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FULLFILLING THE EXPECTATIONS? THE EXPERIENCES WITH THE M&E-PART OF OUTCOME MAPPING IN AN EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT IN ZIMBABWE

Abstract: This research has analysed monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities based on the Outcome Mapping (OM) methodology within the St2eep project, an education for sustainability project in Zimbabwe. The vast majority of development programmes in the public sector are being guided by conventional M&E-approaches based on the logframe. Although research is indicating significant problems with the implementation of these approaches, there are only few documented examples of experiences with alternative M&E frameworks. The case of St2eep allowed us to compare three years of experiences with M&E based on the logframe, with two years of M&E based on OM.

We evaluate how the project team and VVOB have perceived the performance of OM with regards to the two main aims of M&E activities: accountability and learning. This is complemented with an analysis of monitoring documentation. The project team refers to the collaborative nature of M&E in St2eep, the principles of self-assessment and peer-assessment, combined with public recognition for project successes, as the key factors supporting learning and accountability through M&E in St2eep. Double-loop learning would require improved data collection and more skills to monitor behaviour changes in the project to push critical reflection at a higher level.

1   Introduction

This paper looks at the findings of a study, collecting the experiences with the monitoring and evaluation (M&E)-function of Outcome Mapping (OM) after a two year implementation period. The study was done in the context of the St2eep project, which is supporting the integration of environmental education into secondary teacher training in Zimbabwe. The conventional Project Cycle Management (PCM) approach, based on the logical framework, (logframe) is by default the standard planning and M&E-framework in the aid sector, but has been criticised by practitioners and researchers for being inadequate to guide social development programmes. In 2001, Gasper (2001) concluded after various studies that, although many deficiencies were identified in logframe-based approaches meanwhile the argument 'something is better than nothing' remained until a valid alternative had been found.

Outcome Mapping has been put forward on a number of international fora[1] over the last few years as a project management methodology which might offer a better balance between the demands towards accountability on the one hand and the needs for learning in development projects and programmes on the other. There are signs that OM is finding its way into a growing number of development agencies, projects and programmes[2]. Therefore, slowly OM can be considered as one of the first comprehensive alternatives for the logframe-based approach. At the same time, donor agencies and policy makers seem to be hesitating how to respond to this new development. Ortiz (2004) refers, amongst other factors, to the significant resources that were spent implementing the logframe methodology inside donor agency structures and with the cooperating partners, and the hesitation to introduce new frameworks which might not be compatible with logframe-based structure. This also explains the need for comparative research looking at the pros en cons of conventional and new project management approaches in the aid sector.

By virtue of its increased use in a growing number of contexts and organisational settings, OM is currently being adapted and contextualised by various groups of professionals. What is unique to the development process is that it shows similarities with the dynamics of open-source software development, with a large group of practitioners and researchers publicly exchanging ideas online[3] on the various components of OM and how it can be improved.
One of the areas which is under critical review is the M&E-part of OM. Only few experiences have been documented with this part of OM, especially not within development programmes in the public sector. This paper evaluates the application of OM over a period of 2 years (2006-2007) in the St2eep project, with a specific focus on M&E.

2   Context of the study

The Secondary Teacher Training Environmental Education Project (St2eep) in Zimbabwe began in January 2003 in partnership with the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, three Secondary Teacher Training Colleges and the Flemish Office for Development, Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB). The aim of the project is to integrate environmental education (EE) in the curriculum of secondary teacher training and to support EE initiatives in the colleges and pilot schools in order to enhance sustainable utilization of natural resources and life skills. EE is done through the integration of in-service training of

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[1] Mentioned in several ECDPM papers, in research for a number of bilateral donors, on capacity development; see also Easy Eco conference in Vienna 2008 (Innovative approaches: OM)

[2] For example, the number of practitioners and researchers subscribed to the OM-community on the internet increased over the course of one year (2007) from 200 to to more than 750 people, representing a variety of projects, programmes and initiatives all over the world.

[3] www.outcomemapping.ca

lecturers, facilitation of the syllabi review process, developing EE learning resources and supporting college-based EE initiatives.

VVOB is the principal supporting agency of the project and provides financial support as well as external process development workers.

Like most international development projects and programmes, St2eep was originally designed based on the logframe. For three years (2003-2005) progress monitoring and evaluation were guided by a list of indicators linked to the programs key result areas.

However, after carrying out an in-depth and internal organizational reflection exercise in December 2004 with the project team and key stakeholders, it became clear that the use of the logframe had certain limitations and challenges for the specific context of St2eep and its supporting development agency. However, the following shortcomings of this process lead the project to search for alternative M&E approaches (Deprez et al, 2007):

- M&E became a practice of report writing by the VVOB development workers to meet the official budgetary and reporting requirements from head office. Although this was sufficient for accountability purposes to the supporting agency, the information in the PM&E reports was based mainly on the perceptions of the VVOB development workers.
- The logframe did not question or address the project's theory of change and intervention paradigm (and therefore, did not address the sustainability of the project). It did not examine the high operational involvement of VVOB, the heavy workload of the volunteer local coordinators and the lack of long term vision to support EE implementation processes in participating institutions, including the future roles and commitments of stakeholders.
- Learning occurred only at the level of individual VVOB development workers; so whether M&E results influenced further planning depended on them.
- The logframe-based M&E process was divorced from the project because local partners did not have the opportunity to actively contribute their input and perspectives and did not directly influence or inform collective decision-making or future planning.

