allowed organisations to try out specific PME approaches, and adjust how they were implemented according to lessons learned along the way.
- “Action Research is not simply problem solving. It is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the world by changing it and learning how to improve it from the effects of the changes made”.

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- “Action Research is not usual day to day practice. Action Research is more systematic and collaborative in collecting evidence on which to base rigorous group reflection”. Action research allowed programme staff and their partners to move out of their “to do” mode and regularly reflect on their practice. The collaborative aspect of the action research was characterised by regular collective learning moments, during which participating organisations shared the lessons learnt from their respective research processes.

3.1.2 Outline of the action research process

Figure 1 describes the steps undertaken during the action-research process. During the first step, begun in early 2010, each participating organisation went through a process of clarifying their respective research questions based on the PME challenges they faced. Each organisation then developed its own research plan narrating the type of data they were going to collect about their PME pilot, how they were going to reflect on these data, and who

was going to be involved in data collection and reflection. The organisational research plans were developed in collaboration with the action-research coordinators in such a way that they would help the organisations to answer not only their own organisational research questions but also the collective research questions.

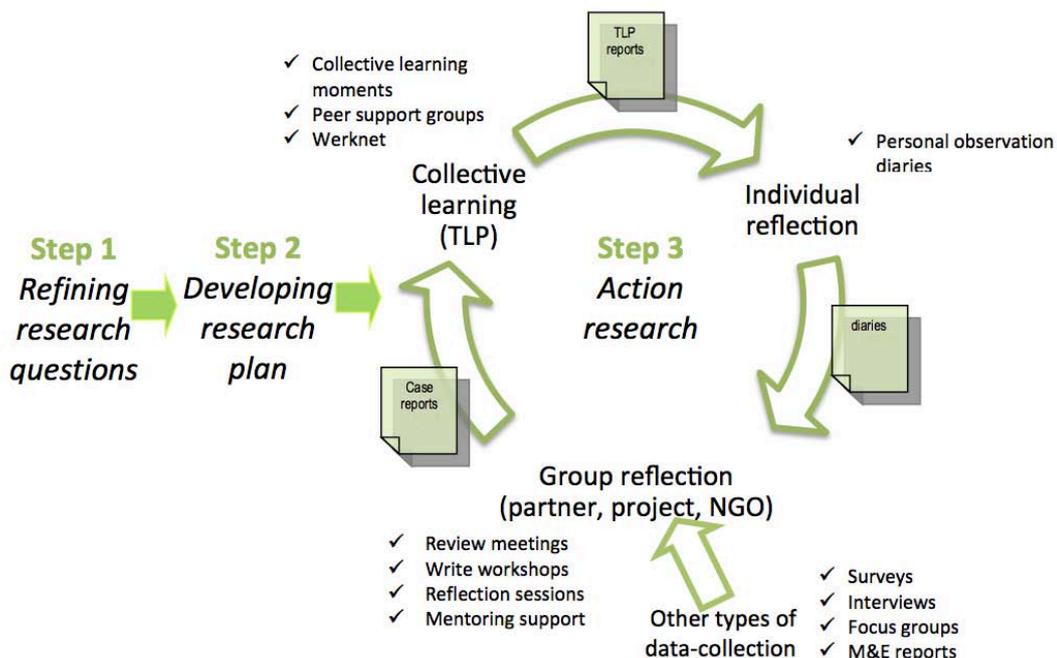
Most organisations were able to start their first action research cycle by the end of 2010 and continued until mid-2012. During the action research cycles, data collection and reflection on the data occurred at three levels: 1) at individual level, mainly involving the coordinators of the respective cases; 2) at organisational level, involving different members of staff

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 Meaning drawn from these outputs was negotiated and further deepened through regular feedback between the cases and the action-research coordinators.

and partners; and 3) at collective level, among representatives of the various cases at collective learning meetings facilitated by PSO and HIVA to exchange experiences from the different action-research cases and reflect on organisational and collective research questions.

The different levels of reflection contributed different action-research outputs, including personal diaries, case reports, and minutes of the collective learning meetings. Meaning drawn from these outputs was negotiated and further deepened through regular feedback between the cases and the action-research coordinators. Research outputs from the cases and collective learning in turn informed the cross-case analysis presented in this paper.

Figure 1: Overview of the collaborative action-research process



3.1.3 Limitations of the study (validity, ethical and practical issues)

We accept that the action-research approach used in this study is not a value-free research process in which the researchers behave as expert independent observers. Instead, in line with the definition of action research by Reason and Bradbury (2001), the research has brought together action and reflection, theory and practice, in collaboration with various stakeholders in order to explore practical solutions towards improved PME practice. Instead of being worried about objectivity, distance, and controls, as in conventional research, as action researchers we worry about “relevance, social change, and validity tested in action by the most at-risk stakeholders.” (M. Brydon-Miller et al. 2003, p25). Below we describe how we dealt with issues of validity and ethics. We also highlight some of the practical challenges that we faced during the action research.

We tried to strengthen the research results’ validity in the following ways:

- Continuous critical reflection on our role as researchers within the research process and the processes under research.
- Openness about our own motives as action researchers during the research, and presenting them for negotiation and reflection with stakeholders involved in the process.
- Negotiation of meaning and interpretation in collaboration with stakeholders involved in the research process.
- An audit trail with records of what happened was kept up to date (see attachment 1).

- Triangulation of results on the basis of different information sources. This was possible because of the multiple data-collection methods that were used.

Ethical issues were addressed as follows:

- Being open and honest about what would happen to the research data.
- The research participants were given the opportunity to read the cross-case analysis and make amendments if they wished, and gave permission for elements of their case reports to be included in the cross-case analysis report.
- No reference was made of specific individuals except after obtaining permission from those individuals, who were given the opportunity to read, and possibly amend, the information.
- Organisations determine if their case reports can be made fully public.

Some practical challenges:

- Several Dutch NGOs were affected by large cuts in funding from the Dutch government (up to almost 50% in one case) during the action-research process (2010–2012). Together with on-going doubts about political support for NGO funding and the anticipation of further funding cuts, this contributed to institutional insecurity within several of the participating organisations and strained relationships with their Southern partners. This was especially tangible in terms of personnel turnover, continuous changes in organisational strategies, and the sudden termination of some of partnerships with longstanding Southern partners.

- The three-year research period was rather short. Organisations needed considerable time to develop and introduce their PME approaches, and only managed to implement one or two monitoring cycles during the research.
- Taking time to reflect on the results of their PME approach (i.e., the research component of the action research) was a considerable challenge for a majority of cases. Involving partner organisations in this reflection was also challenging.

Expanding the results of the action research may not be easy in cases where the PME pilot was not widely anchored in the organisations but rather seen as an interesting side project.

3.2 Overview of the cases participating in the action research

3.2.1 Rationale for participating in the action research

Participating organisations saw this action research as an opportunity to address some pertinent challenges in their PME practice. Each organisation translated these challenges into specific organisational research questions which they explored during the action research. Table 1 gives an overview of the organisations that participated in the action research and the PME challenges they sought to address. The various PME approaches that were piloted by the organisations to address their challenges are also highlighted in the table.

The PME challenges shown in Table 1 are well in line with those referred to in section 2.3 on “implications and challenges of complexity for PME”. Problems related to learning, showing intangible results, strengthening relationships, satisfying accountability requirements, and stimulating ownership of PME activities form a golden thread across the various organisations. Also, the wide range of PME challenges that motivated the organisations to take part in the action research illustrates the ambitious and varied expectations we often have of PME.

FOOTNOTES FOR FACING TABLE

1. ICCO and its partners established an online client satisfaction community: <http://www.clientsatisfactioninstruments.org/>.
2. War Child Holland also uses other participatory PME tools which are integrated in their life-skills programme (“DEAL”) such as quizzes and impact maps (www.warchildlearning.org). In the context of this paper we focus on the use of Personal-goal exercises and module evaluations, as these were found most useful for learning from the changes experienced by the workshop participants and the effectiveness of the workshop modules.
3. Outcome studies were mainly carried out by external consultants and involved survey techniques (e.g., multi-poverty index, gender parity index), community workshops to determine social capital scores, and the use of scorecards to score beneficiaries’ satisfaction with the services provided by partner organisations in terms of quality of education or participation of parents or other community actors. Scorecards especially were perceived as very useful by the partner organisations, as the information helped to inform action plans.

Table 1: Overview of action research cases

Cases	PME challenges to be addressed in the action research	PME approach piloted
Cordaid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning about the results of working with informal networks of women's movements that organise themselves in communities of change. 	MSC and OM
Light for the World	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involving local partners in the development and implementation of the PME system. Strengthening the capacity of local partners through PME. Stimulating learning about programme results at partner level and at Light for the World level. 	OM
ETC COMPAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring unexpected results. Learning about project effect at beneficiary level. Ensuring ownership of the results by the beneficiaries. 	MSC
ICCO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening local partners' downward accountability towards their clients. Making PME more actor-oriented. 	Client-satisfaction instruments ¹
MCNV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase understanding of roles and responsibilities of local actors involved in the programme. Using monitoring information for evidence-based decision making at different levels in the programme. Strengthening ownership of PME activities by the local partners. 	OM
Oxfam Novib	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making visible and learning from "behavioural and cultural" change related to gender justice. 	MSC
STRO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn about the more intangible changes to local partners' capacity and communities' social and economic conditions. Monitoring changes in behaviour. Widening local participation in PME. Becoming more adaptable to dynamic complexities of the local context. 	OM
VECO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring the degree of inclusiveness of the various actors involved in the agricultural value chains that VECO supports. 	Sensemaker
War Child Holland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring changes in psychosocial wellbeing of children participating in War Child Holland's war child's life skills workshops in a child-friendly and participatory way. Monitoring appreciation among the workshop participants and assess their main lessons learned. Learning by War Child field staff and partners from monitoring information. 	Participatory M&E tools (e.g., personal-goal exercises using participant-led indicators of success and participatory workshop module evaluations) ²
Woord & Daad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening local partners' ownership of the PMEL (planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning) activities designed for the alliance supported by Woord & Daad. Preparing local partners to approach institutional donors. 	Score cards used in outcome studies ³

3.2.2 Focusing PME on the programme actors

A common characteristic of the PME approaches piloted in this action research is their focus on specific actors whom the programmes are trying to influence, directly or indirectly. Figure 2 illustrates how the different PME approaches focus on programme actors who can be situated at different levels along the different spheres of influence of a programme. Among cases that used OM, the PME focus was mainly directed towards intermediate local actors. Personal goal exercises, workshop module evaluations, and scorecards were found to direct the PME focus towards programme beneficiaries. MSC, client-satisfaction instruments, and Sensemaker were used to monitor change, both at the level of intermediate local actors and final beneficiaries.

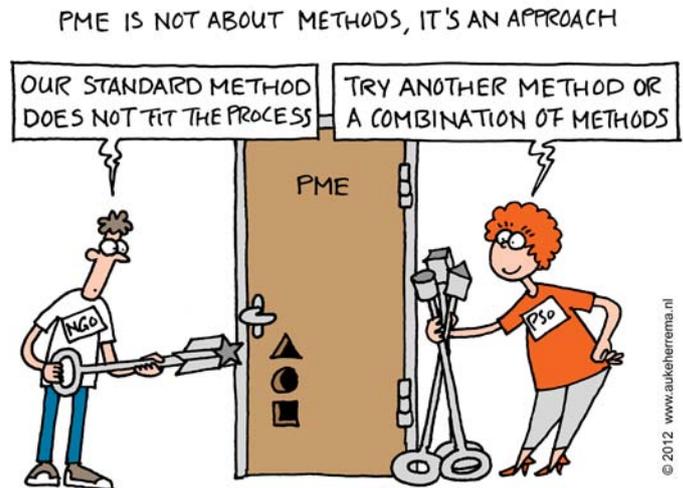


Figure 2: Visualisation of actor focus of the PME approaches piloted in the action research

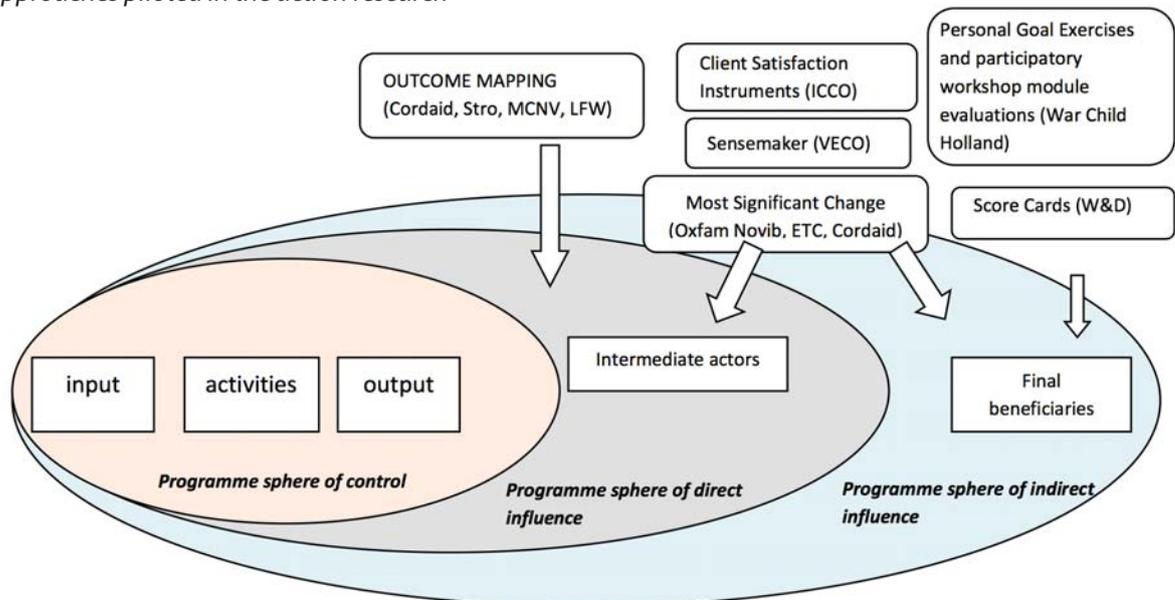


Table 2 below summarises the specific actor focus of each PME approach in the various cases.

PME Approach/ PME Tool	Actor Focus
OM (Light for the World, STRO, MCNV, Cordaid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial planning and on-going monitoring is focused on changes in behaviour and relationships of intermediate local actors who are supported by the programme and whose actions are believed to contribute towards changes at the level of final beneficiaries.
MSC (Oxfam Novib, ETC Compass, Cordaid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representatives from target groups are asked about any significant changes that they experienced as a result of the programme. The type of target groups involved depends on the information needs. (e.g., final beneficiaries and /or members from local partner organisations)
Client-satisfaction instruments (ICCO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clients (i.e., recipients of services) are given an opportunity to provide direct feedback about their satisfaction with the services received. Clients can be the final programme beneficiaries (e.g., hospital patients giving feedback through client satisfaction surveys) or could be the staff within a local partner organisation (e.g., hospital staff giving feedback towards management through consumer panels). Annex 5 shows an extract from a client satisfaction instrument.
Score Cards (Woord & Daad)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Score Cards are used to monitor outcomes related to quality of service delivery and participation. They are used in evaluation sessions with groups of education staff in the case of quality of education score cards or groups of parents and other community actors in the case of participation score cards.
Sensemaker (VECO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target groups are given an opportunity to share their perception about a certain issue related to the programme objective through a short story (micro narrative) and analyse their story according to some predetermined criteria. In the case of VECO, target groups are actors of agricultural value chains which include intermediate organisations such as local NGOs and companies and the final beneficiaries which are the family farmers.
Participatory M&E tools, e.g., personal-goal exercises and workshop module evaluations (War Child Holland)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through this tool, youth participating in War Child Holland's life skills workshops were directly involved in setting their own change objective and monitoring their progress in achieving this objective as well as in providing feedback on each module and the entire intervention. In addition, the personal goal setting was also used for setting professional / capacity building goals for implementers of the intervention (both partner and WCH staff)

From this point onwards we will refer to the PME approaches piloted in the various cases as “actor-focused” PME approaches. We are aware that the term “actor-focused” may be contested. In the literature they are more commonly referred to as participatory PME approaches. We prefer to use “actor-focused” because it captures better their specific added value of zooming in on specific actors whom a programme is trying to influence directly or indirectly.

While these actors may participate to various degrees in the PME process, the actor-focused PME approach directs programme staff attention towards the changes in their target groups. As we will see in this paper, this provides opportunities for dialogue, relation-building, and learning.

We identified the main characteristics of an actor-focused PME approach as follows:

1. A key characteristic of an actor-focused PME approach is that it does not focus on the “hoped-for changes in state” (e.g., changes in income levels, agricultural production or health for example). Instead focus will be more on what people do (e.g., behaviour, practices, relationships) in order to contribute to the hoped for changes in state and/or people’s perceptions about the progress towards hoped for changes of state.
2. Programme staff and the actors whom the programme is trying to influence directly or indirectly are actively involved in the collection and/or use of monitoring information.

3.3 Collective Research questions

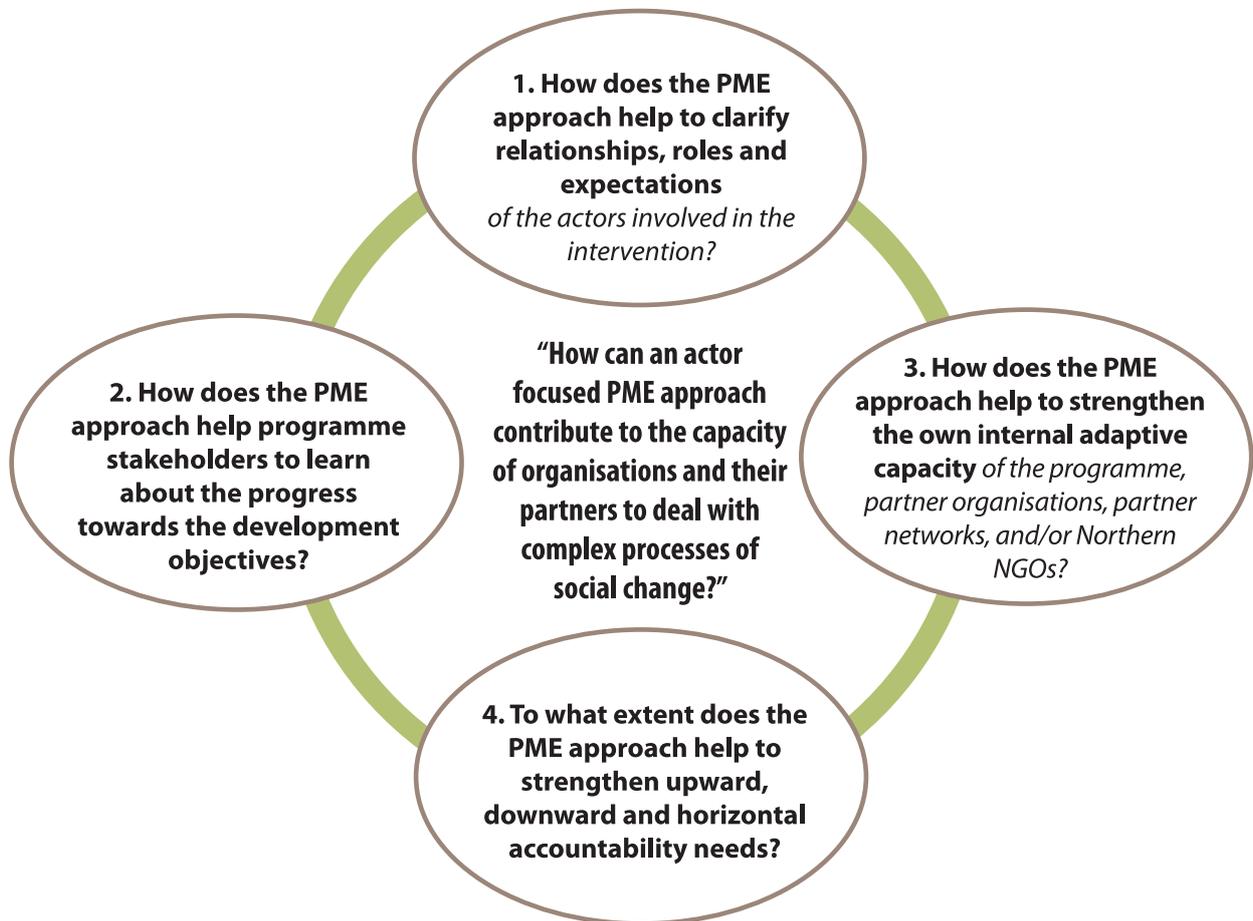
At a collective level (i.e., across the individual research cases) the action research seeks to gain practical insight into how different PME approaches can help organisations deal with complex social-change processes. For that purpose, a set of collective research questions was developed (see figure 3 below).