Introducing Outcome Mapping

We described the methodology of Outcome Mapping more in detail in our previous paper on St2eep's application of OM (Huyse et al, 2006). OM focuses explicitly on the relationship between the project (the implementation team) and the key-stakeholders, which are called *boundary partners*. In OM, the programme develops a variety of strategies to influence the boundary partners towards changes in behaviour (eg. changed professional practices) in line with the vision and the mission of the programme. Table 1 provides an overview of the OM-implementation process in St2eep.

Preparation period	
Aug 2004	Start questioning sustainability and PM&E system
Dec 2004	In-depth self-assessment workshop
Jan 2005	Start planning phase 2 (directions and focus)
Mar 2005	Decision to use Outcome Mapping
Intentional + M&E design	
Jun 2005	1st OM workshop – Institutionalising St^{2}eep
Sept 2005	2nd OM workshop – The role of VVOB
Dec 2005	3rd OM workshop – designing the M&E framework
Implementing OM (2006-2007)	
Jan 2006 –Dec 2007	Progress monitoring (6x) and end of year evaluation (2x)

Table 1: Timeline for using OM in St^{2}eep (Deprez et al, 2007)

The M&E framework of OM is based on principles of (1) monitoring via self-assessment (by the programme stakeholders), (2) encouraging feedback, reflection and learning, (3) promoting internal and external dialogue, and involves (4) following-up on unintended effects. This is operationalised through 3 parallel monitoring processes stimulating critical reflection about

- the strategies developed by the programme,
- the observations on the changes of behaviour of the boundary partners, and
- the internal performance of the programme.

In addition, St2eep decided to a add a team-learning day (participatory learning & reflection groups) to each monitoring session, exploring more structural challenges or complex themes that could not be addressed in the operational monitoring meetings (see fig 1).
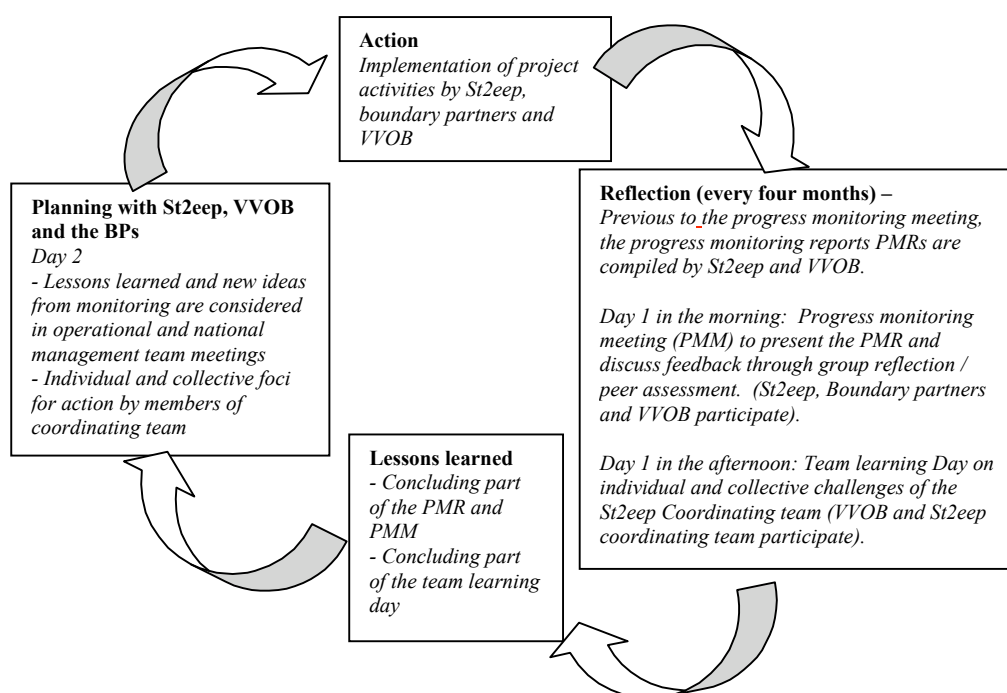

Figure 1: The planning and M&E cycle for St2eep (Deprez et al, 2007)

3   Conceptual framework and methodology

The research in this paper involves the evaluation of the use of a specific project management methodology. More specifically, the aim was to gain insights into the M&E process that was developed on the basis of Outcome Mapping and implemented in a specific context, namely the formal education sector in Zimbabwe. At the time of writing of the article, we were not able to identify any systematic research on the application of the M&E part of OM in the public sector. The case of St2eep allowed us to compare three years of experiences with M&E, based on the logframe (2003-2005) with two years of M&E implementation, based on OM (2006-2007). Therefore, a qualitative case-study design was selected for the methodology of the research.