We used these collective research questions as an analytical framework that helped us to draw lessons from across the research subjects about the extent to which the piloted PME approaches helped them deal with complex social-change processes. The collective research questions were inspired by the participating organisations’ research questions as well as a literature review (Van Ongevalle and Huyse 2010) developed during the preparatory phase of the action research. Some elements of this literature review are summarised in chapter 2 of this paper. The collective questions were also reframed several times during the course of the action research based on insights emerging from the study and negotiation between the participating organisations and the research coordinators.⁴

Eventually, one overall research question and four research sub-questions were formulated. The sub-questions are directly related to the four implications of complex change for PME as identified from the literature and insights emerging during the action research as described in section 2.3, i.e., dealing with relationships, the importance of learning, being adaptive, and satisfying multiple accountability needs.

4. The process of reframing the collective research questions during the action research is described in a learning brief about the lessons learned from setting up collaborative-action research in the context of this study (Maarse 2011). Available at: <http://www.pso.nl/files/Learning%20brief%201%20TLP%20PME.pdf>.

Figure 3: *Collective research questions*



4. Action research results

In this chapter we present the main insights that emerged from an analysis across the ten cases. The four collective sub-research questions outlined above were used as an analytic framework for this cross-case analysis. In four separate sections we explore how the PME approaches piloted in the various cases have helped to: 1) clarify relationships, roles, and expectations; 2) promote learning; 3) strengthen adaptive capacity; and 4) satisfy accountability requirements.

Throughout the text we illustrate the results with extracts from the different case reports. Readers who want more detailed information about individual cases can access the case reports online:

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



4.1 Dealing with multiple actors, perspectives and relationships



In this section we explore to what extent the PME approaches that were piloted by the various programmes were helpful in dealing with multiple actors, perspectives, and relationships. We explore the potential of the various actor-focused PME approaches to help clarify programme actors' roles and expectations, to develop flexible theories of change, and to promote trustful relationships. We also highlight some of the challenges that cases experienced in implementing these approaches.

4.1.1 Clarifying roles, expectations and relations

Across the study, we observed that the use of actor-focused PME approaches has the potential to help programmes go beyond the monitoring of programme activities and to clarify and consider different programme stakeholders' roles and expectations. Textbox 2 illustrates how the use of client satisfaction instruments (ICCO), and personal goal exercises and participatory workshop module evaluations (War Child Holland) encouraged programme staff to reflect on their programme activities in function of the expectations and feedback of their target groups, something that was not done before using these PME approaches.

TEXTBOX 2:

Keeping the pulse of beneficiaries' expectations using client-satisfaction instruments and personal-goal exercises.

In ICCO's partner networks in Ethiopia and Malawi the use of **client-satisfaction instruments** helped partner organisations focus on the rights and expectations of their "clients" (hospital patients and members of farmers' cooperatives, respectively). This required a shift in mentality, as illustrated by the following quotes from participants at a client satisfaction instrument-training workshop: *"An important thing that I learned yesterday is that our organisation has a patient charter that is very much driven by us. Actually, it refers to services as a favour. We need to review that and stress the rights of our patients"* (hospital staff member).

"Currently I am working with the assumption that I am doing what my clients want. I now will get to hear them confirm. Thus giving suggestions to improve the service I give to them" (programme manager).

The use of **personal goal exercise** and participatory workshop module evaluations (War Child Holland) helped to clarify workshop participants' expectations and assisted workshop facilitators to help participants reach their expectations. This, in turn, contributed towards increased facilitators' ownership of the programme objectives and increased their awareness of the importance of adjusting workshop activities according to the individual psychosocial needs of the children. Such awareness took time. In the early stages of the PME pilot it was observed that War Child Holland facilitators would sometimes skip certain workshop sessions due to a lack of understanding about the goals and expected outcomes of each separate session. The personal-goal exercises helped to increase understanding of the objectives and importance of each part of the intervention.

PERSONAL GOAL EXERCISE:

to formulate a personal goal, facilitators first conduct a session with groups of youth to identify their strengths and difficulties regarding specific life skills, e.g. social relationships with peers and adults or managing emotions. Each participant then chooses one specific strength or challenge he/she wants to improve during the sessions. At the end of the intervention (i.e., 2 to 5 workshops over 4 to 6 months) they assess to what extent they have achieved their personal goal as illustrated by the following quote: *"I am now better able to settle conflict at home because I can give advice whenever there is a problem among the brothers"* (life skills workshop participant).



The four programmes that used OM elements (Light for the World, Cordaid, Stro, MCNV) observed positive results in developing a better and more shared understanding of who is influencing whom within the respective programmes and who is expected to do what in order to contribute to the programme's objectives. As a result, **programme actors were**

not abstracted but had a central role within the theories of change. This was illustrated by intervention summaries that no longer consisted of predetermined causal links represented by single arrows between specific activities (cause) and specific outcomes (effect). Instead, the programme's theories of change were represented in the form of different spheres of influence containing different stakeholders depending on the particular influence and role they have within the programme (see example

As a result, programme actors were not abstracted but had a central role within the theories of change.

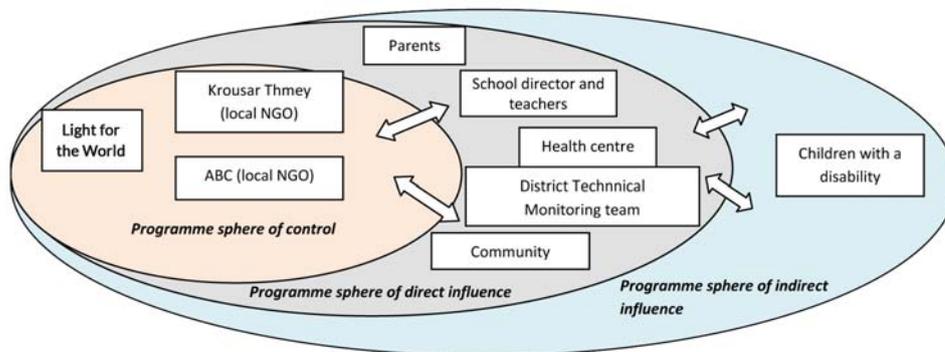
of Light for the World in Textbox 3). Such representations provided visual summaries of the relationships between the various programme actors and the various levels of results to which the programme hopes to contribute. Each influence sphere can be seen as a result level, and this understanding helped programmes to look for results as changes in the actors that are situated within the different spheres. This clarity also helped programme-implementing teams to understand the distinction between the activities they carry out and which they control (i.e., sphere of control) and the changes they hope to influence with their target groups (i.e., spheres of direct and indirect influence). Textbox 3 highlights some possible advantages of using an actor-focused theory of change as observed in the case of Light for the World.

TEXTBOX 3:

Using OM to develop an actor-focused theory of change.

Light for the World used OM to develop an operational plan for its inclusive education intervention in Cambodia to promote access to mainstream schooling for children with a disability. The planning process evolved over a one-year period. It consisted of two planning workshops with local stakeholders and one study visit by Cambodian NGOs and ministry officials to Vietnam. One Light for the World programme officer and a local consultant in Cambodia facilitated the planning process. A simplified version of the actor-focused theory of change that emerged during the OM planning process is shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Actor-focused theory of change in the Light for the World case



The value added by using OM was observed as follows in the Light for the World case:

1) OM helped to identify key local programme stakeholders for achieving sustainable results in the field of inclusive education and to clarify their roles and expectations in the programme. In addition, the planning became more focused on how local actors' behaviour and practice needed to change and how Light for the World could assist this change process. Instead of an instrumental relationship with the local partners for increased service delivery towards beneficiaries, strengthening local partners through funding and technical advice emerged as the main programme objective and the focus of Light for the World's support activities.

2) The various forms of influence between the different stakeholders became clearer (see Figure 4). This encouraged realism and set the boundaries of the programme. It emerged for example that Light for the World together with two local NGOs constituted the main implementing team of the programme with control over programme activities. It also emerged that programme activities were mainly directed towards five key actors that were seen to be crucial in promoting inclusive education and had the potential and the will to continue doing this even after the end of the programme. Changes at the level of these five stakeholders became an important area of results that was included in the programme's monitoring system. Using the OM "progress markers" tool, the five stakeholders situated in the direct sphere of influence of the programme (called boundary partners in OM terminology) were able to formulate their own changes in practice, behaviour or relationships that they hoped to achieve during the programme.

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3) The relationships between the different programme stakeholders at various levels became more explicit. Nourishing such relationships contributed to some unexpected results. It was, for example, reported that the role of the local ministry gradually changed from a rather passive actor that was mainly asked for permission to carry out programme activities, to an engaged player in programme planning and follow-up. The two local partner NGOs realised that they needed to collaborate so that they could take advantage of each other's strengths in order to contribute more efficiently and effectively to the programme objectives.

Progress Markers describe observable changes in behavior or relationships of the actors whom a programme seeks to influence directly (i.e. boundary partners). They differ from traditional SMART indicators in the sense that they are not timed nor necessarily specified with pre-set targets. Only when they materialise does the timing and specifics become clear. They don't have to be seen as rigid targets against which progress is measured. Instead they provide a framework for dialogue or reflection on progress and they can be adjusted during monitoring cycles. Below two examples of progress markers from the LFTW case:

- Teachers use learning materials that are suitable for low vision students
- Teachers follow up and evaluate results of students with low vision

4.1.2 Adapting your theory of change along the way - a political process

Earlier in this paper we referred to the challenge of linear programme plans that can be as rigidly followed as if they were contracts. This is even more the case when action plans with specific budgets are submitted by local partner organisations and approved by the supporting donor NGO. In such cases partner organisations may hire or assign specific staff to implement the activities and implementation of the approved action plan becomes somehow a contractual agreement between partner organisation and donor NGO. While this makes sense in terms of financial and administrative upward accountability, it may hinder the ability to adapt plans quickly in response to changing situations in the field that could not be foreseen during planning.

The experiences of the action-research cases help to support the argument that an actor-focused PME approach can help to address this challenge. For example, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of key actors during the planning stage can help to reorient the focus of the monitoring system to changes in key actors that are outside the control of a programme implementing team. If it emerges from the regular monitoring process that certain roles or responsibilities are not taken up as expected, then the programme team may be in a position to change predetermined plans in order to respond to such realities. Changing these plans isn't always easy because it can become a political process where actors may question why certain support activities that are foreseen

A LEARNING ATTITUDE



in a programme plan are no longer implemented. In addition it may emerge along the way that certain actors who were initially identified as key to achieving programme objectives are not, and other key actors may need to be taken on board. Difficult decisions may need to be made about stopping a programme's engagement with some actors and starting new engagements with others. Textbox 4 illustrates how OM as actor-focused PME approach helped to make these difficult decisions in the STRO case.

TEXTBOX 4:

Using monitoring information to question and change your theory of change.

In STRO's "complementary currency systems" programme, OM was used to identify key local actors or boundary partners who could be supported by the programme. Using the OM methodology outcome challenge and progress markers tools clarified the expected or hoped-for practices of these boundary partners. This clarity made it possible to follow up if the selected boundary partners were indeed able to contribute to the project objective and were the right partners to work with. The three boundary partners in this particular project are grass-root organisations who were created in the final phase of the armed conflict of El Salvador. Two of these organisations had grown out of the third boundary partner and had weaker organisational capacities than their mother organisation. For example, the decision-making process was often based on historical relationships and issues rather than technical criteria. It became clear in the second year of the project that the two boundary partners were not fulfilling any of the commitments or responsibilities that they had set for themselves during the planning stage of the project. Eventually the two boundary partners withdrew and the remaining boundary partner took up a much more prominent role by taking over the provision of credit schemes, which had been the other boundary partners' responsibility. Without clarity about boundary partners' roles and responsibilities, the two boundary partners might easily have continued participating in programme meetings and taking up commitments that would not be put into practice, assuming that there would be no follow-up. The OM-based planning and monitoring helped to prevent such a scenario. (STRO case).

4.1.3 Towards strengthening relationships

The use of actor-focused PME approaches has also shown to contribute to more explicit and more intense forms of interaction between programme implementers and other programme stakeholders, such as direct and indirect target groups. Some positive results were shown in relation to making the target groups of a programme and the relations between them more visible while making their voices more heard. This in turn was shown to empower stakeholders and to strengthen relationships. For example, the monitoring approach in the Cordaid case, based on elements

of OM and MSC, helped members of the various women's networks to gain more access to monitoring information which in turn helped them to increase their understanding of the common agenda and the roles of the different network members. This contributed to changes in established power positions (see Textbox 5). In the cases of Oxfam Novib and ETC Compas it was shown that the use of MSC stories helped to strengthen relationships between programme staff and beneficiaries, who felt empowered through the MSC process (see Textbox 6).

TEXTBOX 5:

OM contributing to changing power positions in Cordaid's women's networks in Colombia.

Customised outcome journals (see Annex 3) were used as a basis for discussion and reflection during regular monitoring meetings with members of women's networks at the local level. These meetings helped network members to better understand the roles and responsibilities of the various actors involved in the functioning of the network, but also of the changes in the actors whom the networks are trying to influence. This understanding was seen to motivate women to take an active role in the network, which strengthened women's leadership. More young women and women with less education started participating actively when they understood better the function and role of the network, which had previously been dominated by educated, feminist activists' theoretical and abstract discourses. This is illustrated by the following quote: *"The monitoring has increased our capacities to use arguments... and the emergence of new leadership. It used to be always the same persons who, as feminist activists, had gained their part in the history of the women's movement, which gave them an exclusive and dominant position. Now other women take over this role (young women, uneducated women, rural women). The monitoring has contributed, because there are written materials that we all have access to. So the old feminists are not the only ones anymore to have access to information. Local women are equally empowered, strengthened and capacitated to use the same arguments..."* (Women in Santander)

TEXTBOX 6:

Strengthening the relationship between programme staff and beneficiaries through MSC.

In the cases of Oxfam Novib and ETC Compass, it was observed that telling and listening to stories was experienced as “an inspiring exercise that brings people closer” and that empowers people. The quotes below illustrates this:

- “MSC allows us to hear the voice of community members and not just community leaders that we hear from usually”, “Beneficiary moves from object to subject, and hence it empowers the individual”, and “The method restores dignity to the story teller and can strengthen the relationship between the story teller and the organisation: the person confides their story to someone from the organisation which creates a certain intimacy and a sense of recognition on the part of the organisation.” (Reflections from MSC workshop Oxfam Novib, Addis Ababa (2011).
- “For this Most Significant Change process, our field officers had to change themselves. They had to take a different approach to win the confidence of community and be closer to them” (ETC compass).

4.1.4 Challenges of implementing an actor-focused PME approach

The cases also indicated that merely introducing an actor-focused PME approach will not guarantee success in dealing with relationships. The following challenges were observed across the cases:

- In each case, the introduction and implementation of the PME pilot required considerable effort. The availability of time and finances can be a limiting factor for organisations to implement these PME approaches, especially if it is not an explicit requirement from a donor.
- Careful customisation of the PME methods and tools into a suitable approach has proven to be essential in order to suit the local context. Such customisation may be a challenge if programme management and staff lack the necessary motivation and capacity.
- The extent to which the actor-focused PME approach was steered by the head office of the donor NGO or was a bottom-up process led by local actors was shown to have direct implications for the local ownership and for the resources and time needed. While a bottom-up approach may strengthen ownership, it may also be more costly and time-consuming. In the War Child Holland case, for example, the development of PME exercises by Dutch experts was initially considered time-efficient. Later on, however, it became clear that more resources were needed for local adaptation and on-going support for implementation of War Child Holland’s PME exercises (see Textbox 7).

PME PROCESS MUST BE TAILORMADE



TEXTBOX 7:

Underestimating the effort needed to support actor focused PME

During collective reflection sessions with War Child Holland staff and life skills workshop facilitators, insights emerged about the role and responsibility of the War Child Holland field offices in supporting the facilitators in the M&E process. War Child Holland's assumption that training the facilitators in using the new M&E tools would ensure good implementation was mistaken, as illustrated by the following observations during the pilot:

- Workshop facilitators needed more training than expected.
- War Child Holland didn't have sufficient capacity to follow up the implementation of the M&E tools or to provide additional training.
- M&E tools were found to be too time-consuming and were perceived as add-on and not part of the daily work.
- M&E tools needed to be adapted to local contexts because standard M&E tools for all geographical locations were unfeasible.
- Facilitators faced challenges analysing and using the monitoring information the M&E tools generated.

Insights into the challenges mentioned above and suggestions to address them emerged from reflection meetings with programme facilitators and War Child Holland office staff. Such reflection meetings have now been integrated into War Child Holland's PME of psychosocial work in the Republic of South Sudan and might be introduced in other field locations depending on funds and available capacity. A YouTube video featuring a reflection meeting can be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLW5nTnA2w8>.



- An actor-focused PME approach inherently leads to increased interaction between programme staff and the actors whom the programme is trying to influence directly or indirectly. Such interactions need the necessary leadership, logistics, and time to occur. In the Cordaid case, for example, organising reflection meetings to which geographically dispersed women's networks have to travel long distances has been a major challenge and poses questions about the viability of the PME system once Cordaid's support ends.
- Setting up an actor-focused approach takes time, and can constitute a considerable shift from a traditional PME practice based on measuring and reporting against predetermined indicators and less on nurturing relationships and learning. This is illustrated by the MCNV case in Textbox 8. Having started with the action research in 2010, seven out of the 10 cases managed to go through a first full monitoring cycle by mid-2012, while three were still in the process of initiating monitoring activities.
- An actor-focused results framework with one uniform set of indicators (i.e., applicable in different geographic settings) to track change at outcome level risks being perceived by local partners as a reporting instead of learning framework. This is illustrated by the Woord & Daad case where PMEL (planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning) staff is facing the challenge of stimulating partners to learn from the monitoring data (see Textbox 9).

TEXTBOX 8:

Promoting critical self-reflection (MCNV).

"... when you ask people to formulate an Outcome Challenge you ask for a kind of self-diagnosis and this is not at all common practice in Vietnam. One participant in the OM planning workshop had asked: 'and so you want us to self reflect? What do you mean-criticise ourselves? That is very strange'". The OM workshop with the boundary partners (local NGOs and CBOs) in the field made it clearer to the boundary partners themselves what **their** roles and responsibilities are in improving access of marginalised people to health, finance and Civil Society development...When we started the workshop they very much started formulating what MCNV should do for them in the TEA program. When they had to formulate challenges for them as an organisation they really changed when they realised it was all about them, and not about MCNV or other actors in the field. They initially wanted to discuss how others should behave differently according to them, and once they understood that is not what OM is about they changed attitude and start to reflect critically about how they needed to change" (MCNV field officer).

TEXTBOX 9:

Trying to balance adequate data collection about outcomes and using this information for learning.

Woord & Daad together with its partner organisations have developed a theory of change and associated results framework that guides its programme across various regional alliances in different parts of the world. Each alliance contains up to nine partners and each partner uses the same results framework for the respective programme areas of education, vocational training, basic needs, agribusiness, enterprise development, and strengthening partner networks. An extract of the Woord & Daad result framework is illustrated in Annex 2.

Woord & Daad has chosen to design an overall planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (PMEL) system that coordinates PMEL activities programme-wide. PMEL officers are appointed at Woord & Daad head office and partner level. PMEL officers are key in developing, customising and implementing of the PMEL system and are expected to involve their colleagues within their respective organisations.

After the first monitoring cycle, it emerged that partner organisations found the results framework helpful because "it has a clear structure and it contains clear indicators that clarified the goals of the organisation". At the same time, partners predominantly looked at the monitoring process as a way to satisfy Woord & Daad accountability requirements and less as an internal learning opportunity about the programme. In addition, external consultants are hired to collect outcome-monitoring data through outcome studies around most of the outcome indicators. This contributed to less interaction between programme staff and target groups in the monitoring activities, which could also be seen as a limiting factor to learning. The results of the outcome studies were felt by the partners to be interesting but not very practical. Exceptions were

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the results of the scorecards used to monitor the quality of service delivery, which the partner organisations considered very useful.

Woord & Daad and its partners reflected on the PMEL approach with regards to assisting the programme in dealing with relationships; it was felt that it had mainly helped in clarifying the role of the PMEL officers and their relation with their colleagues. Its potential for clarifying roles and expectations among various programme actors beyond Woord & Daad and its partner organisations was less pronounced.

Woord & Daad is now investing in more systematic regional reflection meetings to help partner organisations learn from the monitoring information.

4.2 Learning about programme progress



Earlier in this paper, we argued that a potential strategy to deal with non-linearity and unpredictability is to learn as quickly as possible during programme implementation. This is necessary to see if the programme is moving in the right direction and to adjust strategies according to those lessons learned. One of the research questions in our action-research therefore specifically explores to what extent the PME approaches contributed to such “speedy” learning. In this section, we argue that an enhanced focus on the various actors and the relationships between them (as described in the previous chapter), and opening up to intangible and unexpected effects, forms a fertile basis that has the potential to stimulate (but cannot guarantee) collaborative learning.

Across the cases we observed how the use of different actor-focused PME approaches (albeit with considerable effort and mixed levels of success), had the potential to contribute to an alternative management approach that does not squeeze out unpredictability and non-linearity but actually embraces it in a way that may strengthen learning within a development programme. The following three observations support this argument:

i. Gaining insight into intangible results.

Actor-focused PME approaches were observed to help programmes collecting information about intangible changes related to human or organisational behaviour, practice, relations or perceptions of various programme actors. It was also noticed, however, that this requires a considerable effort and careful facilitation.

ii. Gaining insight into unexpected results.

There is evidence from the research that the use of actor-focused approaches helps to surface information about unexpected and unintended programme effects. A considerable effort was also required to obtain this information.

iii. Strengthening dialogue and collaborative learning. The increased social interaction stimulated by an actor-focused PME approach was shown to help programme stakeholders make sense of and interpret the monitoring information and make decisions based on these insights. As with the previous points, this also didn't occur automatically; a considerable effort was needed, and there is no guarantee of success.

4.2.1 Gaining insight into intangible results

Most cases used the logical framework approach (LFA) before the start of the action research. This approach resulted mainly in

programme activity reports and rather quantitative information about predetermined SMART indicators. This monitoring information was shown to provide only limited insight into intangible programme effects.

Reorienting a PME's focus to programme actors was shown in various cases to contribute to useful additional monitoring information about changes at actor level. Such changes are often intangible and difficult to measure and were neglected by programmes before actor-focused approaches were implemented. This was demonstrated by the fact that in many cases, there was limited clarity about the direct and indirect target groups of a programme and even less clarity about what type of changes a programme was hoping to see at the level of those target groups (see Textbox 10).

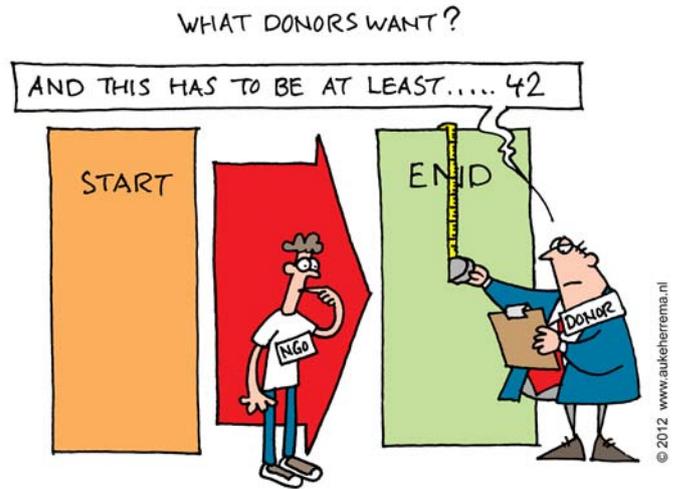
TEXTBOX 10:

Limited clarity about expected changes at target-group level (Cordaid).

The issue of limited clarity and thinking about expected changes at target-group level emerged during the initial steps of the action research in the Cordaid case. This is illustrated by the following quotes from one of the members of the women's networks in the violence against women programme:

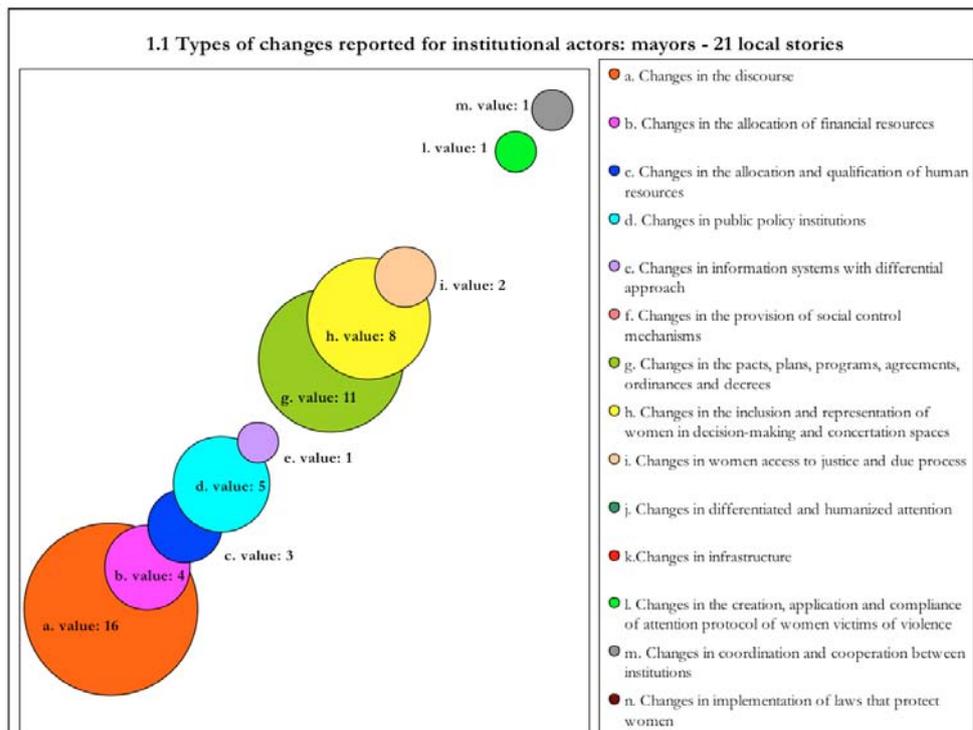
- *"We were very busy with doing, doing, doing; knocking on the city mayor's door, for example. The monitoring (using elements of OM and MSC) helped us to focus our actions and make them more effective. We reflected on the processes: was it worthwhile what we were doing or not? Then we identified the changes and adjusted the activities. ...There is more discussion about what political lobby is. We now understand that there are different levels of lobby. For some of us it was enough to have the city mayor participating in the council. But is that really the change we need? It made us reflect on the type of changes we want to achieve."*

The Cordaid case also illustrates how debate and dialogue about monitoring information contributed to the identification and visualisation of different categories of change within specific actors, allowing deeper analysis. Figure 5 illustrates this deeper analysis of changes observed in the city mayors. The sizes of the different circles in the diagram refer to the number of stories that were seen to relate to a specific change. There is also a vertical logic in the diagram. The changes towards the bottom of the figure correspond with changes that are more short-term and easier to achieve. The changes towards the top of the diagram represent deeper change. Figure 5 shows that the changes in discourse and changes in agreements, plans, programs, ordinances, and decrees featured most often in the collected stories. This made



the women in the networks realise that more needed to be done to influence more tangible changes related to infrastructure, allocation of financial resources and women's access to justice.

Figure 5: Visualisation of reported changes at the level of city mayors (Cordaid case)



Textbox 11 illustrates how MSC in the ETC Compas case resulted in complementary information that could be used to explain people's perception of specific interventions.

TEXTBOX 11:

Using MSC to gain insights in beneficiaries' perception about programme results (ETC).

While the logical framework indicators would provide information about the number of terraces cultivated and the amount of crops produced, MSC stories allowed farmers to explain some deeper reasons why they are happy with the results of the intervention: "people said they were able to grow more food or increase their income. But at the same time, they said that social and spiritual aspects were important. Mr. Suduappu, for example, was happy he was able to feed his family without having to kill other creatures." This was in line with his Buddhist worldview and was made possible thanks to the organic farming practices promoted by the programme. This link with the farmers' Buddhist worldview is now used by ETC Compas partners to promote organic farming practices more successfully.

In addition, the use of MSC also helped to identify intangible effects such as gender-related deep cultural change in the case of Oxfam Novib (see Textbox 12) and changes in various forms of wellbeing (e.g., spiritual, leadership, women's empowerment and health) in the ETC Compas case. Changes in psychosocial wellbeing that were hard to measure through the use of survey instruments emerged through the use of personal goal-setting exercises in the War Child Holland case. Also, information about changes in behaviour and relationships surfaced through the OM-based PME approaches in the cases of Cordaid, Light for the World, MCVN, and STRO.

Finally, in the case of VECO, the use of Sensemaker allowed the programme to make the intangible concept of "inclusiveness" of agricultural value-chain actors more explicit and discussable (see Textbox 13). Inclusiveness refers to the extent that ownership, voice, risk, and reward are being shared and distributed among the different chain actors. By making the state of affairs concerning this intangible concept more explicit, it became an issue that could be discussed objectively among programme stakeholders and could inform programme activities planning. Before the use of Sensemaker, programme actors knew implicitly that there were challenges related to inclusiveness, but they were not able to discuss it as they didn't have tangible data or evidence.

TEXTBOX 12:

Example of MSC story illustrating gender related deep cultural change.

"Based on our sensitisation, community women have, on their own, set up pressure groups, carried out community enhancement projects and organised protests to ask for their rights from multinationals... And these have yielded wonderful results in terms of renewed consultation of women on community issues, ongoing compensations arrangements, provision of amenities by the erring multinationals, including electricity etc..."(partner organisation Oxfam Novib).

TEXTBOX 13:

Using Sensemaker to make explicit what is implicitly known.

Sensemaker, used in the VECO case, provides a software and methodological approach that helps an organisation to collect and analyse large amounts of fragmented micro-narratives to learn about complex realities. The approach is built on the idea that people use fragmented narratives or micro-narratives instead of full stories to make sense of the world around them. Through probing questions, respondents tell a specific anecdote or short story. Typical prompting questions are formulated as: "What specific moment or event made you feel discouraged or hopeful about ...?" or "imagine that you would meet a colleague, what would you tell to motivate or discourage her to ...?" The storytellers then "signify" or score their own story against pre-defined topics of interest. One of these topics of interest in the VECO case was price-setting;

respondents were asked to put a mark in a triangle or "triad" (see Figure 6) to show how they felt their story related to the three aspects of price setting represented by each corner of the triangle. Using a large number of "signified" micro-narratives allows a programme to identify patterns around pre-defined topics of interest. Besides observing such patterns, people can also read specific stories related to those patterns which can be further interpreted and acted upon.

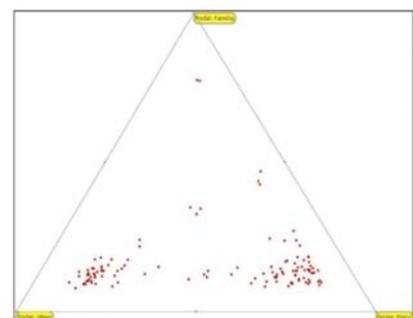
Sensemaker doesn't provide direct answers to evaluative questions about the effects of a programme. Instead it provides insights into specific areas of interest. These

insights can be used to learn about the implications for the programme and to inform future programme interventions to encourage or discourage observed patterns. In VECO's tea agricultural value-chain in Vietnam for example, it became clear from the story distribution shown in the triad in Figure 7 that farmers (top triad corner) are the least powerful party in price setting. Private companies (bottom right corner) dominate (60 stories) together with other parties such as middle-men (bottom left corner). Although this situation was intuitively known, the programme had not been able to make it explicit through tangible evidence. Demonstrating the Sensemaker data during reflection meetings with the farmers, farmer organisations, private company staff, and chain supporters made the issue of price setting much more discussable. It had been a difficult issue to talk about in the past.

Fig.6: example of triad signifier



Fig.7: emerging patterns of stories





4.2.2 Gaining insight into the unexpected

An important difference between the actor-focused PME approaches that have been explored in this action research and the more linear planning approaches such as LFA is their non-predictive character concerning the information they seek to track during programme implementation. Except for the results framework in the Woord & Daad case, the piloted approaches didn't make use of SMART indicators with predetermined targets and timing. This open perspective towards the possible results of a programme contributed towards surfacing information about unexpected and unintended programme effects and about the local context.

The MSC story collection process in the Oxfam Novib and ETC cases was left relatively open without predetermining domains of change nor specifying in advance who should be the story tellers. Instead, a non-prescriptive story collection framework was used that implied that stories should relate to changes experienced by people that were affected in one way or the other by the programme. This resulted in unexpected results as illustrated by the following quotes from the ETC Compas and Oxfam Novib cases:

"..., we went into the communities to strengthen their capacities to implement specific interventions. That were the results we expected to get from the change stories. However, we got to know that Forikrom community also has been able to use the community organisation development (COD) process to initiate their electricity and water projects." [Staff member partner organisation of ETC COMPAS]

"... after a gender training,... I (female teacher) decided to form a girls' football team and discussed my idea with the Head master of the school. The headmaster was motivated by me and agreed. In May 2011, I formed a Girls' Football team in cooperation with the headmaster. The members of the football team became skilled through regular exercise. (...) Now the Football team has become familiar in the Union. Other girls' schools are now trying to follow this example and have taken initiatives to form such football team" (Oxfam Novib, Bangladesh 2012).

The disadvantage of such an open story-collection process was that without specifically asking for negative changes, most of the collected stories referred to "positive" change. Moreover, in the Oxfam Novib case, 44 out of the 119 collected stories could not be attributed to the programme because they didn't refer to the programme or sometimes narrated events that

fell out of the programme time frame. Some of the stories that could not be linked to the programme still proved to be useful, however, as they provided insight in the larger context in which the programme took place, as illustrated by the following quote:

“One workshop participant in Addis Ababa (2011) explained that Oxfam Novib’s Gender Mainstreaming programme had found fertile ground in his organisation, because of Oxfam Novib’s ‘Gender en Route’ project before. He explained that the Gender Mainstreaming programme had sparked or highlighted activities and changes that were already taking place” (Oxfam Novib).

In the War Child Holland case, the use of personal goal setting and monitoring progress towards achieving these goals resulted in unexpected insights that went beyond psychosocial wellbeing. For example, the life skills workshops in some cases helped workshop participants become more disciplined and better able to concentrate in schools. This outcome unexpectedly resulted in “vocational skills training centres in Uganda having started enrolling their pupils in War Child Holland’s life skills workshops before starting with

the training, because they had observed that the alumni of the life skills workshops performed better in the vocational skills training” (Director War Child Holland in Uganda).

Asking for direct feedback from target groups was also shown to highlight useful and unexpected contextual information. In the ICCO case, one partner hospital in Malawi was surprised by the patient feedback the client-satisfaction instruments obtained. Patients complained about the high price that they had to pay. Hospital management assumed that the medical costs were covered by the National Service Agreement in the district where the hospital is located, but it emerged that the patients who complained lived in a neighbouring district the hospital of which was much further away. This insight opened up internal discussions about the need for the programme to start lobbying the government to address this issue.

The fact that community-based organisations only needed limited support from the supporting programme was a pleasant unexpected result in the MCNV case, which emerged through the use of OM in the planning phase (see Textbox 14).

TEXTBOX 14:

Less programme support needed than expected.

An interesting unexpected result emerged as MCNV used elements of OM to plan the capacity development programme with the community-based organisations they support. Using the outcome challenge and progress markers concepts, the community-based organisations were asked to describe the changes in their own capacity that they were hoping to achieve. In addition, they identified the support they would need from MCNV to help them achieve these changes. MCNV was pleasantly surprised when it emerged that most of the suggested changes didn’t require MCNV support but could be achieved through the community-based organisation’s own initiative and commitment. Examples of such changes included the following:

- Encourage members to contribute membership fees.
- Organise meetings with board members to discuss how to improve organisational management.
- Communicate quarterly activity plans to members.
- Visit members who employ successful livelihood models and promote the models among other members.

4.2.3 Highlighting intangible and unexpected results doesn't come easy but is worth the effort

The research demonstrated that exploring intangible and unexpected changes such as actor-level changes in behaviour and relationships is not always easy. As illustrated by the Light for the World case in Textbox 15

the programme team or the target groups themselves might initially have understood vaguely what these changes could be, making the monitoring process more challenging.

TEXTBOX 15:

Dealing with the challenge of shallow progress markers in the LFTW case.

During the first OM workshop to plan the inclusive education programme, it became clear that participants did not have adequate knowledge of “inclusive education”. This resulted in rather “disappointing and shallow” progress markers. Progress markers describe the direct (i.e., boundary) partners’ specific observable practices. Even after a field trip with programme stakeholders to a neighbouring country that was more advanced in inclusive education, progress markers remained disappointing. *“A good number of the (final) progress markers were not of high quality, but at least it stimulated discussion. I hope that these discussions created new insights in finding ways to include children with disabilities in primary schools. In essence, what we are continually doing during this process, is creating spaces for reflection and learning and letting the key stakeholders find their solutions. It does not need to be perfect from the outset, if at all that would be possible”* (LFTW programme officer). The monitoring information that resulted from the progress markers after having been adjusted twice in the course of the first year of the programme is illustrated by an extract of the monitoring tool (i.e., outcome journal) (see Annex 4). This tool was used during self-assessment to monitor changes in the practice of teachers and directors of the schools who took part in the programme.

Highlighting intangible and unexpected information through interaction with target groups also requires logistical and financial support to get programme staff to the target groups or to bring them together during a PME activity. In the Woord & Daad case, PMEL officers found themselves unable to visit programme target groups; cars were assigned to programme staff, and PMEL staff therefore had to find their own way to the field. VECO was also confronted with the considerable logistical effort of bringing farmers in Ecuador

to a central place to collect their stories during the Sensemaker exercise. In some cases farmers had to travel several days to reach the workshop venue.