The following research questions were put forward:

1. In the context of St2eep, how is the new M&E system performing in the area of team learning / organisational learning?, and

2. How is the new M&E system performing in the area of accountability?

3. What are other perceptions / experiences of the project implementation team of St2eep with the new M&E-system, based on OM-methodology, after two years of implementation?

The analysis of the application of OM methodology went beyond what can be called *techne-based* research (Flyvbjerg, 2001), in which we would be acting as consultants, trying to improve the running of a development agency by evaluating different project management systems. This would imply staying within the limits of the value-system of the organisation. We argue that organisational systems used by development agencies are not value free, and should be looked at in a framework of *phronesis-based research* (Flyvbjerg, 2001) which assumes context-dependency, is geared towards practice, assumes variable theories, and involves deliberating about power and values. This is type of research is preferably practised by studying cases and contexts, and getting close to reality.

The research was done by a practitioner closely involved in the management of the St2eep project, and a programme manager who had the St2eep project in his portfolio for some time. This of course raises a number of epistemological issues. Researching your own working environment and more specifically processes that you have initiated yourself, can be challenging in many ways. When collecting data from interviews with project beneficiaries, for example, it is up to the practitioner-researcher to try to assess in how far answers to critical questions will be influenced because of donor-recipient dynamics. The trust relationship that has been built up over the years within the project team makes it possible to discuss many things in a frank and critical way, but it remains a point of attention. Abbott et al (2007) argue that reflections and research by development managers can form the basis of transformations in learning if they embed their reflections within their work, and develop their relations with other stakeholders beyond operational managements challenges towards joint learning opportunities. Different forms of triangulation of data, for example by interviewing different groups within the project, comparing these with results of participant observation, and asking outside experts to review certain data and findings (like M&E reports), did not only increase the validity of the research, but also gave additional insights in the processes at hand.

Methods

An analysis of project documents consisted of the review of six progress monitoring reports over the period 2003-2007 and other documents. They were analysed in terms of (1) presenting a balanced account, (2) readability, (3) clearness on responsibilities and duties.

A survey about the experiences with the M&E system was completed by key stakeholders (3 persons) in the project. The information coming out of the survey was used to prepare a semi-structured interview within a focus group with 3 other key-stakeholders of the St2eep project. Via participant observations during monitoring meetings over the period 2003-2007, additional data was produced looking at the M&E processes and the group dynamics. The literature review used materials from a variety of sources (academic journals, development agencies, development research centres, etc.) and a variety of backgrounds (policy documents, evaluations, research papers, reports). We also used inputs from contributors to specialised email lists about OM, evaluation, systems thinking, and PCM systems.

The findings of an earlier action research on the application of Outcome Mapping for the planning of the second phase (2005-2006) of St2eep (Deprez, 2006) were used as reference material in this research.

4 An intellectual framework looking at M&E in the aid-sector

Although contested as an instrument, and more and more framed in sector wide programmes, the project approach is still the main vehicle for Western donors to deliver that aid (P. Crawford, 2004). Overall, the development sector is increasingly asked to provide evidence of its role in poverty reduction. However, a variety of problems have been identified over time related to the effectiveness of development programmes. In an extensive study for ECDPM, Morgan (2005) concludes that, in spite of large volumes of resources devoted to capacity development programmes in the public sector over several decades, results have been disappointing. Inappropriate M&E approaches, and capacity constraints within the M&E departments in development agencies, are identified by Watson (2006) as playing a role in the failure of these programmes.

In the following sections we look shortly at how this debate on M&E has been evolving recently and what a number of studies are pointing at as critical success factors. Before that, we focus shortly on the definition of M&E in the context of development aid.

In an extensive literature review of M&E definitions in development agencies, Crawford (2004) concludes that there is broad consensus about the purpose of M&E at the paradigm level, which is improving aid performance. However, there is less consistency in the exact definition of the separate terms 'monitoring' and 'evaluation' in terms of timing, responsibility, purpose, scope and data. For this review, we will not try to make an absolute distinction between M&E because we argue that they have a shared logic and a unity of social purpose (Bhola, 1998). We refer to *monitoring* as a periodic tracking of progress of activities and outputs versus planning, typically done by programme staff; and *evaluation* being more ad-hoc (episodic), typically looking in a comprehensive way at the overall design and implementation of a project or programme (outcomes and impacts), involving outside experts. Our prime focus in this research will be on monitoring, but we will use the term M&E for the reasons mentioned above.

4.1 the high expectations towards M&E in development aid..., and the mixed experiences with M&E in capacity development programmes

In response to recurring findings that many development programmes are not performing as well as planned, Easterly (2005) and others argue that development agencies have to get better in learning to know what works and what doesn't, and should be held accountable in case things don't work. Strong M&E systems are seen as a way of achieving these objectives. Overall, it is possible to conclude that within the development sector, and especially at management and policy levels, expectations towards M&E have been increasing over the last few years.

Baser et al. (2008) identify a number of different purposes for monitoring in capacity development programmes: except for (1) accountability to donors and tax payers[4], and (2) learning, they see other purposes, like for (3) building local M&E capacity, (4) symbolic protection to defend operational space, with appearances more important than the product, and (5) local accountability, where local stakeholders/beneficiaries are given the opportunity to hold development programmes accountable.

We will look closer to, what can be argued, are the two key-aims of monitoring: accountability and learning.

As described earlier on, development aid agencies have been under increasing donor, political and media pressure to demonstrate *accountability*. Over time, there has also been a widening interpretation of the concept of accountability (see figure 2). Initially, accountability referred to the demonstration of the efficient use of the means provided by the

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[4] Much of the monitoring that is done under the banner of purpose 1, accountability to the donor, can in reality be seen as forms of purpose 4, symbolic protection, according to Baser et al (2008).

donor. This has widened towards the accountability of efficacy (individual project evaluations) and effectiveness (overall contribution of the portfolio of projects of a development agency towards sustainable development) (P. Crawford, 2004).
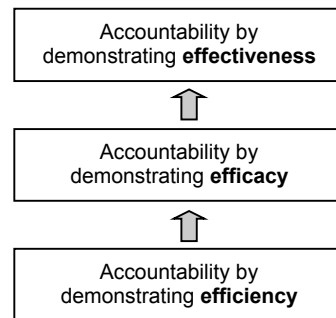

Figure 2: Changes over time in looking at accountability

Some of the problems with accountability in the form of external evaluation are related to the fact that those processes are difficult (rely on experts), they are expensive (those who can be trusted and carry sufficient authority are expensive), and the evaluation is transitory (can take place only occasionally). The managerialism dimension that is introduced by increased focus on accountability also creates problems of control in that it dilutes the message (from senior to lower levels, and back up), and it transfers trust from the practitioner to the manager (Pryor, 2005).

O'Neil (2002, in Earle, 2003) indicates that regimentation and strict bureaucracy is likely to hinder relationships supposedly based on partnership. Gasper also refers to this.

> In parallel to increasing talk of local ownership, building local capacity and so on, low-trust management imposes more and more time-consuming, even humiliating, compulsory procedures upon recipients. (Gasper, 1997, in Earle, 2003)

A number of authors (Smillie, in Crawford, 2004) have also criticised the growing influence of donors on development agencies and NGO's through the stringent accountability requirements. Development agencies will tend to comply with the requirements, just to ensure ongoing support.

Except for demonstrating accountability, M&E-processes in development programmes are supposed to guide programmes in the implementation phase (*learning function*). By measuring progress, comparing it with original planning, and analysing why things are not moving the way they should, programmes are expected to learn their way forward (EU, 2004). Using learning points from M&E exercises to improve planning has proven to a major challenge for development agencies (Crawford, 2004). Biggs and Smith (2003) phrase it rather ironically as follows:

> While at the center of its approach is the idea of a "learning cycle", the normative PCM manuals appear to be remarkably robust against such learning.

Earle (2003) demonstrates how the dominant focus on RBM & logframe-based approaches comes at the expense of the 'intuitive analysis of qualitative methods', which are needed to guide social processes. In the context of capacity development programmes, Morgan (2005) argues that many conventional approaches remain a-historical, a-political, and a-cultural. It leads Smilie (2001, in Earle, 2003) to conclude that 'in real development projects, .. achieving the efficiencies of the engineering model will always be a fantasy'.

Additionally, development agencies want to strengthen their organisational memory by setting-up complex knowledge management systems to capture the learning points collected from M&E-exercises and re-phrase them into codified knowledge. In that way, M&E is seen as the key to support organisational learning strategies. Britton (2005) has illustrated how many approaches to organisational learning have failed because they neglected the situational character of most knowledge and how it is constructed.

4.2 what works? critical factors from literature and practice for successful M&E in capacity development programmes

> *The highest level of accountability is not that you did what you said you would, but that you are getting better at serving the underlying intent of what you said you were going to do. (Smutylo, in Ortiz, 2004)*

In view of the high expectations of M&E towards improved performance of capacity development programmes (Horton et al, 2003) it is important to be able to refer to some critical factors that have shown in the literature to contribute towards more successful M&E practices.

Horton et al (2003), Earl et al (2003) and Watson (2006) highlight the value of a self-assessment approach involving a programme's managers, staff, and stakeholders in the M&E process. Studies have shown that the strength of the self-assessment approach is that the programme implementers and stakeholders with a strong knowledge and interest in the programme, gain an in-depth understanding of what works well and why, and where improvements are needed (Horton, 2003). As such it encourages feedback, reflection and learning on the basis of experience (Watson, 2006). Another critical parameter for successful M&E systems involves the promotion of internal and external dialogue between stakeholders as this promotes client-focused information generation, dissemination and feedback processes (Watson 2006).