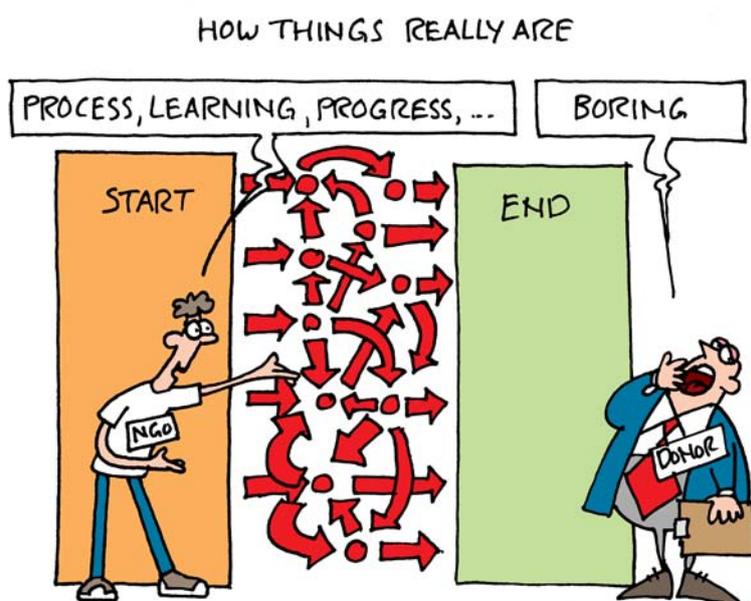
It was observed that when using MSC, getting people interested in the story collection process could be challenging. Also, in some cases, story collectors had to visit storytellers more than once to increase the quality of the stories.

4.2.4 Strengthening processes of collaborative learning

An important lesson across the cases is that having the necessary monitoring information will not automatically lead to learning. It is a general challenge to go beyond data collection. Making sure that the monitoring information is used to draw meaning about the programme is an uphill task for many organisations. Similarly, using the insights that emerge from this “meaning-making process” to inform planning is difficult. In every case, we observed the importance of some kind of dialogue and reflection about the monitoring data as a condition for learning to take place (see Textbox 16). Such dialogue and reflection was shown

to take place with different levels of success in different forms and involving different stakeholders depending on the specific programme context and the PME approach used. Textbox 16 illustrates the importance of this dialogue as perceived by one of Oxfam Novib’s partners.

It was also observed that learning about the PME data was the most difficult aspect of the PME approach to produce and to sustain. Table 3 on the next page summarises the various challenges that the different cases, using different PME approaches, faced in stimulating learning.



TEXTBOX 16:

The importance of dialogue and reflection for learning.

“We now question each other about whether we are seeing a change. This did not happen before.”

A director of a partner organisation in Bangladesh noticed how the process of MSC had become known throughout the organisation with the experiment in the beginning of 2012. It had enabled a dialogue between staff at different levels in the organisation, to discuss their contribution to making a difference. *“The idea of change is not something looked at by management only. MSC has made the whole organisation think and talk about change.”* (Oxfam Novib)

Table 3: Challenges faced by different programmes in stimulating learning from PME information

PME approach used	Challenges related to learning about the monitoring information.
<p>MSC (ETC, Oxfam Novib)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning from the discussion during the selection of stories doesn't happen automatically. Proper facilitation may be needed to ensure that learning takes place. For example, in Oxfam Novib's three Bangladeshi partner organisations, discussions during story selection were shown to be very lively, but questions about the validity of the current gender mainstreaming interventions were rarely raised. • People involved in the selection process can get stuck in discussions about the technical qualities of the stories (e.g., are they well written? Do they provide enough information?) instead of the meaning that people draw from the stories. • People may feel hesitant to share their interpretation of stories in the presence of organisational superiors. Some people might also feel that they lack the skills to interpret stories or communicate their insights, and therefore keep silent. • Documentation of the discussions and the major lessons learned is an extra task that may not happen automatically. • The stories may be too shallow or may be difficult to relate to the programme. • Organisations find it generally challenging to organise selection of MSC stories as part of a regular monitoring and learning exercise. For example, only three of Oxfam Novib's 20 partner organisations carried out such selection processes in the second monitoring round, and only with intensive support from Oxfam Novib. Story selection in the ETC case was mainly done in the context of an end-of-programme evaluation and to a lesser extent as part of an on-going monitoring exercise.
<p>OM (Stro, MCNV, Cordaid, LFW)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulating critical reflection on achievement of progress markers was a challenge in the LFTW case, especially in the presence of different local stakeholders such as teachers, school directors, parents... • Expertise is needed to facilitate group discussion of progress markers. NGO staff need to gain such expertise. Facilitation expertise was seen as the greatest challenge to critical reflection and learning in the various learning spaces at local, regional, and national levels in the Cordaid case. It helps when the facilitator is familiar with the boundary partners, as was demonstrated in the MCNV case. • Partner organisations being overwhelmed by various monitoring tools and OM seen as yet another tool among the many other monitoring tools (LFTW case). • Need for longitudinal support of partner organisations to implement OM and to facilitate reflection & learning workshops. Local presence of supporting NGO is crucial. This was mainly solved through hiring a local consultant, but at the risk that the supporting NGO is less involved in the partner organisation OM process. • There is a risk of getting stuck in the planning stage and not moving towards the monitoring stage. In the STRO case, monitoring cycles had not started after two years of OM implementation in two of the projects. In one project, OM never began after the first OM training workshop. • Finance and time must be budgeted to make sure that learning meetings happen. • Learning at various levels (local, regional, national) can be challenging because of high quantities of qualitative information and the need for lots of reflection meetings at various levels.

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<p>Client satisfaction instruments (ICCO)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of investing a lot of effort in the collection of data but neglecting analysis and the documentation of and feedback on the results of the analysis. • The use of client-satisfaction instruments results to lobby for reform is often not taken into account in the planning stage. • It emerged in the ICCO case that the following can help ensure that client satisfaction instrument results are actually used to inform reform and that there is proper feedback to the clients and other programme stakeholders about the outcomes of the process: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Willingness of and commitment by management to adhere to/follow the results and develop a reform agenda. 2. Integration of client-satisfaction instruments in the existing PME calendar and activities. 3. Minimum standard of M&E capacity in the participating organisations (e.g., capacity to collect, process and analyse data without much assistance). 4. Having someone within the organisation spearhead the client satisfaction instrument process. 5. A culture of trust and relationship-building within the organisation.
<p>Sensemaker (VECO)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical expertise for the first-level analysis (pattern seeking with Sensemaker software) and facilitation expertise for the second-level analysis (human sense-making by a group of people) has proven to be essential. Such expertise may be unavailable and therefore a limiting factor for enlarging the approach as an integrated part of the programme management cycle by VECO, and especially by their partner organisations. • Unless storytellers are involved in the second-level analysis, the Sensemaker approach might be perceived as extractive, as in the VECO case, where the farmers who provided the stories didn't see the benefits of participation.
<p>Participatory M&E tools such as personal goal exercise and participatory workshop module evaluations (War Child Holland)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite improved facilitator ability to capture changes in psychosocial wellbeing at workshop-participant level, the programme still faces problems analysing this qualitative information. • This challenge is further complicated by the sometimes-limited monitoring-outcomes documentation, the misinterpretation of the scoring tool within the personal goal exercise or poor formulation of personal goals. • Documentation of the outcomes of the other M&E tools like the module evaluations was also very limited. • Another challenge is the danger of "cherry picking" by facilitators of narratives that illustrate positive change. • The monitoring information collected at field level didn't automatically result in systematic learning processes at country level or WCH head-office level. Therefore a learning process had to be carefully planned at each field location and followed up by joint learning in global meetings and subsequent planning at head office. • WCH had initially underestimated the capacity needed to provide on-going support for the implementation of M&E tools.
<p>Uniform Results framework, outcome studies and PMEL officers (Woord & Daad)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcome studies carried out by consultants provide information that is interesting but of limited practical use for partner organisations. This approach is also not seen to stimulate interaction or dialogue between programme staff and target groups during monitoring activities. • The uniform results framework allows comparison and benchmarking of results among partners and countries and allows aggregation of information from all countries. This is seen as very useful by partner organisations. However, at the same time, monitoring is predominantly experienced by partners as a requirement to satisfy accountability requirements of Woord & Daad. • Analysis of the monitoring information and learning is still predominantly initiated by Woord & Daad through organising reflection meetings at regional alliance level. After a first monitoring cycle, learning from the monitoring information by the partner organisation in a way that this would result in adjusted plans was still limited.

From Table 3 it becomes clear that a considerable effort is required to stimulate dialogue about and collective learning from the available monitoring data. We can summarise the main challenges for collaborative learning as follows:

- Availability of careful and customised facilitation to promote critical reflection and identification of action points.
- Availability of time and money for people to be able to meet and reflect regularly.
- Reflection and learning activities not being integrated as a regular event in programme cycle management.
- Too much focus on data collection instead of using the data for deeper analysis and collective sense making.
- Analysis of large quantities of qualitative information and aggregating this information at higher levels in the programme is experienced as a serious challenge. Skilful adaptation and customisation of different methods and technical solutions was needed in various cases. Stro developed a web-based data “collection and sharing” tool to compliment the OM-based M&E system (see Textbox 17). The women’s networks in the Cordaid case developed a web-based information system with the help of the local consultant to make monitoring information from the local, regional, and national levels more accessible to programme stakeholders.
- Organisations getting stuck in planning and taking a long time before moving into regular monitoring cycles. This can result in programme actors not immediately seeing the benefits of the monitoring process and lacking motivation to continue participating actively.

TEXTBOX 17:

Customising web-based solutions to facilitate data collection and sharing.

STRO created a virtual platform called the Customer Relationship Management tool to complement its OM-based monitoring system. The tool aims to facilitated access to and analysis and sharing of monitoring information for decision making. One of the progress markers for the businesses owners in its complementary currency systems project is that they exchange goods and services among themselves, using the local “complementary currency system” promoted by the project as part of the commercial transaction. One of the obstacles encountered in the earlier phases of the project was connecting buyers and sellers. Part of the virtual tool shown in Figure 8 is designed to help establish those links.

Fig. 8: extract from web based data collection and sharing platform

The screenshot shows the 'CRM Red Suchitoto' web interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'Socios', 'Productos', 'Eventos', and 'Emisión'. Below the tabs, the page title is 'Inicio' and the main heading is 'Productos y Servicios'. A table displays the following data:

Producto / servicio	Socios ofreciendo	Socios buscando
Alimentación domicilio	2	0
Alojamiento	2	1
Avícolas	0	0
Carnes	0	1
Comedor	1	0
Lacteos	0	0
Pan	1	0
Restaurantes	4	0

Of course, deeper analysis and learning doesn't only happen during formally organised reflection and learning meetings. While such learning spaces were shown to be important, it was observed in every case that learning can happen informally and without planning. Such informal learning happened, for example, during data collection (e.g. individual staff members of partner organisations learning from the effects of their work by gaining insight in the intangible and unexpected results during story collection) and during informal contacts (e.g., LFTW programme officers at head office learning about the results of the action research during conversations around the coffee machine). So while the availability of the data related to intangible and unexpected results may not be enough to stimulate deeper learning, it definitely helps. Looking back at the challenges to learning from the monitoring information illustrated in Table 3, there is a considerable risk that collective learning processes are difficult to sustain. This challenge is explored in the next section.

4.3 Strengthening adaptive capacity



Across the cases it was observed that the more formally organised learning spaces are mainly initiated by motivated individuals who play a key role in the action research. There is a risk that these learning spaces and opportunities cease to exist once the action research ends or the motivated individuals leave or no longer have the mandate or resources to organise them. We call this risk “considerable” because the various PME approaches are being explored in a somewhat “privileged” context of a collective action research with external financial and methodological support, and with considerable recognition by higher management in each organisation. To explore to what extent this risk plays out in the various cases, we examined how the actor-focused PME approaches contributed towards strengthening the adaptive capacity of organisations in a sustained way. Drawing from aspects of the core capability ‘to adapt and self-renew’ from the ECDPM five core capability framework, we have explored the following elements of adaptive capacity across the cases:

- The extent to which the PME pilot has contributed to visible changes in organisational practice.
- The extent to which the observed changes in organisational practices can be sustained over time and constitute more than a side project for interested individuals.

4.3.1 Promoting changes in organisational practice

There are indications that the exploration of actor-focused PME approaches contributed in the various cases towards changes in organisational practices that have a chance of continu-

ing even beyond the action-research period. These changes in organisational practices are mainly related to PME practice and are illustrated in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Overview of changes in organisational practices influenced by the PME pilots

Cases	Organisational change
Light for the World	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elements of OM were incorporated into the internal monitoring of a European-funded programme on inclusive education in South Sudan. • Advice was sought from the pilot project regarding the use of OM during the closing phase of the Nepal country programme, to stimulate programmatic cooperation between local partners in Afghanistan, and to remodel an inclusive education programme in Bangladesh. • The head of programmes has requested a proposal to embed an outcome level into the Light for the World programme management software system.
Stro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger actor-focused planning and including qualitative narratives in the progress monitoring. • Stronger downward accountability from partner organisations towards final beneficiaries by involving communities in strategic planning through the use of OM. • Partner organisation using OM elements in a new programme funded by the Ford Foundation, involving local producers and businesses in defining their roles and responsibilities in the new programme. • In Central America STRO will use the intentional design part of the OM methodology as a framework to analyse the complex environment of projects together with partner organisations.
Cordaid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying theories of change in retrospect based on lessons learned during monitoring. • Providing long-term support for the women's networks to develop their own flexible PME system without imposing predetermined targets or M&E questions. This has been a noticeable shift compared with PME practice in other programmes of Cordaid. • Monitoring of women's networks' organisational practices local, regional, and national level has become an inherent part of the monitoring system. • Insights from PME pilot are being integrated in the monitoring system of Cordaid's new Business Unit on "Women Leadership for Peace and Security".

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Oxfam Novib	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The MSC pilot ignited critical discussions about gaps in the existing PME system and has contributed to the political will and enthusiasm within Oxfam Novib to search for ways to improve it at the level of partner organisations and Oxfam Novib. • MSC has been integrated in Oxfam Novib's country programmes 2013 planning for Zimbabwe and Nigeria. • Two partner organisations have taken concrete steps to include MSC in their M&E, noticing that MSC made visible what had remained hidden with the M&E tools that were used so far. • Extra staff capacity has been made available to continue integrating a more qualitative approach to M&E in the organisation.
ICCO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing organisation-wide support at the level of ICCO for the use of client-satisfaction instruments. Client-satisfaction instruments have been mentioned as among the tools that can enrich PMEL practice in ICCO's 2011 policy. • Policy that mandates the use of client-satisfaction instruments has been included in the founding act of the Uchembere Network, which consists of different NGOs that ICCO supports in Malawi.
MCNV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indications that international NGOs and local partner organisations are less restricted to proposed activities but change their action plans according to changing needs and contexts.
ETC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MSC integrated as complementary method in partner organisations' PME practice.
War Child Holland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic involvement of beneficiaries in monitoring their own learning outcomes. • Reflection and learning sessions have become part of the normal programme activities as a method of quality assurance. • In the new programme, M&E will not focus on only one intervention, as children and young people often participate in various interventions and activities. M&E tools that allow for analysis of a wider variety of outcomes will therefore be developed, including reflection sessions and community events (e.g., festivals and closing events).
Veco	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisation-wide exploration of Sensemaker involving all head office staff. • Results from the Sensemaker process will be integrated in the baseline/impact assessment reports of the respective chains; recommendations and insights will be incorporated in chain intervention reports and presented in the annual reports to the main donors. • Strong interest from VECO Vietnam to carry out Sensemaker on a regular basis to monitor changes related to inclusiveness in the agricultural value chain.
Woord & Daad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointment of PMEL staff within the partner organisations. • Stronger local-partner involvement in the development and customisation of PMEL monitoring tools.

4.3.2 An isolated event or an organisation-wide project

Whether the changes in organisational practice illustrated in Table 4 are appropriated by a whole organisation or by a small number of individuals varies. VECO decided to explore Sensemaker only after all head office staff members were involved in clarifying the specific challenge that they would address through this PME approach and the modalities for its implementation. The PME pilot was thus carried by the whole organisation. A similar scenario was observed at Woord & Daad, where the new PMEL system was part of an organisation-wide reorganisation at Woord & Daad head office and a shift from working through bilateral partnerships to working in regional alliances. These two scenarios contrast with the other cases. In the majority of cases, one or a few individuals in the head office of the donor NGO introduced the idea of a particular new PME approach because they considered it useful to address specific PME challenges, mainly at the level of the partner organisations. An important implication of such a scenario is that the energy of the PME pilot is dependent on the motivation and availability of the individuals who introduced the new approach and also on the partners who are supposed to be the main implementers. A number of challenges have already emerged from this second scenario.

- **First**, the enthusiasm that comes with the introduction of something new often fades after time. This poses a risk for sustained implementation, especially if it is dependent on the interest of some individuals and not part of an organisation-wide policy or follow-up system.
- **Second**, the lessons learned from the PME pilot risk being ignored by management because of a lack of critical mass or because it may be considered an interesting but one-off side event.

- **Third**, the responsibility of mentoring and follow-up in the field is often left in the hands of local consultants. There is a risk that with the learning process externalised from the head office, lessons are mainly learned by consultants and local partners.
- **Fourth**, there are only limited indications of donor NGOs organising systematic PME activities to monitor their own organisational practices. This mainly happens on an informal basis.

4.4 Accountability



Upward accountability requirements didn't emerge as the main driver for the organisations to engage in this action research. Table 1 earlier in this paper shows that other incentives were more important, such as strengthening learning and promoting local actors' ownership of PME processes. There were nevertheless some notable implications for accountability that resulted from the use of the different actor-focused PME approaches. In this section we highlight these implications by looking at accountability broadly as a process that can take place in different directions: upward (towards a donor or higher authority); downward (to beneficiary or lower authority); and horizontally (towards peers). Accountability can also be determined by different levels of transparency, participation and feedback.

4.4.1 upward accountability

A general observation is that the various actor-focused PME approaches were instrumental in helping programmes satisfy upward accountability requirements. Through their specific focus on the actors a programme is trying to influence directly or indirectly, they provided information about concrete programme results that were not obtained by the monitoring systems already in use, which were mostly based on logical frameworks with quantitative SMART indicators. That way, organisations were able to enrich their

monitoring reports by including essential contextual information that gives a narrative of what has changed in what context and the possible contribution of the programme towards that change (see Textboxes 18 & 19). Examples of such contextual information, including intangible and unexpected results, have already been given earlier in this paper (e.g., changes in local authority practices in the Cordaid case, examples of gender-related deep cultural change in the Oxfam Novib case, or changes in psychosocial wellbeing in the War Child Holland case).

TEXTBOX 18:

Using stories to provide essential context within monitoring reports.

In the ETC Compass case, MSC was found to provide qualitative information about perceived changes in wellbeing in addition to the quantitative scores obtained for the wellbeing indicators (e.g., number of ceremonies held in sacred forests or numbers of pesticide poisoning) and for community capacity areas (see Figure 9). This qualitative information mainly helped the implementing NGOs to “develop a better understanding of the complex reality of community wellbeing from the local perspective” and to learn about the deeper effects of their “endogenous” intervention approach. For the donor, the MSC stories were useful as a way to provide context to the quantitative information which would otherwise show trends without the meaning of what these trends entail. In the ETC Compass case, upward accountability needs were met by including a small sample of stories and testimonies as “vivid proofs of how people’s lives changed”. Some of the MSC stories were also videotaped and are available at <http://www.youtube.com/user/cikodvideo?feature=mhum>.