Accountability mechanisms also need to be given appropriate attention for M&E processes to be successful. In his study of M&E-systems in capacity development programmes, Watson (2006) concludes that endogenous accountability (towards local governments, NGO's, organisations) appears to be more important as an incentive to performance, than performance monitoring for reporting to exogenous stakeholders (donors and lenders). On top of providing a better incentive for performance of programmes/projects, accountability towards the primary stakeholders (poor people) is seen by a number of organisations as an ethical principle underpinning their work.

5 Summary of research findings

In this section we present the findings of our examination of the research questions. We first look at how St2eep's M&E system provides a conducive framework for team learning / organisational learning. This is done by analysing three important learning conditions (Britton, 2005), i.e. motive, means and opportunity for learning. We then try to find out if St2eep's M&E system contributes to enhanced accountability and better quality of reporting. And finally, we try to systematise some of the other experiences the project team has put forward on the basis of two years of implementation.

5.1 OM and learning

The rich metaphor of organisational learning as a 'crime' (Britton, 2005) provides us with an interesting framework to investigate if St2eep's M&E system provides the minimal requirements for organisational learning. In other words, does St2eep's M&E system provide a 'motive', the 'means' and the 'opportunity' for organisational learning to take place? And how do people learn within St2eep's M&E system?

To analyse St2eep's M&E system, it is important to understand who are the main actors responsible for this process. The *St2eep coordination team* (about 15 people) is responsible for carrying out activities that seek to strengthen the capacity of specific boundary partners to integrate environmental education in the colleges. The *boundary partners* are existing educational structures that deliver specific educational services. St2eep's coordination team

consists of three *local project coordinators* (one is also *national project coordinator)*. These coordinators are supported by members of the *environmental education (EE) steering teams in the colleges*. All of these are lecturers with full lecturing loads in their respective colleges. They are involved in the project on a voluntary basis and do not receive salaries or top-up payments for their work in St2eep. The St2eep coordination team has over time been supported by *a facilitation team* which consisted of three expatriate development workers (from VVOB) in the first three years. It has been downsized to one part time development worker during the last year of the project.

5.1.1 Does OM provide a <u>motive</u> for learning?

Various data sources such as progress monitoring reports (PMR), minutes of progress monitoring meetings and self assessment workshops, reports of management meetings, and participant observations provide clear evidence that the members of the st2eep coordinating team are actively involved in the various M&E processes. This is different from the situation before 2006, when M&E was mainly in the hands of the development workers.

The involvement of local stakeholders can be witnessed in several ways. For example, different college coordinating teams fill in the progress monitoring instruments on a 4 monthly basis and prepare and present powerpoint presentations for the monitoring meetings with boundary partners.

Outcomes from the semi structured survey and focus group interview provide some insight in what motivates St2eep members to be actively involved in the M&E processes:

- S1:'…It allows my college administration to see what I have achieved in EE which is one of my college duties.'

- S1:…it becomes embarrassing at monitoring meetings when certain agreed programmes are not undertaken.

- S2:'….I participate because of the conducive atmosphere which allows free participation and values individual opinions.'

- S3'…For the coordinators it gave some confidence to see that some of their problems were not specific to them or their college but could be widespread…

- I1:….Leads to 'activation' of the boundary partners' which is very motivational….

- I1:…There is strong peer assessment. … This resulted in strong improvement in one college and colleagues admitting embarrassment outside meeting.

The data show that St2eep members enjoy the group recognition of individual or group achievements during monitoring meetings. At the same time they find it reassuring that problems can be discussed in a non-threatening atmosphere, where also suggestions for future planning can be formulated. Peer assessment is also seen as an important motivational factor.

Team learning days

Team learning days are embedded in St2eep management and planning structures and reporting requirements. At the end of each term, a peer coaching day is organized for the boundary partners and VVOB development workers. This peer coaching group, also called participatory learning group, analyzes the organizational practices of St2eep and VVOB as well as on elements of their partnership, normally not discussed in formal meetings.

It has been a challenge to organise these team learning days on a regular basis. The team managed to organise only four from the planned six team days in 2006 and 2007. After the initiators of these activities partially moved out of the St2eep project, the rest of the team didn't see this activity as crucial in the M&E process resulting in the erratic organisation of

the team days. These activities seem to require skills in team/organisational learning and have to be actively guided and recognised to motivate project teams to invest in them.

5.1.2 Does OM provide the _means_ for learning?

Besides providing a motive, St2eep's M&E system also needs to provide the means for learning to take place.

Using OM, St2eep developed a two-way monitoring system. St2eep monitors the changes in behaviour and actions of its Boundary Partners. Accordingly, VVOB monitors the changes in behaviour and actions of the St2eep coordinating team. Specific monitoring documents for the National Coordinator, the EE coordinators and the VVOB development workers have been developed to facilitate these reflective exercises. The reports are also presented during management meetings in which key boundary partners participate. In this way, the monitoring process and results are used as a tool for reflection & learning and inform decisions on future planning and action. Finally, after compilation into one report it is also presented to St2eep's national management team, and later on sent to VVOB.

Table 2 shows an extract from a PMR instrument. The bullets describe changed behaviour (in the form of activities) of the EE steering teams in the colleges (one of the boundary partners) that St2eep observed at the national level and at college level.