Figure 9: Capacity area scoring tool, ETC Compass

The capacity scoring tool in figure 9 compares the baseline data for 13 capacity areas of local communities with progress after 4 years of ETC COMPAS endogenous development programmes.





TEXTBOX 19:

Strengthening upward accountability towards own management.

In the ICCO case, managers in partner organisations wanted to see the narrative stories behind the client satisfaction scores because the scores alone were not found useful in decision-making. This is illustrated by the following two quotes from directors of different partner organisations:

- “We as directors think that we are not always updated well about the findings of the CSI fieldwork. We need more than just the scores, but also the reports and thus the results of the follow up discussion with the community. Now, we feel there is a gap in sharing information between field workers and managers. Feedback is not clearly documented and therefore not always easy for us to make decisions.”
- “I feel that just data only won’t help us much further. The scores have the risk of bias. I rather see the opinions of people, their feedback. Comparing the scores between the years is difficult; whereas there are objectively spoken successful measures taken to improve, this might not be shown in the scores, since clients may become more critical.”

Instead, partners were made accountable for showing that they used the scores they obtained from the client satisfaction instrument exercises to reflect on their services and to reform them if necessary.

We simultaneously observed some specific challenges within the various PME pilots in relation to satisfying upward accountability needs:

- Organisations had only gone through one or two monitoring cycles at this stage in the action research. All the PME pilots were still in an early phase of implementation and facing considerable “teething” problems. Accordingly, monitoring information from monitoring cycles based on the PME pilot was still limited in some cases.

- Quality and reliability of the monitoring information is sometimes questioned by the donor NGO. This was especially observed when partner organisations provide information based on self-assessment processes (MCNV, Light for the World, War Child Holland, Oxfam Novib, ETC Compas). Textbox 20 illustrates this challenge in the War Child Holland case.

TEXTBOX 20:

Dealing with the challenge of bias in the War Child Holland case.

Monitoring the personal goal exercises helped facilitators in War Child Holland's life skills programme to adjust interventions to help participants achieve personal goals. This also helped the facilitators improve their facilitation skills. This monitoring information proved to be less useful for aggregating at higher levels. Instead, the monitoring information is used to illustrate the scores of War Child Holland's global indicators,⁶ which are obtained by completing "Indicator Progress Cards" with quantitative information collected from a sample of groups that are supported by the I DEAL programme (i.e., life skills workshops). At this stage in the action research, the information from the I DEAL M&E toolbox was not yet recognised by the War Child Holland head office as sufficient evidence to satisfy upward accountability requirements. There was still the perception that the monitoring information could be biased by possible cherry picking of positive stories. Additional external in-depth research was therefore seen as being necessary to satisfy upward accountability needs.

Bias was shown to be less of an issue for using the monitoring information to draw lessons about the effects of the programme and to use these insights to adjust programme strat-

egy. Textbox 21 illustrates how reflections and learning triggered by (mostly positive) MSC stories managed to deepen knowledge about the programme's theory of change.

TEXTBOX 21:

Learning about deep cultural change in Oxfam Novib's Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory.

Secondary analysis of MSC stories using the "Gender at Work" framework (Figure 10) helped Oxfam Novib to identify and understand changes which take place at the more informal, intangible levels of consciousness and culture (see quadrants 1 and 4 in Figure 10). The same framework helped to develop deeper understanding of the programme's theory of change and how change related to gender can start and move in different directions across the quadrants of the framework.

Figure 10: *Gender at Work Framework*

Box 1 Women's and men's consciousness	Box 2 Women's access to resources
Box 4 Informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices	Box 3 Formal institutions

6. Programme interventions in the Warchild case are contributing to two global outcome indicators: 1) Children and young people have positive social skills (i.e., the ability to engage in positive relationships with caregivers, key adults and peers); and 2) Children and young people feel confident and have a sense of self esteem.

- Donors often prefer quantitative information that can be easily visualised and which doesn't require reading long narrative reports. (ETC Compas, Woord & Daad). At the same time, organisations find it challenging to analyse large amounts of qualitative information and synthesise or quantify it for use in a readable report. (Cordaid, ETC Compas). This was less of a challenge in the VECO case, however, where Sensemaker allowed a quantitative analysis of large amounts of qualitative data (see Textbox 22).
- Donors sometimes ask that context-specific qualitative monitoring information from different geographic locations be aggregated. From the PME pilots, we learned that whenever aggregation is done, there is an unavoidable loss of meaning and relevance of the monitoring information. While it may be possible to aggregate certain data – such as the number of people who can access a specific service – this will give only limited insight in how these services were established and sustained within different contexts. In fact, we don't see the context-specific character of the monitoring

information that emerged from the actor-focused PME approaches during the action research as a challenge to solve in view of aggregation. It is rather an unavoidable reality when you monitor complex change processes. Hence the challenge is to learn to recognise that without this context-specific character, monitoring information loses its relevance and its power to develop insights into the effectiveness of a programme. This is illustrated in the Woord & Daad case (see Textbox 23), where a uniform results framework allowed aggregation but faced challenges in stimulating learning. Instead, partner organisations rather saw it as a framework for reporting towards the donor. At this point, we would like to stress that there are innovative case-study approaches that may help make generalisations related to cause and effect across individual cases by identifying clusters of subsets of cases (Stern et al, p.28). While these approaches fall outside the scope of this action research, they open up interesting methodological opportunities to deal with questions of synthesis and aggregation in contexts of complex change.

TEXTBOX 22:

Combining quantitative data with qualitative data through Sensemaker.

VECO considered Sensemaker useful for strengthening upward accountability for the following reasons:

- Stories are signified by the people who wrote them and there is therefore less bias from external interpreters/researchers (as compared to other methods).
- The visual representation that is generated by the Sensemaker software is easy to understand, attracts people's attention, and shows clear patterns. If it comes with a good set of stories, it combines quantitative data with qualitative data.
- Results from the Sensemaker process can be integrated into annual reports to donors.

TEXTBOX 23:

The challenge of aggregating context specific monitoring information (Woord & Daad).

Allowing aggregation of monitoring information from different geographical locations was seen as an advantage of the uniform results framework in the Woord & Daad case. This resulted in scores for specific alliances and countries which were easy to report. Furthermore, these scores could be used for bench marking and comparison. While such bench marking and comparison were intended to stimulate dialogue among partner organisations, which it did, this hadn't to date stimulated learning by partner organisations. In a first monitoring round it was also observed that some partner organisations were afraid that, without the necessary context specificity, monitoring information that pointed towards lower poverty levels could lead to less funding. This concern was confounded by the fact that the alliance budget had to be divided among the various alliance members. This again points to the earlier observation that the PMEL system had been experienced by the partner organisations of Woord & Daad as mainly serving upward accountability requirements instead of satisfying internal learning needs.

We are aware of the fact that most cases at this stage of the action research only managed to go through one or two monitoring cycles. Only the results of their initial monitoring activities are therefore available. At the same time, these results give us insight in the usefulness of the monitoring information that emerged from the actor-focused PME approaches with regards to satisfying upward accountability needs. Firstly, we see that it has provided the cases with monitoring information about programme results that was not available before the pilot. This includes information about intangible and unexpected changes at the level of the direct and indirect actors that a programme seeks to influence. Secondly, the actor-focused PME approaches already contributed towards learning about programme results in such a way that it helped programmes to refine their theories of change and adjust strategies accordingly. Being able to show what you have learned and how you have used these lessons to adjust programme plans is an efficient way of being accountable. At the same time, we recognise the challenges that remain, especially with analysing and reporting qualitative data and dealing with questions of bias. Nevertheless, we tend to argue that actor-focused PME approaches are more than just an interesting addition to

the more linear PME approaches. Instead, we tend to see them as an essential element of PME practice for those seeking to strengthen upward accountability when dealing with complex social-change processes.

4.4.2 Horizontal accountability

It was shown that horizontal accountability was strengthened in those cases where an actor-focused PME approach went hand-in-hand with increased dialogue among different programme actors situated at the same level in the results chain or in the same circle of influence or control. This is well illustrated by the Cordaid case, in which regular learning spaces strengthened horizontal accountability among women's networks at local, regional, and national levels. This was made possible by increasing monitoring-information feedback levels among the various networks and network members, increased transparency, more active participation by less powerful and vocal women in the networks, and stronger input from local networks in decision-making at regional and national levels (see Textbox 24).

TEXTBOX 24:

Regular learning spaces promoting horizontal accountability among peers.

There is a limited funding relation between Cordaid and the women's networks it supports. Upward accountability is therefore less of an issue. Cordaid does not impose its global indicator set on its partners. The PME pilot was therefore not stifled by or limited to a predetermined monitoring framework, but instead had the necessary operational space for its PME system to evolve according to the needs and the context of the women's networks within the "violence against women" programme in Colombia. The establishment of specific learning spaces in the form of reflection meetings at local, regional, and national level grew organically during the design of the PME system based on OM and MSC. These spaces were found to contribute to increased transparency among the women and organisations involved in the programme. This was illustrated by increased participation by women and member organisations in monitoring the results of their activities and in making decisions about future actions and plans. In addition, the learning spaces also helped the various participants share information about how funds were used, resulting in more trust among the various members. Broad access to shared monitoring information at all levels also helped to neutralise some dominant powers and facilitated stronger local networks involvement in agenda-setting and decision-making. *"In Santander there are some tensions now. The local networks want to have more space, are questioning the role of the NGOs and the meeting places. The meetings are always in the capital, because the urban networks are based there. Also, the local networks are questioning the NGOs whether they participate as an NGO or as representatives of the network. The discussions used to be dominated by the NGOs. Because NGO's traditionally were the facilitators and trainers of women's networks, they still tend to sit on the chair of the women"* (M&E Consultant, Cordaid).

In the VECO case, multi-stakeholder meetings with various actors in the agricultural value-chain programme contributed to horizontal accountability. During these meetings, chain actors were given the opportunity to discuss story packs that had emerged from the Sense-

maker process. This allowed chain actors to discuss sensitive issues such as price-setting and to come up with recommendations for future actions or programme adjustments. Textbox 25 illustrates the result of such a multi-stakeholder meeting from the VECO case.

TEXTBOX 25:

Horizontal accountability in action in the VECO case.

Feedback of the Sensemaker results and analysis of the stories during a multi-actor meeting with farmers, farmer organisation leaders, and the tea processing company resulted in intense debates on issues related to price-setting and quality standards. Meeting participants selected the following two stories they felt reflected the core message of the price setting issue:

1. *"On May 20, 2011, I felt lucky to become a member of our tea group. I remember one day in June, I picked up tea to sell to the tea company at its gate. The lady buyer of the company said 'your tea is not really good; I can pay you only 3600 dong for a kg'. I came back and talked to Ms. Tien and she rang the company's lady buyer to inform that I belonged to Phu Cuong tea group. One day later, I also picked up tea and brought to the company and sold at a higher price, 3800 dong a kg. After that, I carried tea to sell there again; the buyer said that she could pay me only 3500/kg. What happened made me sad and I wish that the tea company could have a system to stabilise tea price for farmers."*
2. *"On August 20, 2011, after a training my family learnt how to look after tea plants in a better way. Thanks to this, we produced good and tender tea and sold at 3500 dong for a kg. When I transported 150 kg tea to the Tea Company and collectors there said that 'your tea is good. You must have picked up at the right time and correct method'. I felt happy as I had been looking after tea very well and picked up tea in the right way."*

The meeting closed with a set of recommendations: the need for trade contracts between the cooperative and the company, further training in tea-picking techniques, and a commitment by the company to display prices at collection points.

Strengthened horizontal accountability was also observed in the Light for the World and War Child Holland cases, where challenges related to responsibilities and roles of different programme actors were discussed during learning meetings as part of the monitoring system. This resulted in practical decisions and actions to address these challenges. For example, Light for the World partner organisations' action plans were adjusted to avoid overlapping beneficiary services. In the War Child Holland case, it emerged that War Child head office needed more time and resources to support monitoring-tool use by programme facilitators in the field.

Many of the organisations sought to strengthen horizontal accountability by organising

spaces for horizontal learning between peers. In the MCNV and Woord & Daad cases, organisational capacity assessments were facilitated by peers instead of the donor NGOs. In the ICCO case, client satisfaction instrument results were discussed in the presence of various partner organisations. Some cases also designed IT-based solutions similar to the web-based systems already mentioned in the Stro and Cordaid cases. These systems were set up to strengthen transparency and improve access to monitoring information. Such opportunities for sharing information and experiences were felt by partner organisations to stimulate transparency and mutual accountability among peers within a programme or a network. As discussed earlier, learning spaces where peers can meet, share experiences, and learn require

4.4.3 Downward accountability

a considerable investment and need careful facilitation, and there is no guarantee they will successfully promote horizontal accountability. Woord & Daad for example reported that partners would share experiences during learning meetings, but that there was a risk nothing much would be done with the information. As we saw in the section on adaptive capacity, the sustainability of such learning spaces is fragile, and depends on the will of local partners and supporting NGOs for maintenance and nourishment.

Throughout the research, we observed that actor-focused PME approaches can potentially promote downward accountability. This potential was especially observed in those cases where the PME approach provides a practical methodology that helps programme actors to give critical feedback about the programme and stimulates regular learning spaces where the feedback can be used to inform programme adjustments. Textboxes 26 and 27 illustrate examples of downward accountability in action in the cases of ICCO and Woord & Daad.

TEXTBOX 26:

Using client-satisfaction instruments to improve service delivery.

“Clients complained about the fact that they sometimes come to the hospital to find out that for their specific health complaint a doctor is not available during that day. They had to return one or two days later. As a correction measure the hospital now offers integrated diagnostic services, which allows patients to see a doctor for all health issues during the week and not only at set times/days” (ICCO, Malawi).

TEXTBOX 27:

Informing programme adjustments based on outcome monitoring through scorecards.

Woord & Daad partner organisations use scorecards to monitor quality and participation outcomes in their technical and vocational education programmes. The tools are used in the schools and with parents and other community actors. The monitoring information obtained led to a realisation among the partners that client satisfaction measurement needs to be included in regular programme management procedures. Other lessons included the need for more written policies and improved inclusion of parents in decision-making.

Downward accountability processes were also observed when the PME approach helped a programme organise collective reflection during which donor NGOs and partners were able to consider both progress at partner level and the effectiveness of the donor NGO's support. This was observed in the cases of Light for the World, STRO, and MCNV, where programme-planning activities supporting partners remained relatively open, and could be adjusted according to lessons learned during monitoring meetings involving representatives from both the donor NGO and the partners.

We also learned that downward accountability doesn't come easily and requires a considerable effort. This is illustrated by the following challenges that were observed across the cases in relation to downward accountability:

- **The challenge of collecting honest feedback:** As we mentioned earlier in this paper, it can be hard for people to be critical of services they receive for free. ICCO tried to address this challenge by explaining and demonstrating to their beneficiaries the importance of critical feedback in terms of improving service delivery. Setting up anonymous complaint mechanisms was another strategy used by ICCO to stimulate critical feedback.
- **The challenge of learning from critical feedback:** In every case, we saw a considerable risk that too much focus and effort goes towards data collection and not enough towards using this data for learning and programme adjustment. If feedback is merely collected and not used to drive learning and programme adjustment, it remains an administrative exercise that can at best serve upward accountability requirements.

- **The challenge of informing those who provide critical feedback of what is done with this feedback.** Downward accountability processes were strongest when the actors who contribute information (through whichever actor-focused PME approach) are informed of what was done with the information they supplied. For example, when ICCO's service-delivering partner organisations' staff began informing beneficiaries about how their client-satisfaction instruments were used, people were empowered to be more critical in their future assessments. A similar example from the STRO case is illustrated in Textbox 28.

We also observed, however, that feedback to beneficiaries remains generally weak. The resources and time needed to organise such feedback are the two most cited reasons. This means asking if programme staff and management value the benefits of downward accountability enough to invest the necessary resources and sustain them on a regular basis.



COLLECTING DATA

TEXTBOX 28:

Managing unrealistic expectations (STRO case).

One of STRO's partner organisations decided to use OM for their strategic planning with the communities where they work, only to find themselves with unrealistic demands from these communities. The partner organisation had to go back to the communities and start a process of dialogue to manage expectations and adjust strategic planning. This feedback process contributed towards more trustful relationships between the partner organisation and the communities, and towards the empowerment of both staff and community members involved in the strategic planning process.



- **The challenge of dealing with unequal power relations.** The issue of power differences was shown to be an important challenge that needs careful consideration. In one of Oxfam Novib's partner organisations, for example, stories were collected internally from the female field staff employed in a malaria programme. These stories proved to be very useful as an appraisal tool for the predominantly male management. It was not clear, however, to what extent the MSC exercise contributed to improved relations between field staff and management, or if it was mainly a process

to extract personal change stories from female staff to be judged by management. The importance of transparency in using these stories is illustrated in the ETC Compas case, where it was reported that stories are validated in community fora in the presence of traditional chiefs and other community members (ETC Compas Ghana learning history). While this was shown to be a good learning space, it also raised questions about whether the storytellers were aware their stories would be scrutinised in public and, if so, to what extent that influenced candidness.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

From 2009 through 2012, 10 NGOs (nine Dutch and one Belgian) and their partners engaged in a collaborative action-research process to pilot various actor-focused PME approaches and methods.⁷ We chose to call the piloted PME approaches “actor-focused” for two main reasons. First, because they direct the focus of PME towards changes in what people do or perceive instead of changes in state (e.g., increased income or production). Second, because the direct or indirect target groups are actively involved in the collection and/or use of the monitoring information. The overall aim of this process was to find out if and how these actor-focused PME approaches helped organisations and their partners to deal with complex change processes. We tried to answer this question by exploring how the actor-focused PME approach assisted the cases in dealing with the following four implications of complexity for PME: 1) Dealing with multiple relations and perspectives; 2) learning about the results of the programme; 3) strengthening adaptive capacity; and 4) satisfying different accountability needs. In this section we summarise the conclusions and recommendations that we can draw from this exploration.

1. An actor-focused PME approach, if done well and followed through with the necessary leadership, can provide development organisations working towards complex change with the means not only to demonstrate this complex change (i.e., show their results) but also to learn how this change happened and how they contributed to it. This can help organisations to adjust their strategies according to lessons learned, making them more effective and adaptive. This conclusion is based on evidence from the 10 cases that implemented various actor-focused approaches and which is summarised in Figure 11 on the next page. Actor-focused PME practice is therefore not just an interesting complement to more mainstream linear planning logic; we consider it an essential component of learning-centred programme management, particularly in contexts of complex change.

We are fully aware that implementing an actor-focused PME approach is not a silver bullet that will solve all problems related to dealing with complex change and the pressures related to the results agenda. Figure 12 on the next page illustrates the main challenges faced with the implementation of an actor focused PME approach in relation to dealing with relationships, learning, accountability, and adaptive capacity.

7. The actor-focused PME approaches piloted in this action research included OM, MSC, client-satisfaction instruments, Sensemaker, personal goal exercises, and scorecards.