1.1.1 Description of the changes for this period for the EE steering teams
Report on the changes which occurred during this term as stated in the list of progress markers
National level   • Supporting lecturers with EE implementation through EEAST workshops organized by Steering Teams   • Steering Teams facilitated in the livelihoods programme to enhance food security through the empowerment of schools in five districts of Zimbabwe.   • Greater involvement in planning and execution of EE workshops by steering teams   **Belvedere Technical Teachers College level**   • Assisting lecturers to identify their needs and expected support for EE implementation   • Supporting lecturers with EE implementation through EEAST workshops   • Empowered some pre-service teachers to incorporate EE in their teaching   • Participated in the livelihoods programme for orphaned and vulnerable children in five districts of Zimbabwe.   • Successfully carried out college community EE awareness workshop

Table 2: extract from PMR instrument of term 1, 2007 showing observed changes in one of St2eep's boundary partners, i.e. EE steering teams.

The progress monitoring instruments and meetings are characterised by team work and are perceived by the project team as making the M&E process more systematic and based on actual facts instead of individual assumptions. They also seem to enhance individual competencies, and build interpersonal relations and trust. Extracts from surveys and focus group interview illustrate these observations:

- I2: …(PMR instruments provide) clear guidelines on what to monitor

- S3: using the PMR instruments brought focus to the exercise. Without the PMR instruments this was not done in any systematic way but more anecdotally…This often left out important points. PMR is helpful in planning because it points our critical areas…. Through presentation and discussion issues were clarified and there was usually immediate follow-up to look at the way forward.

- S3:…makes people think about the project, ….helps to uncover problems within the running of the project…document is structured but leaves room to report freely on

issues through the narrative reports…section to specifically bring out unanticipated changes encourages people.

- I1:'…exposing people's expectations against ground experiences – based on factual data instead of assumptions.

People involved in the M&E process also go through a process of individual capacity development in terms of M&E.

- I1'….. it is difficult for people to use the instruments if they are not familiar with the outcome mapping terminology.…colleagues explain to each other ….doesn't need an expert for M&E.

Although very positive signals could be observed from the project team on how OM provides a supportive framework for learning, a review of the M&E reporting brings up a number of challenges. In the intentional design phase of OM, significant efforts are made to develop a coherent story that links strategies with progress markers and outcome challenges. It is our impression that the project team is challenged by the multitude of progress markers and strategies, and is not always managing to bridge the gap between every-day-realities (activity-based) and the more long-term strategic thinking (overall progress). Although there is no need to monitor all progress markers at every monitoring session, the reporting on the boundary partners was not systematic in following-up important progress markers. In addition, descriptions of changed behaviour were quite often vague and repeated in subsequent reports, with little contextual information and few references to tangible evidence. Some examples of described changes:

- PMR 1-2007:'increased use of EE resource center by both students and lecturers'
- PMR 1-2007:'empowered some pre-service teachers to incorporate EE in their teaching'
- PMR 2-2007:'more interest in joining St2eep activities and support of St2eep'.

These examples illustrate how the project team is facing difficulties in qualifying and quantifying the observed changes against observations from earlier monitoring periods and presenting a story of change that makes sense for readers who were not involved in daily project activities. While some of this information is discussed in progress monitoring meetings and is available in the files and records of individual coordinators and facilitators, a systematic analysis of the overall changes in the boundary partners as specified by the list of progress markers seems to be missing.

5.1.3 Does OM provide the <u>opportunity</u> for learning?

Progress monitoring meetings

The data collected through the progress monitoring instruments are presented by the EE coordinators during four-monthly progress monitoring meetings, described earlier in the text. Linking St2eep's progress monitoring meetings with operational management team (OMT) meetings provides a learning opportunity where lessons learned from the M&E process inform planning and decision making by the operational management team.

- I1: '…Greater room during progress monitoring meeting to discuss, analyse, allowing informed planning during OMT and developing factually loaded reports during NMT meetings…'
- S3: 'PMR is helpful in planning because it points to our critical areas…. People are encouraged to be critical. If certain things have not been achieved, they are also brought out. Discussion then tries to get to the bottom of the case on why something did not work out. From this a better plan follows.'

Specific lessons learned, recommendations for future actions and action plans are captured during progress monitoring meetings and presented during management meetings where specific decisions for future action are taken.

End of year self-assessment workshops:

Each end-of-year evaluation includes a self-assessment workshop where the St2eep team, its boundary partners and strategic partners engage in critical reflection. Elements of the self-assessment are determined in advance by the St2eep team and may include St2eep's internal performance towards relevance and viability of the project (i.e. st2eep's organizational practices), leadership issues, partnerships and resources or a reflection on the intentional design of the project. The self-assessment workshop outcomes inform the yearly operational planning by the St2eep management teams.

- S3: ' certain parts of the PMR instrument become outdated after some time while new items, not yet covered may crop up. The system is flexible enough to review the document from time to time and make changes.'

Team learning days

Team learning days have been successful opportunities to build in time and space for reflective exercises. These activities resulted in team members getting to know each other better and trust building within the team. Some feedback from team learning day participants illustrate the usefulness of this activity:

- 'The action learning group in the afternoon links very well with the progress monitoring report (PMR) meeting in the morning.…it is nice to be able to evaluate the deeper selves, …. the 'self' being responsible of things happening or not happening'.
- 'The action learning group needs to continue since it provides opportunities for action research'.

As described in the previous section (5.1.2), it has proven to be difficult to retain momentum in these team learning activities over time.

5.1.4 Combining the motive, means and opportunity for learning in St2eep's M&E system.

It is the combination of the motive, means and opportunity for learning provided by St2eep's OM-based M&E system that promotes learning within the project. Outcomes from the surveys and focus group interview provide insight on how St2eep members experience this learning process:

- S1: 'I learn from others and they learn from me. I go back to college and improve on my weaknesses…'
- S2: 'getting insight in the running of the whole programme in general and not just the components.'
- S3: '…coordinating teams learn from each other. Approaches used in one college can be tried in another as well.'

The data show that there is an element of team learning whereby St2eep members and boundary partners are able to learn from each other based on discussing issues that emerge from the M&E process. The principles of self-assessment and peer-assessment in a non-threatening atmosphere combined with being able to celebrate successes and collaboratively

look for answers to problems seems to be strengthening the learning process by motivating people to become involved.

The fact that the monitoring framework focuses specifically on the project implementation team (strategy maps) and the boundary partners (progress markers), makes it easier to motivate st2eep members and boundary partners in the M&E process. As a result participation in the M&E activities strengthens ownership of the project and stimulates both St2eep members and boundary partners to become actively involved in the project.

The problems with the rather vague descriptions and the lack of systematic analysis of the behaviour changes could be partly explained by the fact that not all the in-depth discussions in the meetings are captured in the reports. However, to increase the learning curve of the monitoring process there would be a need to deepen the quality of the data collection, to unpack the progress markers into clearly defined changes of behaviour, and to push critical reflection at a higher level, including the systematic follow-up of which strategies seem to work and which don't in view of contributing to behaviour changes of the boundary partners. This requires M&E maturity of the stakeholders involved, sufficient time and resources, and a supportive framework. If those barriers to learning are not actively mediated, applying OM methodology will not really allow 'frank dialogue about successes and failures' (Ortiz, 2004), as is needed for successful OM implementation.

5.2   OM and accountability

St2eep's M&E system was developed in such a way that the information generated through the various M&E processes would satisfy accountability requirements towards various stakeholders, e.g. the donor (VVOB), Ministry and college administrations (local authorities), the boundary partners and beneficiaries (lecturers and college students). In this respect we asked a number of St2eep implementation team members their viewpoints about accountability and quality of reporting. We also asked an independent reviewer to critically look at the M&E reports and give her opinion on these issues.

A balanced account?
Members of St2eep's coordination team felt that the progress monitoring report gives an objective and balanced account of the successes and challenges of the project. At the same time they highlight that the accountability to the donor is improved because VVOB gets monitoring data from various sources. They also indicate that the quality of reporting has improved because the report contains the viewpoints of different operatives.
- S3: in the early stages the narrative reports were little developed. 'change' is a specific term in OM but not clear once used by people who no longer remember the special meaning or who were not part of the OM process….St2eep definitely has a clear picture of its problems and successes. The process also seems to happen in a fairly honest way.
- I2: Degree of objectivity is high – different people input in the report ….not based on one individual….e.g. in one college, two members go through the report…draft circulated to other members who were able to input as well.

Because the overall M&E process of St2eep is a multi-stakeholder process with participation of various layers of the project, final reporting products can be considered to provide a balanced account. Additional support for accountability could also be created by stronger feedback mechanisms that would include the final beneficiaries. Studies indicate that these have been successful in improving project performance. But overall, accountability has increased with the introduction of OM in comparison with the logframe-based M&E system (where the main contributors were the development workers).

Readability of the monitoring documents

One of the VVOB development workers indicated that the quality of the report is improving over time with better narrative analysis included in the report. The external review of the PMR's also found a learning curve in the readability of OM-based reporting over time. When comparing with the initial logframe-based reporting (2003-2005) the situation becomes more complex. Because of the contributions of multiple persons to the OM-based M&E report, combined with the large quantity of information to be completed for each boundary partner, it is almost unavoidable that the readability of the report is hindered. The extremely condensed form of reporting by the local stakeholders (in bullet form and without contextualising) also decreases readability. Comparing the readability of the reports when M&E was based on logframes, with that based on OM is somehow complicated because it went hand in hand with a significantly bigger role of the local stakeholders in report writing. That this report writing is done more pragmatically by the lecturers is partly understandable, knowing that all the work for this project has to be done next to their normal lecturing duties (unlike for the development workers).