Figure 11: Advantages of actor-focused PME approaches in dealing with complex processes of social change

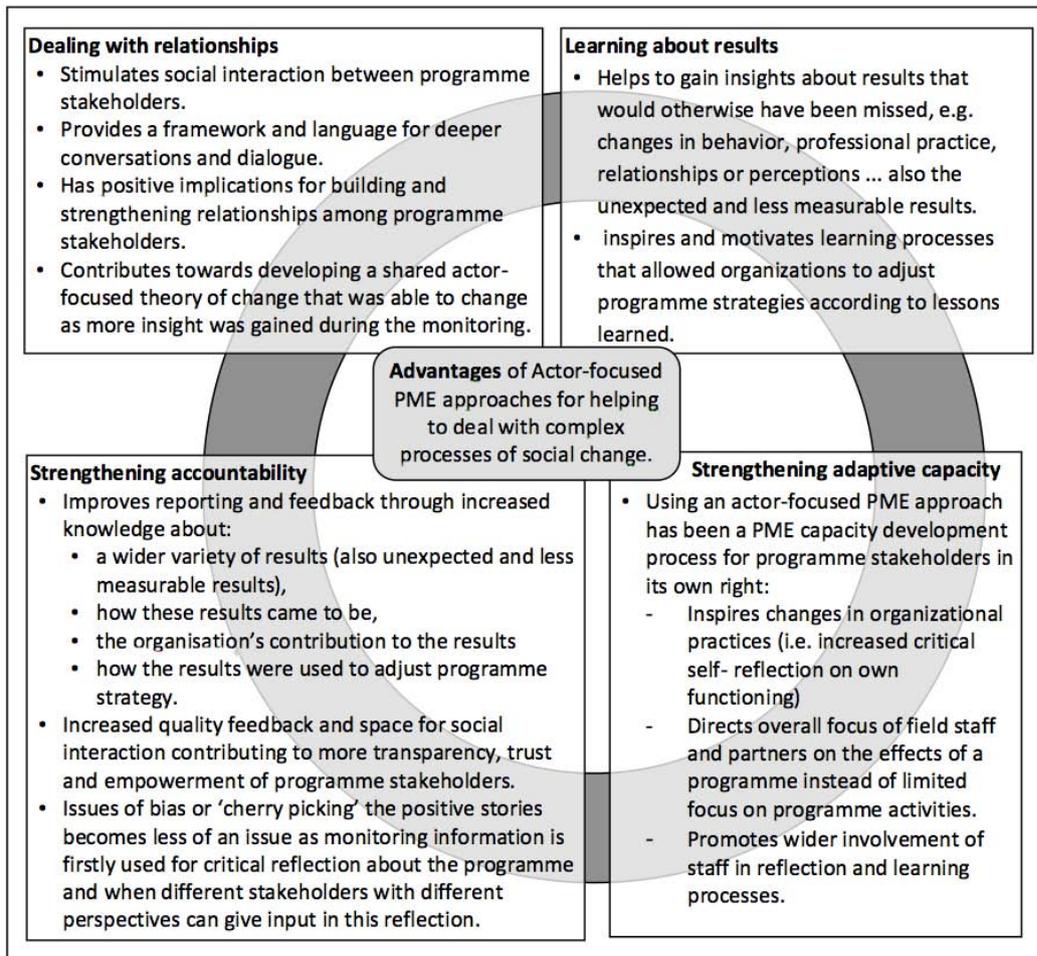
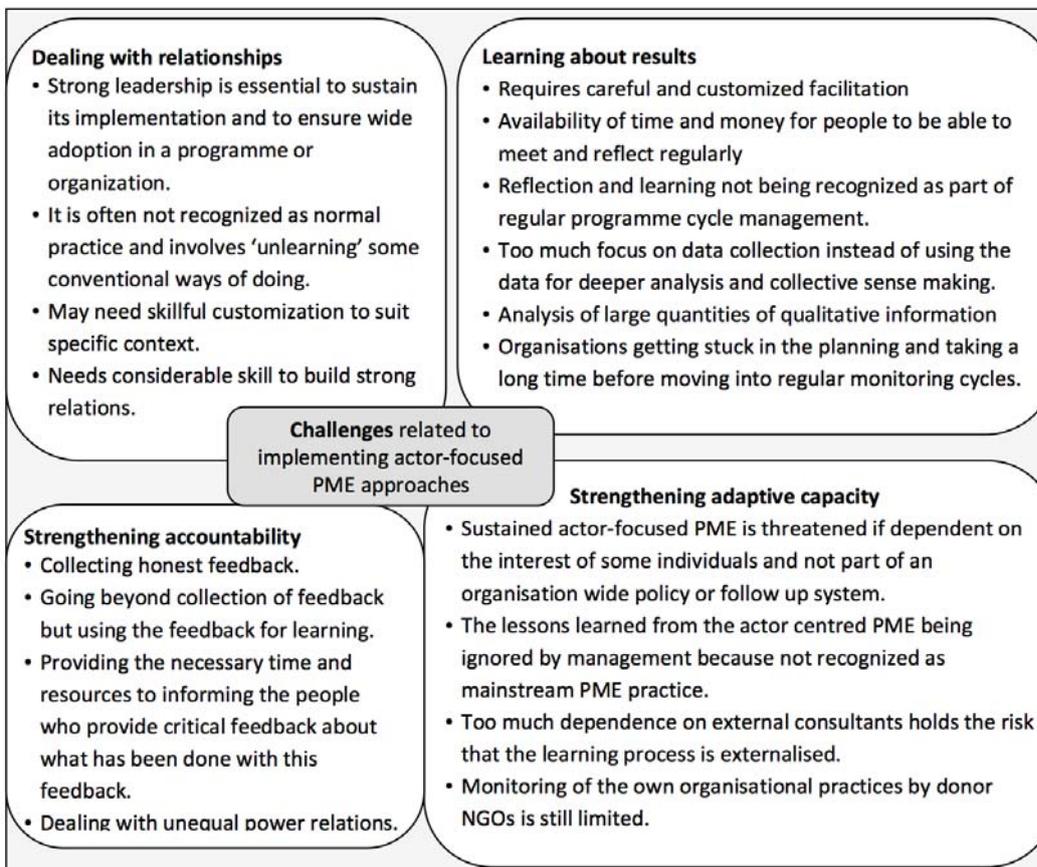


Figure 12: Challenges related to implementing actor-focused PME approaches



In the additional conclusions below, we elaborate in more detail the strengths and challenges of using an actor-focused PME approach in relation to the four implications of complexity with regards to PME (i.e., relationships, learning, adaptive capacity, and accountability).

2. Relationships:

Implementing actor-focused PME approaches can be rewarding in terms of helping donor NGOs and their partners deal with multiple actors, perspectives, and relationships. Their implementation requires a considerable effort, however, in terms of time, resources, and leadership. This conclusion is based on the following advantages and challenges of the actor-focused PME approaches observed across the action research cases:

ADVANTAGES:

- Helps to clarify different actors' expectations, roles, and responsibilities by developing actor-focused theories of change. This helps a programme **to plan more realistically** around the actors that are identified as key levers for contributing towards the programme's vision or objectives. It also helps to identify who is influencing whom through clarifying the various spheres of control and influence.
- **Opens up new result levels where programme effects can be harvested.** These effects constitute changes in key stakeholders' behaviour, practice, relationships, or perceptions at various levels in a results chain. Such effects didn't get much attention in the logical frameworks of the action-research cases.
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities helps deal with power relations and political processes. Once operational programme plans are developed and agreed, it is often difficult to change them, as they may constitute a source of income for partner organisations

or supported actors. If monitoring shows that roles and responsibilities are not met over time, existing relationships can more easily be discussed and sometimes questioned on the basis of monitoring data and less on emotions or assumptions. This can make it easier to change partner organisations' funded action plans or even change partner organisations if necessary. **As a result, theories of change can become less fixed and more adaptable.**

- Helps to stimulate more intense interaction between programme implementers and their direct and indirect target groups, hence bringing the voices of the target groups to the attention and consideration of the programme. This can help to **strengthen relations**, which are an important basis for learning and for empowering programme actors in less powerful positions.

CHALLENGES:

- It takes time, a learning culture, and strong leadership for an actor-focused PME approach to be widely adopted. This can be especially challenging when an actor-focused PME approach is not explicitly required by the donor.
- It is often not recognised as normal practice and involves "unlearning" some conventional approaches. In some cases, it has taken more than a year to launch the PME approach.
- Needs considerable skill to build strong relations, as this doesn't happen automatically merely by involving people in the PME process. For example, the way stories are collected in MSC or the way feedback about use of monitoring information is organised determines the development of trust between programme stakeholders.

3. Learning:

An actor-focused PME approach is an investment in learning. Nevertheless, while such approaches can provide practical mechanisms for promoting learning, such learning doesn't come automatically or without considerable leadership and effort. We observed the following learning-promotion mechanisms associated with the piloted actor-focused PME approaches:

- Helps a programme open up to surprise by bringing to light information about intangible and unexpected effects and contextual information which was not available without the actor-focused approaches.
- Helps to avoid dualistic thinking or programme management characterised by discussions of achievement or non-achievement of predetermined targets; instead encourages openness to multiple kinds of information that can help analyse if the programme is going in the right direction and inform programme adjustments if necessary.
- An actor-focused approach has been demonstrated to stimulate dialogue and reflection among programme actors, which was shown to be crucial for collaborative learning about monitoring data.
- While some of the participating organisations started this process mainly to improve the technical aspects of PME practice (e.g., train people in implementing a specific PME approach according to a manual and initiate PME) it soon became clear that the action research process resulted in bringing to light different programme stakeholders' hidden assumptions and values. This had tangible implications for PME practice and a programme's internal politics, and for the relationships between various programme actors. It also contributed, as we already mentioned, to a deeper understanding of a programme's actor-focused theory of change.

In addition, stimulating and sustaining collaborative learning is shown to be the most difficult aspect of all the actor-focused PME approaches explored in the action research. This is crucial for the success of these PME approaches. At the same time, the PME approaches themselves cannot guarantee that collaborative learning will take place. The following challenges for collaborative learning could be observed across the cases:

- Availability of careful and customised facilitation to promote critical reflection and identification of action points.
- Availability of time and money allowing people to meet and reflect regularly.
- Reflection and learning activities not being integrated as a regular event in programme cycle management.
- Too much focus on data collection, instead of using the data for deeper analysis and collective sense-making.
- Analysing large quantities of qualitative information and aggregating this information at higher levels in the programme.
- Organisations getting stuck in planning and taking a long time to move into regular monitoring cycles.

4. Adaptive capacity:

An actor-focused PME approach was shown to strengthen programme stakeholders' adaptive capacity, as demonstrated by observable changes in organisational practice that emerged during the relatively short action-research period. This was even more remarkable given that several organisations were simultaneously affected by cuts in government funding. The integration of actor-focused PME approaches in programmes and organisational systems and processes can therefore be seen as capacity-development in its own right, and

can strengthen programme actors. This is especially the case when:

- Actors requiring specific information learn to collect the information that is relevant to them and their own practice.
- Feedback loops are integrated into the PME approach and actions are taken on the basis of insights into this feedback.
- Opportunities and spaces to learn about roles, relations, and change in relation to organisations own interventions become part and parcel of the organisational rhythm.

Such capacity-development processes are vulnerable if they remain an isolated experiment in an organisation or programme, however. Anchoring actor-focused PME approaches in a programme's day-to-day work remains a challenge but also a condition for adaptability in a fast-changing context.

5. Accountability:

Actor-focused PME emerged as essential to improved accountability, not only upwards to management and donors (upward accountability), but also towards peers (horizontal accountability), and beneficiaries (downward accountability). This conclusion is a direct result of the previous conclusions on relationships and learning.

- Implementing an actor-focused approach didn't only help organisations to report on a wider variety of results but also how these results materialised in a specific context and beneficiaries' perceptions of them. In addition, organisations were able to report and provide feedback to other programme stakeholders about how they had used their deeper insights into their results to adjust their programme strategies.
- Issues of bias or of "cherry picking" positive stories became less of an issue or limitation. This is because the monitoring information

was first used for drawing meaning about the programme, and for critical reflection and programme improvement along the way. Allowing for critical reflection with input from different stakeholders' perspectives adequately balanced any possible bias.

- It is as an unavoidable reality that the aggregation of monitoring information about complex change, as is sometimes requested by donors, will lose contextual meaning and relevance. We don't see this as a challenge that needs to be solved. Instead, we need to learn to understand that without this context-specific character, monitoring information loses its power to offer insight into programme effectiveness. For the purpose of learning what works in which context, aggregation isn't all that useful.
- Horizontal accountability was strengthened in those cases in which an actor-focused PME approach went hand-in-hand with increased dialogue among programme actors situated at the same level in the results chain or in the same circle of influence or control.
- Downward accountability was especially strengthened in those cases in which the actor-focused PME approach provides a practical methodology for programme actors to give critical feedback about the programme. At the same time, organisational commitment to downward accountability is needed to ensure that time and resources are available for applying feedback to programme improvement and informing stakeholders of how the feedback is used.

Recommendations

1. From results-based management towards results-based learning. The results of this study affirm the importance of dem-

onstrating a programme's results in order to learn if it is moving in the right direction and to adjust the programme if necessary. However, **the study does question the notion that results can be technically managed in contexts of complex change.** Result areas that are too rigidly managed and made uniform across various context risks making PME a reporting exercise. This may be comfortable for programme implementers and donors, but may not contribute to better programmes, as it may not stimulate a learning culture. The research has shown that it may also obscure a lot of unexpected and intangible results that can be missed in the process of reporting to predetermined results. While some kind of predetermined results framework can be useful to provide focus and to give direction, in contexts of complex change, programme actors need to go beyond these frameworks. Throughout the action-research, we learned that focusing PME towards the actors involved at different levels in the programme can help the programme to become more learning-oriented, and better able to deal with the unpredictability of complex change. **Genuine learning about results can be stimulated if an effort is made to look for unexpected and intangible results (in addition to expected results) and if opportunities for collaborative learning are purposefully organised and skilfully facilitated.** In the next points we propose some recommendations for programme implementers and donors to help them make "learning from results" a reality.

2. What can programme implementers do to help them make "results-based learning" a reality:

- **Using actor-focused PME approaches can help to broaden a programme's results "radar".** In other words, tracking changes in behaviour, relationships, and direct and indirect target groups' actions and/or perceptions at different levels in the results chain can bring to light unexpected effects that may remain hidden by monitoring according to predetermined results frameworks. Such results frameworks can be useful for strategic direction, but actor-focused PME approaches can add considerable value as complimentary approaches.
- **Regular monitoring of programme results** resulting in lessons that inform programme adjustments is key for dealing with complex change processes. This may require shifting perceptions of the meaning and value of regular monitoring practice. Monitoring is still often perceived as the little brother (or sister) within monitoring and evaluation. It is often limited to a regular follow-up of programme activities and activity-based progress reports. Evaluation, on the other hand, is much more associated with deeper learning about programme results. At the same time, such evaluations are often carried out by external consultants, and the learning therefore externalised. We argue that effective monitoring by programme staff needs to go beyond activity monitoring but should systematically and regularly track programme effects and motivate learning processes that can inform programme adjustment whenever the programme is getting off track.
- **Strong leadership that motivates and mandates regular learning-centred monitoring of programme effects is key.** Actor-focused PME approaches can help, but will not by themselves guarantee that a programme becomes better able to deal with processes of complex change. A strong learning culture and managerial encouragement to monitor and think critically about results are key. Also, regular monitoring and learning about a programme's results requires a considerable effort in terms of time and financial and logistical resources. Merely training programme staff in one or another actor-focused PME approach may be an important step, but by itself will not be enough.

- **Organisations shouldn't hide behind the strategic-planning and reporting formats required by a donor to avoid actor-focused PME approaches to operationalise their strategic planning.**

Most organisations participating in this action research already had a strategic plan in place, with associated budgets approved by their respective donors. Each of these strategic planning frameworks constituted a logframe that laid out programmatic areas with specific objectives, result areas, and associated SMART indicators to follow progress. At the same time, all cases were able to experiment with actor-focused PME approaches that were complementary to their strategic planning framework and based on a planning logic that was fundamentally different from the strategic planning logic. The argument that donor requirements prevent organisations from using actor-focused PME approaches therefore doesn't apply.

3. Policy makers and donors may stimulate "results-based learning" in the following ways:

- Ask funded programmes **to demonstrate that they have developed and implement PME systems that are learning-centred** and that stimulate formal and informal learning at individual and collective level. In addition, donors could ask for specific accounts of how lessons learned were used for programme improvement or for planning.
- **Use a wider notion of what results can entail.** We observed that very useful programme results can be harvested in terms of changed behaviours, relations or perceptions among social actors directly or indirectly influenced by a programme. While such changes may not provide objective measurements of changes in state, which may be the specific objective of a programme (e.g., increased production or income, health, etc.), they are crucial to making these changes in state sustainable.

This could also mean that donors accept programme proposals that promise less ambitious but more realistic results.

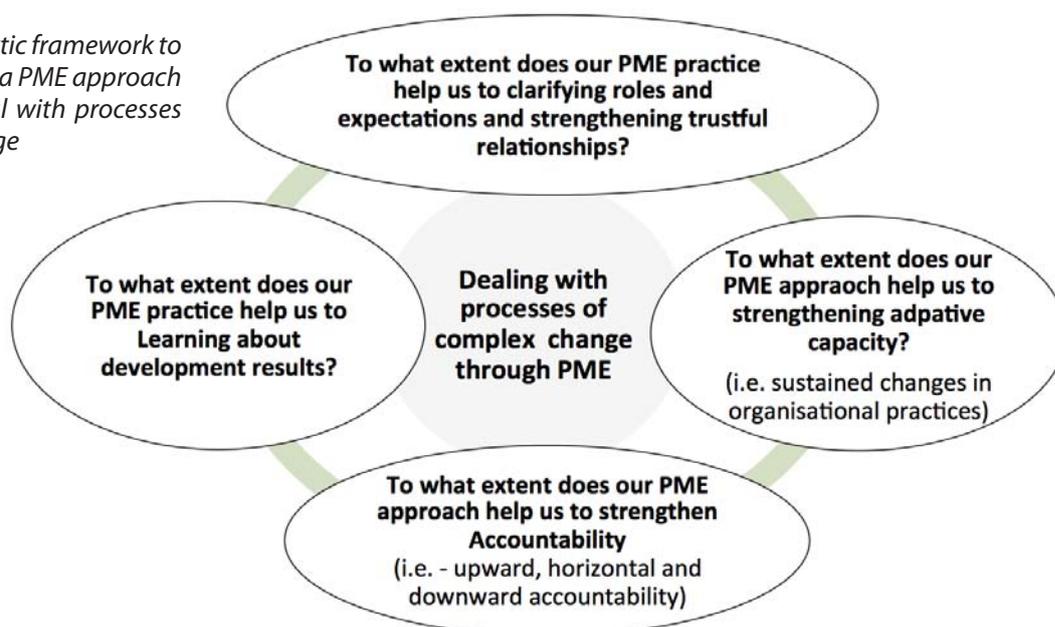
- Ask programmes **to submit proposals that are clear and explicit about the various actors** in a programme's sphere of control (i.e., who is responsible for inputs, activities, outputs), spheres of direct influence (direct target groups) and spheres of indirect influence (indirect target groups or/and final beneficiaries). Asking for specific information about the actors that are situated in these spheres can help organisations' programme design become more actor-focused. As we learned from our research, such actor-focused programme designs (or actor-centred theories of change) can help organisations monitor results at different levels of the results chain during programme implementation. 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 had to change. This would help safeguard and promote flexibility in programme planning.
- Allow programmes to **use part of the operational budget to fine-tune their actor-focused programme design** in collaboration with local programme stakeholders and accept adjustments that are informed by lessons learned from programme effects. In fact, a donor should become concerned if no adjustments of programme plans are deemed necessary along the way, especially in the case of programmes that work towards complex change.
- Develop the **donor staff's knowledge** about the basic characteristics of actor-focused PME approaches, their suitability for specific contexts, and their potential to complement (but not necessarily replace) other, more established, approaches.