Clear responsibilities and duties?
Logframe critics argue that logframes underrate the importance of relationships and human dynamics in development programmes, which lead to under-socialised interpretations of causality (Davies, 2005). OM is clearly actor-oriented via the explicit focus on boundary partners in the planning and M&E process. Therefore, also the reporting clearly spells out the responsibilities and duties of both the implementation team and the boundary partners. Furthermore, it was felt by the project team that information captured about specific boundary partners helps to make these boundary partners more committed.

- I1: Written down expectations for boundary partners in report challenges boundary partners and motivates them to critically analyse their commitment.

5.3 Other experiences with M&E in OM

By using OM, St2eep was able to innovate and do better PM&E through the following:

- Dedicating time, personnel and additional funds for reflection, discussion and consensus;

- Adapting OM journals to suit St2eep's needs; for example, incorporating the program's key result areas from the logframe;

- Developing two parallel OM systems – one for St2eep and one for VVOB, in order to measure at a more detailed level the operational handover of the program.

- Incorporating M&E into already existing meetings (such as team meetings, college meetings, etc);

- Input monitoring has been replaced by a focus on behavioural change results;

- Boundary partners are agents of change and enhance their own responsibility, power and capacity as well as leadership of the project.

However, OM is not straightforward to implement. It requires careful contemplation of the methodology and customization to different contexts. It must also be carefully planned for (budget, time/activities). OM also requires a mind shift by the program team and its boundary partners. It is not just a 'face lift' operation. For it to be successful, the management of the project and the environment in which it operates need to be supportive to this new approach.

6   Reflections and discussion

There are signs that Outcome Mapping has made St2eep's and VVOB's M&E cycles more learning oriented, making it more exciting, useful, relevant and transformative. In this paper we have illustrated why this is the case:

- OM has helped to make the M&E process more actor-focused in its approach (motivation for learning).   Ownership of St2eep's M&E system, and of its programming, has become more endogenous, as EE coordinators in each of the colleges become increasingly the leaders of St2eep and are able to clearly identify where their actions should be focused to further increase ownership and results through the behavioural changes of the identified boundary partners. OM has also been able to draw the boundary partners into the M&E processes which has resulted in a deeper understanding of their expectations and responsibilities, has strengthened their partnership with the project team and has enhanced their commitment towards the project.

- The application of OM in St2eep has stimulated the project team to craft an M&E system that provides useful M&E tools (learning means) and offers specific learning spaces (opportunities for learning) for meaningful dialogue and reflection on the progress of the project. Because of the strong local leadership in the organisation of these learning spaces, the learning practices employed are more based on a learning style that is relevant to the cultural context of the local practitioners (Britton 2005). The strong feeling about the motivating effect of M&E meetings that provide a non-threatening space for team learning through critical reflection and inspired by elements of self- and peer-assessment provide evidence for this argument. In the local language (Shona) there is a saying that goes 'Nyika vanhu, musha matare' – 'the country is the people and home is networking'. Out of this comes a process which is called 'dare', a place of meeting not only in the physical plane but also socially and spiritually. It can be village meeting where specific issues are discussed and where the participants of the meeting play specific roles making sure that everything will be said that needs to be said (Magaya, 2007). The set up of St2eep's OM based monitoring meetings have similar characteristics which helps to explain why participants feel energised and ready for the next activity cycle after each meeting.

- We also observed a major challenge of St2eep's OM based M&E system. OM seemed to assume a higher level of M&E maturity than could be expected in the St2eep context. we observed that the project team is challenged by the multitude of progress markers and strategies, and how to bridge the gap between the reality of the day (activity-based) and the more long-term strategic thinking (overall progress). These observations pose a challenge for both accountability and deeper learning about the broader change processes that the project is trying to influence.

In order to continually strive for a balance between accountability and learning, this case study concludes by summarizing three key questions a project, programme or organization could ask itself, based on St2eep's experience:

1. Is there enough M&E maturity on the part of the M&E implementers to fully exploit the advantages of an OM based M&E system? The St2eep case has shown that while OM helps to promote local ownership of the M&E process, this does not automatically translate in adequate M&E capacity to ensure that all learning and accountability needs are met. Development of M&E capacity is a process that may need active support which could be included in future operational plans.

2. Do the various stakeholders have a shared understanding about the learning and accountability needs that the OM based M&E system seeks to address? In the case of St2eep, the project coordination team was not aware that all learning and

accountability needs were not fully met. They were also not fully realising that they could learn more about the overall progress of the project by monitoring specific change processes more systematically. A clearer strategy on what data has to be collected when, for each progress marker, would support this idea. Also, regularly checking if all internal and external accountability and learning needs are met by the M&E system through feedback from various stakeholders could be helpful.

3. Can we combine an M&E based system with other PM&E tools? The main PM&E tool still used globally by VVOB is the logframe. St2eep therefore had to integrate both logframe and OM approaches. Currently St2eep uses the OM system at the operational level and draws from the original logframe to develop the yearly operational plans grounded in OM. The logframe reporting system is still used at the end of each year to report to VVOB. The logframe remains relevant to meet accountability requirements, resulting in a practice whereby the VVOB development workers 'translate' emerging ideas and strategies into the operational and budget planning based on the original framework.

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