4. Using actor-focused PME approaches may help solve the notorious dilemma facing most development organisations that rely on donor funding. Under pressure to show results, organisations maintain they can solve the development problems they address as long as they have enough money (Eyben, 2006). This can seriously backfire when organisations, a few years later, find themselves unable to solve those complex problems. Such situations, showing that aid doesn't seem to work as promised and that problems continue to exist, can affect public opinion in donor countries, which are increasingly sceptical about aid and about maintaining or increasing aid budgets (Glennie et al, 2012). Interestingly, Glennie et al (ibid) also revealed that there is a considerable appetite among the general public of the United Kingdom for greater understanding of development and for more complex stories of how change and progress happens. "Instead of a simple reassurance that 'aid works', people would like to hear about how and why it works, why it doesn't always work and the reasons aid alone cannot achieve development targets." (ibid, p2). Using actor-focused approaches in a more systematic way can help organisations tell this complex story. This is a tentative recommendation that is not yet based on empirical evidence, but would offer a great opportunity for further research.

5. Collaborative action research has proven to be effective in strengthening the capacity of the participating organisations in the use of complexity-oriented PME and to draw lessons that can be useful for practitioners and policy-makers. Systematic reflection by the individual organisations on their PME actions has played an important part in the success of the action research. It helped to avoid a situation in which organisations would merely introduce PME approaches without reflecting on how this approach helped them. In addition, the collaborative element allowed the cases to learn from one another in a more systematic way. Organisations who could not take part in this action research may consider setting up similar collaborative action-research trajectories to strengthen their capacity in complexity-oriented PME practice. Policy makers could equally benefit from such processes.

6. The analytic framework that we used for the research questions in this study can be used by other organisations or programme teams to explore to what extent their PME approach is helping them deal with complex change processes. Figure 13 below shows the main analytic categories of the framework. These categories can be used as a basis for reflection on PME practice by programme teams.

Figure 13: Analytic framework to assess the extent a PME approach is helping to deal with processes of complex change



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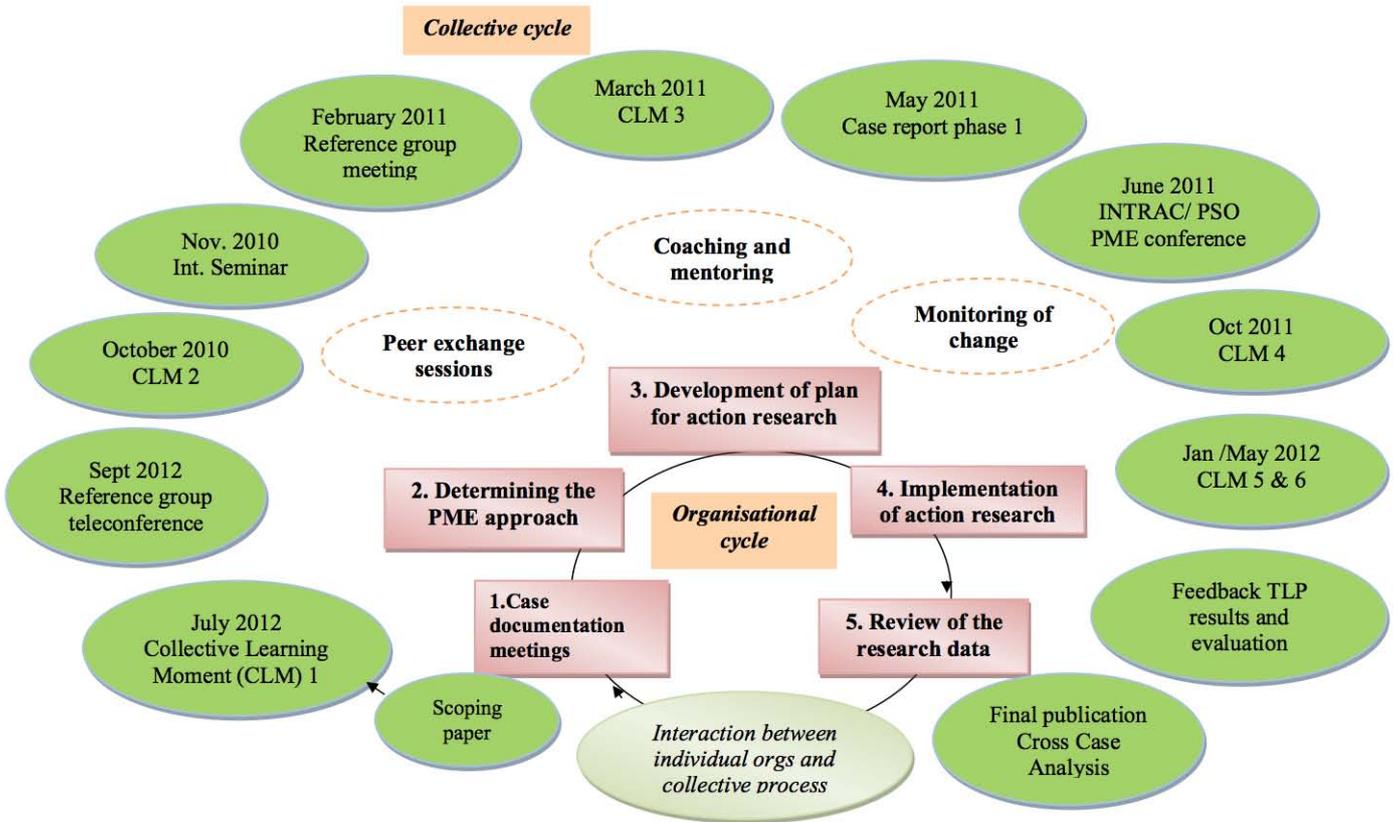
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Annexes

Annex 1:

Visualisation of the audit trail of the different research activities



Annex 2:

Results framework for Woord & Daad vocational training and job and businesses programme

Type of result	Objective	Indicator
Impact	Improved skills training and (self) employment opportunities, leading to more sustainable income and a better position in the labour market for the poor and vulnerable.	No indicators. This will be measured through impact studies
OUTCOME		
Utilisation	Improved skills training and (self) employment opportunities, leading to more sustainable income and a better position in the labour market for the poor and vulnerable.	2 a. Nr of TVET trainees and JBS clients who find employment 2 b. Nr of TVET trainees and JBS clients who are self-employed 2 c. Nr of TVET trainees who continue in further education
Access	--	1. % of TVET trainees and JBS clients that work under fair labour conditions
Organisation	Strengthened role of actors (parents, community) in education. The target group organises itself in different groups and associations.	3. Social Capital Score 4. Number of partners providing TVET and/or JBS with an active network of ex-trainees and/or JBS clients
Quality	The TVET and JBS providers and/or training institutions have effective qualitative programs for the training and income needs.	5 a. Quality score for TVET providers 5 b. Quality score for JBS providers 6 a. The percentage of total costs of the TVET project that is covered by project income 6 b. The percentage of total costs of the JBS project that is covered by project income
OUTPUT		
Service delivery	To provide effective and high-quality TVET.	7 a. Number of trainees enrolled in TVET programs 7 b. Number of TVET trainees who successfully completed a TVET program 8. Annual number of JBS clients receiving individual services
Civil society strengthening	To strengthen the capacities of schools, partners, and CBOs.	9 a. Number of staff capacity development training units 9 b. Number of person-days training 10 a. Number of partner organisations that participate in networks relevant for the program 10 b. Number of networks relevant for the program
Advocacy	Relevant advocacy initiatives are actively undertaken by TVET and JBS providers and by rural communities.	11. Number of partner organisations that have an implemented advocacy program or are actively involved in the advocacy program of a network

Source: WD 2010

Annex 3: Customised outcome journals used as monitoring tool in Cordaid’s violence against women programme

The focus of Cordaid’s PME system is mainly directed towards two actor levels. The first level involves changes in of key actors’ behaviour that the women’s networks are seeking to influence (see Figure 7). The second level involves an assessment of the functioning of the women’s network (see Figure 8).

Figure 14 shows an extract from the outcome journal (i.e., key actor-monitoring tool) that was developed using elements of the OM outcome journal. The key actor-monitoring tool provides a framework for assessing the changes in key actors using the OM concept of “outcome challenge”. It also contains a set of questions that helps the women’s groups build stories of change for each key actor and draw lessons to inform planning of future activities.

Figure 14: extract from customised outcome journal from Cordaid’s violence against women programme

Key actors we tried to influence during this period	What behavioral changes we were expecting to influence or support in these actors? (Ideal behavior)	Which was the behavior of these actors, at the moment we began to influence or support them? (Initial behavior)	Have we observe changes? (mark with an "X" one of the following options			
			No change	Negative change	Some positive change	Significant positive change
1. Actor 1	Outcome challenges copied from the annual plan, or emergent outcomes	Base line behavior copied from the annual plan, or retrospectively defined for emergent outcomes			X	
2. Actor 2						X
3.				X		
Identifying the key aspects of the story of change (done for three actors that are give the highest priority):						
Guiding questions: who changed?; Where?; What kind of change?; How these changes contribute to the National Advocacy Plan themes and purposes?; What has been done to contribute to the described changes? Where? With whom?; What other actors and factors contributed to the described change? How?. The answers to these questions are later used as elements to build a story of change in a creative way and a title is assigned to each story.						
Deepening the reflection and the learning from the story of change:						
Guiding questions: Why this change is important for us and for our realities/contexts?; What changes, if any, we still want to pursue in this actor?; What actions we should implement to keep influencing or supporting this actor? What have we learned from this experience, that may be useful for the policy influence work for us and for others?.						

Figure 15 shows an extract of the journal used to assess the functioning of the women’s network at regional and national levels.

The first part of the journal focuses on agreeing on an “ideal” situation for the articulation and networking processes based on previously agreed networking categories, and assesses progress towards it. Categories can also be adjusted or change. Once the “ideal” situation is defined or reviewed, a progress assessment is done both in a numerical and descriptive way (see columns four and five in Figure 8).

Figure 15: Form to identify progress toward ideal functioning of articulation and networking categories

Articulation and networking categories	Ideal functioning of the articulation and networking categories	Progress assessment towards the ideal (on a Scale from 1 to 5, in which 1 = Little progress, and 5 = significant progress)	Description of the progress towards the ideal functioning
Strategic vision and common agenda			
Planning			
M&E system			
National core group composition			
.....			
General reflection: What worked well in the networking processes? What was the added value, if any, of being networked in achieving our objectives? What should be improved in the networking processes? What actions are needed?			

Annex 4:

Extract from outcome journal monitoring tool from the Light for the World case

Table 5 shows an extract from an outcome journal used in the Light for the World case, with the original set of progress markers for school directors and teachers developed during a first OM-planning workshop. Progress markers are used to follow up on changes at the level of the school directors and teachers, who are the boundary partners in the Light for the World programme.

Table 6 shows the same outcome journal, but with reformulated progress markers and monitoring information collected during a first monitoring cycle.

Table 5: Extract of outcome journal with initial progress markers for school directors and teachers as developed during first OM-planning workshop.

Boundary partner:			Directors and Teachers		
Outcome Challenge:			Teachers and the school director collaborate to inform the parents about the study results of the LV child. They are knowledgeable, skilled and comfortable to assist LV children in class. They let other schools visit to share their good practice.		
Expect	Like	Love	Progress Marker		Level of achievement (High/Medium/Low)
			X		
	X		2.	Repetition is reduced.	
		X	3.	Quality of teachers is high.	

Table 6 Outcome journal with adjusted progress markers for school directors and teachers. Monitoring info from first monitoring cycle is also included.

Boundary partner:			Directors and Teachers		
Outcome Challenge:			Teachers and the school director collaborate to inform the parents about the study results of the LV child. They are knowledgeable, skilled and comfortable to assist LV children in class. They let other schools visit to share their good practice.		
Expect	Like	Love	Progress Marker		Level of achievement (High/Medium/Low)
			X		
X			2	Interested in disabled students	H
	X		3	Have material for teaching low vision students	M
	X		4	Regular monthly meeting (where they discuss strengths/weaknesses and share experience)	H
	X		5	Follow up and evaluate on result of student with low vision	H
Description of Change:			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The teachers have their own lesson plan. - Both the teachers and the director are enjoying good communication with the parents of the students with disabilities. - When they teach the teachers assist students with disabilities in writing, reading and take time to explain more. - The teachers should have big rulers, big letter bookstand, etc. to their disposal. - Regular meeting between teachers take place. - The teachers have individual follow-up sheets for children with disabilities. 		

Annex 5:

Extract from client satisfaction instrument to assess the service of Farmers' Marketing Organisations (FMOs) (ICCO case)

We would like to ask you to fill in your satisfaction of the total service provided by [fill in name NGO]. Please rate each service from 1 (totally not satisfied) to 5 (completely satisfied).

	Service	1 (totally not satisfied)	2	3	4	5 (completely satisfied)
25.	Training for capacity building					
	Support by field workers and other NGO staffs					
	Facilitation of experience sharing					
	Results of the project					
	Overall satisfaction with the service provided by [fill in name NGO]					

30. Are there any major problems you have experienced regarding our services which make you dissatisfied with our [fill in name of NGO] services? Name up to 3 in order of their importance to you.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

31. What suggestions do you have that would help us provide better services to the farmers who use our FMO services? (Give up to 3 suggestions in order of importance to you).

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Annex 6:

PME methods applied in the collaborative action research

Client Satisfaction Instruments (CSI)

CSI are downward accountability tools to monitor satisfaction among users of a particular service. This may be a public service (e.g., a government hospital or primary school) or a semi-public or private service (e.g., a producer organisation, a cooperative, or an NGO). CSI has become increasingly popular in the social sector to improve service-provider performance. The tools usually considered CSI are: Client Satisfaction Surveys (CSS), Citizen Reporting Cards (CRC), Client Score Cards (CSC), Consumer Panels, Complaints and Grievance Systems, Complaint and Suggestion Boxes, and Citizen Charters. CSI gives voice to those who are usually not heard and strengthens individuals and communities to become discussants in the design, implementation and monitoring of services.

Visit: www.clientsatisfactioninstruments.org

The IDEAL PME toolkit (War Child Holland)

This M&E toolkit consists of five parts: i) a personal goal exercise through which children are encouraged to formulate the goals they want to work towards during the intervention; ii) the impact map exercise in which children draw the changes over time in a “map” at baseline (this is done after the intervention and three months after the last session); iii) module evaluations to evaluate the content of the modules with the participants and to identify the most important things that the participants have learned during each module; iv) quizzes about the content of each module; and v) a final evaluation. The tools are designed actively to involve children and are used at beneficiary level, as well as to assess workshop strategies. Visit: www.warchildlearning.org

Most Significant Change (MSC) technique

MSC is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation that involves many stakeholders in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data. The process involves the collection of significant change stories at field level, and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by panels of designated stakeholders or staff. Once stories have been captured, various people sit down together, read the stories aloud and have regular and often in-depth discussions about the value of these reported changes. When the technique is implemented successfully, whole teams of people begin to focus their attention on programme impact. From: [Designing a MSC System - Quick Start Guide](#)

Outcome Mapping (OM)

OM focuses on measuring changes in the behavior of the people with whom a development initiative works most closely. OM limits its concern to those results – or “outcomes” – that fall strictly within the program’s sphere of influence. It considers only those activities to which the program can claim it contributed directly. OM works on the principle that development is essentially about people. It looks at how human beings relate to one another and to their environment. Most importantly, OM recognises that development efforts will more likely be successful when they devolve continuing responsibility to local people and institutions. See also: [Outcome Mapping – building learning and reflection into development programs](#)

Sensemaker

SenseMaker is in essence software that comes with a methodological approach. It is a technique that relies on the use of large amounts of fragmented micro-narratives to make sense of complex realities, to distil patterns, and to respond in a timely manner. Through probing questions, respondents give a specific anecdote or a short story. These stories are then self-signified against pre-defined topics of interest (signification framework). It can be used as method to reveal the world through the eyes of programme beneficiaries or important actors linked to the programme. Sensemaker provides a powerful, natural, and intuitive approach for gaining multiple perspectives of and new insights into complex systems. For more information <http://sensemaker-suite.com/index.htm>

Annex 7:

Overview of the cases participating in the action research

ORGANISATION: Woord & Daad (WD) (See WD case report)

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



Context of the pilot:

WD's action research focuses on their implementation of a renewed Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL) approach. WD has been working in regional alliances with partner organisations since 2009, and the organisation has used this opportunity to improve PMEL methods, both at the level of their five regional alliances as well as at the level of WD. The organisation-wide action research is thus part of a larger and longer trajectory, planned for the policy period through 2015.

Summary of the research questions:

1. Which factors determine how far Woord en Daad's implementing partner organisations actively implement and customise the new complexity-oriented PMEL system to make it their own PMEL system?
2. How does the renewed PMEL approach: 1) help to clarify the relationships, roles, and expectations of the actors involved; 2) contribute to learning about progress towards objectives; 3) satisfy accountability needs; and 4) strengthen internal adaptive capacity?

PME approach and outcomes

WD's action research implements an entirely new PMEL system for the organisation rather than one or two specific PME approaches, including both traditional elements (e.g., at output level) and more complexity-oriented elements (at outcome level, using outcome studies and impact studies). The implementation and customisation of the new PMEL approach consisted of the following elements: joint design of a shared vision on development (theory of change – as a guide for further programme development); a joint development of result frameworks per programme; the joint development of tools for monitoring; the appointment of designated PMEL staff, impact studies and the so-called PMEL strengthening visits, at which the individual organisations' PMEL systems are systematically assessed. This implementation was accompanied by various learning activities to enable reflection, including questionnaires to map the overall appreciation of PMEL, group discussions on the outcomes, three rounds of reflection sessions during regional alliance meetings and guided interviews.

W&D found that appointing specific PMEL coordinators raised the profile of PMEL within several partner organisations. Having a person responsible for coordination meant that more information was shared among staff members at different levels of the organisations involved, enabling a fervent discussion of the role and responsibilities of and expectations for PMEL. Joint development of the monitoring part of the PMEL system (mostly consisting of templates and tools), though experienced as a tough exercise, proved useful in learning about programme effects. Horizontal accountability was incorporated on the one hand by organising PMEL-strengthening visits by peers (of both WD and other partner organisations in the regional alliances) and by bringing together PMEL coordinators for collective reflection sessions. Scoring themselves on various areas of accountability sparked interesting discussions on the meaning of accountability; by explaining their scoring rationales to one another, PMEL coordinators could learn from one another. One of the unexpected outcomes of the reflection sessions was the understanding that better cooperation and communication between programme and PMEL personnel was needed, both among partner organisations within the alliances as well as within WD in the Netherlands. This was an aspect identified and addressed during the last part of the action research by organising common reflection sessions.



Context of the pilot:

Cordaid's action-research focussed on developing a PME approach for complex multi-stakeholder processes, and in particular Cordaid's Communities of Change (CoC). A community of change consists of a group of people, networks, and organisations that collaborate towards a specific social-change objective. The CoC concerned is a women and violence programme in Colombia, which supports about 40 networks of individuals, CBOs, and NGOs in eight regions.

The CoC is characterised by linkages between women's groups at local, regional, and national levels, with agendas for change at each level. The links, information flows, and learning between all levels are crucial. The TLP pilot aimed at setting up a PME system serving the information needs at all levels. The women played a leading role in the design of the system.

The pilot entailed two phases: i) a design and pilot phase (Jul 2010-Apr 2011); and ii) an institutionalisation phase (Jun 2011-Jul 2012). The PME pilot and AR was coordinated by a local PME consultant.

Summary of the research questions:

- 1) How does the PME system contribute to an improved and complementary collaboration (i.e. defining roles, joint lobby, make use of each other's expertise in capacity building)?
- 2) How does the PME system contribute to collective learning about planned/unplanned effects or outcomes?
- 3) How does the PME system contribute to: a shared understanding about the ultimate objectives; adjust plans based on lessons learnt; stay flexible and strategic in view of changes in context?
- 4) How does the PME system contribute to increase accountabilities?

PME approach and outcomes

In the pilot different tools from Outcome Mapping and Most Significant Change were combined to design a practical and relevant PME approach that suited the needs of the CoC. This involved four components: i) an actor-oriented planning component; ii) a self-M&E component; iii) an online interactive information system facilitating information flows; and iv) an external evaluation component. The design of the PM&E approach was not a linear process; planning, implementation and reviewing of its structure and operation took place simultaneously, incorporating emerging issues and reflective learning. Another important aspect of the PME approach was the identification and validation of spaces needed for data collection, sense-making, learning and decision-making at the local, regional, and national levels.

Motivation for this pilot was that Cordaid's current M&E system is based on pre-set indicators and quantitative data that do not sufficiently capture what happens in a CoC. Moreover, after four years of networking and collaboration, the women's groups wanted to start working in a more structured way. They indicated that they were interested in improving their strategies and strengthen the network.

Outcomes of this pilot included that the PME approach helped actors to understand the (importance of) different roles and contributions at local, regional, and national level. This helped to strengthen the position of smaller/weaker actors. Also, actor-focused action plans strengthened advocacy strategies and supported more realistic planning. Documenting and reflection was highly valued by the women and supported learning. The results of this learning process are starting to show in the adjustments and changes to the way the networks are developing their new action plans.



Context of the pilot:

ETC COMPAS is one of ETC Foundation's Agri Culture programmes. The COMPAS network consists of community, NGO, and university members in 15 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The network focuses on comparing and supporting endogenous development through a participatory approach based on local people's worldviews, resources, values, institutions, and culture. Worldviews are central to endogenous development as they determine how community members value changes to their lives through development interventions. This can be quite different from how changes are observed, defined, and perceived by outsiders.

COMPAS Sri Lanka was the first network to implement the change stories pilot. They started change stories documentation training in 2009, before the TLP PME began. During regional meetings the COMPAS partners decided that the change stories pilot should be implemented on all three continents, specifically in Ghana (CIKOD – Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development), Sri Lanka (COMPAS Network with Future in Our Hands) and Biodiversity Research and Information Centre (BRIT)) and Bolivia (AGRUCO – Agro-ecology centre of Cochabamba University). The COMPAS partners' main reasons for using the TLP was that it enabled them to get deeper insights in the processes of social change from a Buddhist worldview perspective (Sri Lanka) and to learn about project impact at beneficiary level from an African worldview perspective (Ghana).

Summary of the research questions:

1. Do stories of change contribute to a more holistic understanding of the importance of wellbeing from a worldview perspective in comparison to measuring quantitative wellbeing indicators?
2. Can stories of change function as a qualitative monitoring tool to complement quantitative monitoring tools?

PME approach and outcomes

Change stories were collected to identify, describe, and explain if and how interventions brought about a desirable change in communities in general, and in various groups or individuals in particular. The assumption was that change stories could complement the quantitative indicators commonly used in the logical framework by looking at qualitative aspects of change, such as social cohesion or spiritual empowerment. Quantitative monitoring of programme activities is important in terms of accountability; however, focusing only on quantified indicators is often insufficient for making unexpected changes visible and learning from these.

In Ghana, the stories were also documented by a professional filmmaker, which proved to make them more useful for reflection purposes as well as for presenting insights to donor organisations.



Context of the pilot:

ICCO works in 44 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America and supports programmes that contribute to a world in which people can live in dignity and well-being, a world without poverty and injustice. ICCO's action-research concerned the use of Client Satisfaction Instruments (CSI) as an innovative approach to improve service delivery and empower clients. The introduction of CSI is part of ICCO's PME capacity-building support to partner organisations. From ICCO's interactions with its Southern partners, it became apparent that these partners were often active in sharing their progress reports with ICCO, but rarely were these reports shared with programme clients. Besides, clients' experiences, priorities, and suggestions would not be used to redefine service delivery strategies. Partners in Malawi and Ethiopia explicitly mentioned their interest in testing participatory approaches for improving services. A match between partners' interests and ICCO's concern regarding downward accountability became clear. ICCO introduced CSI initially in 2009 in programmes in agriculture (Ethiopia) and health (Malawi), and later in Bangladesh and Zimbabwe.

Summary of the research questions:

- How does CSI help to clarify the relationships, roles, and expectations of the actors involved in the intervention?
- How does CSI contribute to learning about the progress towards the development objectives (of the programme, partner organisations, partner network, Northern NGOs)?
- How does CSI contribute to satisfying downward, horizontal, and upward accountability needs?
- How does CSI contribute to strengthening the adaptive capacity of program stakeholders?

PME approach and outcomes

The term CSI used in this pilot refers to an umbrella of client satisfaction tools of diverse nature. Through these tools, development intervention target groups (clients) assess the performance of the service delivery organisation and the quality of the services delivered. The assessment of the performance itself is just half of the work; the follow-up on service content as well as the required reform within the service provider is the other half.

The pilot has completed two rounds of CSI surveys/panel discussions. This included an introduction workshop, support and coaching, implementation, and review and feedback. The questionnaires were created by the partner organisations, who also collected and analysed data.

The use of CSI helped partner organisations to pay more attention to the rights and expectations of their "clients" (hospital patients and members of farmers' cooperatives respectively). In the pilot they learned that they had to be aware of the culture of not criticising the service provider. Efforts had to be made to get the "real" picture. Crosschecking data in the field appeared to be essential. The main challenge related to the use of CSI is the risk of investing a lot of effort in data collection but neglecting data analysis and the documentation and feedback of analysis results.

ORGANISATION: Light for the World (LFTW) (See LFTW case report)

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



Context of the pilot:

Before the start of the TLP PME, LFTW had been looking for a PME methodology that is complexity-sensitive. The choice was made to focus their action research on looking at whether Outcome Mapping (OM) could fulfil their needs in this area. LFTW decided to conduct a pilot with OM in an inclusive education programme in Cambodia on which the organisation already cooperated with several local organisations.

The pilot involved a design phase, a study tour with all stakeholders, an implementation phase, two monitoring cycles, and a learning history (link).

Summary of the research questions:

How can LFTW in cooperation with its local partners design and implement more outcome oriented programmes to foster social change, and what benefit can Outcome Mapping offer in this regard?

1. Focus on “networked governance” within a multi-stakeholder approach?
2. What tools, facilitation and enabling environment are needed to stimulate sense-making of stories and collected information to draw lessons for future strategies?
3. How do the OM monitoring tools (strategy journal and outcome journal) find their way in the existing PME system of the various stakeholders and LFTW?
4. How are lessons learned integrated into the pilot programme?
5. How does OM contribute to strengthen internal adaptive capacity at the level of partners and LFTW?
6. What does the use of an outcome-oriented approach imply for LFTW’s PME approach?
7. What (unexpected) lessons are learned in terms of adopting a more outcome-oriented approach to programme development and implementation in other LFTW programmes?

PME approach and outcomes

LFTW soon discovered it is vital to adapt the OM methodology to the local context. They continued the pilot by adopting a flexible approach to which reflection and learning are central. Furthermore, LFTW is now convinced that it is important to find a way around using all the jargon associated with the often-conceptual OM framework. Furthermore, it was shown that conducting a study tour to Vietnam with all the relevant stakeholders early on in the process helped to establish and strengthen relations and allowed programme partners to build a better rapport. Another important point was that during the implementation phase several moments were built into the monitoring framework for face-to-face reflection and learning at the local, national, and regional levels.

Some of the lessons LFTW learned from their experiences with this pilot include that local presence is essential for outcome-oriented programme development. Moreover, the pilot also increased local government engagement in the process, and changed national partners’ attitudes and mutual understanding between stakeholders. Other desired outcomes of the pilot have not materialised (yet). LFTW intend to continue with a next phase of this programme and continue using (elements of) OM. Overall, LFTW has stated that participating in the TLP PME has helped them learn to facilitate a multi-stakeholder programme and co-create meaningful programmes, certainly a positive added benefit of the action research.

ORGANISATION: MCNV (See MCNV case report)

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



Context of the pilot:

MCNV's action research focuses on the use of Outcome Mapping (OM) and Most Significant Change (MSC) elements in the Transition in the East Alliance's capacity-development work. This alliance consists of three Dutch development organisations and is carried out in five countries in South-East and Central Asia. All activities are carried out by and with local stakeholders to improve sustainability. Planning and monitoring forms an important part of the program and is always carried out with the local partners because the program has a strong focus on capacity development. As stated by MCNV: "As we want our counterparts to own the program and feel responsible for parts of it, it is important we enable them to participate in the planning and monitoring."

Summary of the research questions:

1. How can we make visible strengthened relationships in a multi-actor setting?
2. How can we learn from unexpected results?
3. How can we strengthen ownership of PME activities by local partners?

PME approach and outcomes

In the context of this program, an evaluation was first carried out in Laos using MSC and OM. Thereafter, the use of OM was piloted in Vietnam and then reflected upon before broadening the pilot to other partners. This set the basis for the design of the overall PME system, in which components of OM were integrated with more logframe-like elements.

During the action research, MCNV decided to conduct organisational assessments with each partner organisation and incorporate elements of OM to monitor the progress on the basis of the OA. The five capabilities model of ECDPM was used as a starting point and then OM was used for the programme around CBO strengthening.

Lessons learned by MCNV during the process included that OM elements can be very useful for making explicit the roles and responsibilities of various partners in a programme and highlight ways to relate to one another better, as "OM forces us to 'unpack' these roles and relationships and [helps us to] reflect on them explicitly". MCNV found that in Vietnam it was very difficult to communicate the OM terminology. A particular point of attention is that during the implementation it is important not to get held back in the planning phase but to move on and be adaptive with the plans throughout the entire process.

ORGANISATION: Oxfam Novib (ON) (See ON case report)

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



Context of the pilot:

Oxfam Novib (ON) began the first phase of the Measuring Milestones Initiative (MMI) with 20 partner organisations and 12 consultants from 12 different countries. In a second, more in-depth phase, it focused on three partners and a gender consultant in Bangladesh. The initiative was developed in response to a request from partner organisations and their consultants involved in ON's Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory (GMLT), to gain insight in alternative M&E methods that make it possible to measure and show changes on sensitive and complex issues. The aim of this initiative was to explore to what extent Most Significant Change (MSC) can make visible the changes, in particular deep cultural changes related to gender, sought with the GMLT interventions. In addition, ON wanted to explore the extent in which MSC can foster and inform experiential learning at the level of the partner organisation and contribute to the learning and accountability of ON itself.

The pilot was initiated by ON's Research & Development department in cooperation with Gender at Work (G@W). Others involved were ON local field officers, GMLT consultants, and partner organisations.

Summary of the research questions:

To what extent can MSC:

1. Make visible the changes, in particular "deep cultural change", sought with ON's Gender GMLT interventions?
2. Foster and inform experiential learning at the level of the partner organisation?
3. Contribute to the learning and accountability of Oxfam Novib?

PME approach and outcomes

The original GMLT tools for M&E revealed mainly technical and tangible changes (such as the formulation of gender policies and staff training on gender issues), instead of how certain actions had led to deep cultural change. It was expected that MSC might bring to light positive, negative, and unexpected change, enable monitoring of complex social (and cultural) change, and provide insight into how these changes occur.

ON and G@W invited partners and consultants to implement and experiment with MSC in their organisations. A second workshop aimed at sharing experiences on the use of MSC to highlight changes resulting from the GMLT. ON concluded, however, that more support and follow-up were needed for partners to use MSC properly. The second phase of the AR therefore focused on what partner organisations needed to implement MSC and how it affects the roles, relationships, and expectations of different actors involved in an intervention.

ON did not customise MSC beforehand; customisation and adjustments occurred when ON, consultants and partners started implementing, and responded to opportunities and challenges within local contexts. The significant change stories collected by partners were used in a secondary analysis by ON and G@W to answer the research questions. ON observed that many MSC stories disclosed deep cultural change, and concluded that the analysis of stories can help in making your theory of change explicit.

ORGANISATION: STRO (See STRO case report)

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



Context of the pilot:

STRO's pilot is part of their Innovative Local Development Approach (ILDA) Programme. This program focuses on the role of Complementary Currency Systems (CCS), Appropriate Technologies (AT) and entrepreneurship development as instruments for local development to increase the impact of conventional development interventions carried out by local organisations. The overall goal of the programme is socio-economic development of local communities. In STRO's capacity building programme the main objective is to facilitate knowledge creation at the level of local partners on how to set-up and execute CCS, AT and other related activities. The overall aim is to create conditions and capacity locally to implement and manage these interventions.

The Outcome Mapping (OM) pilot took place between 2009–2012 and involved three different partners in two countries, El Salvador and Nicaragua. STRO decided to participate in this TLP PME process after a mid-term review was conducted using OM. One partner expressed interest in receiving OM training. STRO was interested in obtaining richer information about the development results than those provided by merely quantitative methods. Also, STRO wanted to be better able to adapt to complex processes at the local level.

Summary of the research questions:

Can OM contribute to a more actor-focused PME system in such a way that it assists in:

- 1) Learning and self-reflection (i.e., increased ability to “adapt and self-renew”)?
- 2) Clarifying the roles and contributions of the various actors in the programme?
- 3) Increasing ownership of the M&E process while complementing the partner's own M&E system?

PME approach and outcomes

The initiative to move forward with OM was largely donor-driven. First PSO introduced OM for the mid-term evaluation it sponsored at STRO. Next, STRO consulted with partners and decided to train partners in OM. Finally, the TLP PME provided an additional incentive to not only adopt the method, but also to study its effect on the implementing organisations.

STRO expected that OM would be useful “to promote a wider participation of local actors in PME activities, as well as to identify and follow-up (un)expected behavioural changes in local partners and local communities”. Implementation of the pilot consisted of four parts:

- OM design workshops facilitated by an external consultant to introduce the underlying principles of OM and begin to define vision, mission, boundary partners, and progress markers.
- Additional training, either face-to-face or by teleconference, to clarify concepts and adapt the application of OM to the context and learning needs of each project.
- Workshops with local partners to design the M&E plan and tools needed to implement the plan successfully.
- Reflection meetings at the level of STRO and with partners.

An important lesson learned from the pilot is that introducing OM requires a commitment at management level. The fact that OM was introduced in three different projects made very clear that there is no-one-size-fits-all approach.

ORGANISATION: Vredeseilanden (VECO) (See VECO case report)

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



Context of the pilot:

The Belgian NGO VECO aims to contribute to viable livelihoods for organised family farmers through improved income from sustainable agriculture, with a particular focus on value-chain development. Value-chain development is a complex process in which relationships, dynamics, and mechanisms cannot be fully understood. Different actors (chain actors, chain influencers, and chain supporters) and factors (government policies, environmental aspects, market dynamics, trends, etc.) are at play and influence the outcomes of the capacity-development process of farmer/producer organisations, the concrete results in the value chain and the changes in the livelihood of small-scale farmers. This requires a planning, monitoring, and programme-management approach allowing VECO and its partner to understand the complex process in which they are engaged in order to develop relevant intervention strategies. In 2007, VECO changed its programme framework to an Outcome Mapping-based programme design. Over the last three years, they developed a learning-oriented M&E system that provides a framework for systematic data collection, sense-making, and documentation. Some challenges remained, however. VECO was still looking for ways to improve understanding of inclusiveness of smallholder farmers, which is in essence a relational aspect between important chain actors such as farmers/farmer organisations and companies (processors, manufacturers, buyers, supermarkets, etc.).

In response, VECO looked at Sensemaker in the TLP action research programme to address this need. It is in essence a software that comes with a methodological approach, using large amounts of fragmented micro-narratives to make sense of complex realities, to distil patterns, and respond in a timely manner. After a pilot phase exploring the relevance of Sensemaker for VECO, it was tried out in the field in two cases of chain development (the Banana Chips Chain in South Ecuador, and the Tea Chain in North Vietnam) between September 2011 and June 2012.

Summary of the research questions:

General research question:

To what extent can Sensemaker be used and useful for measuring the inclusiveness of small-scale farmers in modern market chains in order to improve the support interventions in the respective value chain?

PME approach and outcomes

After the selection of the cases, the domains and topics of interest had to be operationalised. This involved unpacking the concept of “inclusiveness” in four domains of interest. Slightly different questions were developed for the different groups in the agricultural chains (farmers, private companies, government, etc.). In Sensemaker, respondents signify their own micro-stories about the topic of interest, guided by a signification framework with different types of statements/questions. Once the data-collection framework was designed, it was tested and then launched with a total 75 farmers in Ecuador and about 144 farmers in Vietnam. First-level data analysis –making use of the Sensemaker software (designed by Cognitive Edge)– was done by VECO staff supported by two external people. This was followed by human sense making analysis and feedback in VECO Belgium and with the respective offices and partner organisations.

Sensemaker was found to be innovative in the way it helped to bring new perspectives to the debate about inclusiveness and highlight various stakeholders’ implicit assumptions. The main challenges relate to the resources and expertise needed to implement the approach.

ORGANISATION: War Child Holland (WCH) (See WCH case report)

<https://partos.nl/content/planning-monitoring-and-evaluation-complex-processes-social-change>



Context of the pilot:

WCH undertook action research into an M&E Toolkit developed by them as an integrated part of their I DEAL methodology. I DEAL is a creative life skills methodology for working with groups of children (11–15 years) and young people (16–20 years) in conflict-affected areas. The intervention provides a series of theme-based life skills workshops to improve the psychosocial wellbeing of children and young people. Important components are combined creative and participatory techniques, such as role-play, drawing, games, and group discussions. The M&E toolkit is meant to offer a participatory, complexity-oriented method to explore outcomes at the level of life skills using indicators set by the children and young people themselves. WCH has a head office in the Netherlands and field offices in various countries. To implement the I DEAL methodology they employ local facilitators or fund local organisations to facilitate the sessions. M&E tools piloting started in 2010 and involved project officers and social workers (implementers/facilitators) in different countries. Uganda and Republic of South Sudan were the countries involved in the TLP PME action research activities.

Summary of the research questions:

- 1) To what extent do the M&E tools help to clarify roles and responsibilities between head office, field office, partner, and beneficiary?
- 2) How can children and young people be involved in partner programming M&E?
- 3) How can the M&E Toolkit stimulate reflection on and evaluation of partner programming?
- 4) How can the M&E Toolkit contribute to a balance between upward and downward accountability? How does using the M&E tools stimulate reflection on the required capacity (capacity of the trainer, coordinators, and facilitators) in achieving progress?

PME approach and outcomes

The M&E toolkit consists of a personal goal exercise, module evaluations and a final evaluation. These M&E tools are basic and meant to be integrated by the facilitators in the I DEAL workshop program, actively involving children and young people, to ensure their meaningful participation in M&E.

The rationale for introducing the participatory M&E toolkit was to monitor changes in life skills among the children and young people who participate in War Child life skills workshops. Previous evaluative studies using Western questionnaires to measure levels of depression didn't provide useful information about changes in coping and social skills. In addition, children perceived the questionnaires negatively, feeling like test subjects. Secondly, the M&E toolkit aims to stimulate WCH field offices and facilitators to use monitoring information to reflect, learn, and improve while actively involving young people and children.

The main lesson learnt for WCH was that it is essential to integrate the M&E tools in the intervention, ensure a link with existing reporting cycles, involve end-users in the design of M&E tools, and have regular reflection meetings integrated in the M&E cycle to create space for learning.



“If you cannot predict what is coming, you have to be continuously learning in order to understand what happened ... and what is continuously happening... The focus of attention must, of necessity, shift from the products and events to the underlying processes that give rise to these products and events... It is in understanding these better that we become more adept at navigating complexity, even if we can never predict or determine with complete certainty what can, or should happen next”

Sue Soal

South African Member of the reference group for the action research.

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Should you wish to stay updated on our work, please contact us at
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