

Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation of complex processes of social change

Towards a diverse PME approach

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Acknowledgments

This paper is a tribute to the many people of the various organizations and their partners who are taking part in the collaborative action research. They have given us a unique opportunity to join them on their journey of diversifying their PME approach in order to better deal with complex processes of change. They are the drivers of the action research as they piloted various PME approaches and systematically reflected on their work. They are also the people who produced a rich narrative of their experiences in the form of a case report. This cross case analysis draws from these case reports and we can only hope that we do justice to the work done by the various cases. The organizations involved in the action research are Cordaid, Dark&Light, ETC COMPAS, ICCO, MCNV, Oxfam Novib, STRO Vredeseilanden, War Child Holland, and , Woord&Daad .

Introduction - Setting the stage

A number of recent trends in international development have contributed to bringing Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) higher on the agenda of many development organizations.

Firstly there is a growing international call for results based management, whereby development actors are asked to be accountable for the achievement of 'measurable' results that they set out to achieve (Paris Declaration, 2005). Many organizations try to strengthen their PME systems in order to provide an answer to this call.

Secondly there is a 'growing' realization that traditional PME approaches such as the logical framework approach, are not always helpful for organizations who are supporting complex processes of change (Hummelbrunner, 2010; Ramalingam, 2008). In such complex contexts the relation between cause (e.g. a training of public health staff) and effect (e.g. improved public health) is rather unpredictable and unexpected results often happen (e.g. the trained public health staff disappearing for greener pastures or not even implementing what they have learned). More and more organizations are now facing the difficult task of following the principles of results based management in complex contexts and are looking for alternative PME approaches that can help them to do this.

Thirdly there is a fired debate about the extent to which organizations should focus on quantifiable easily measurable results versus less quantifiable results that are more difficult to measure. This debate is well illustrated by former US-AID president Andrew Natsios (2010): "... 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." There is a danger that results based management could be associated with PME for quantifiable results. In response, organizations dealing with more complex transformational change (e.g. social change, capacity development, policy work, ...) are looking for alternative PME approaches that can help them to plan, monitor and learn from results that are less easy to measure.

This paper reports on the first results of an ongoing action research process (2010-2012) in which 10 Dutch and Belgian development organizations together with their Southern Partners explore complexity oriented PME approaches. The action research was initiated by PSO. The paper also uses information from two learning histories (ETC COMPAS and VECO Indonesia) that were developed during the preparatory phase of the action research.

We first provide an outline of the action research process and the guiding analytical framework. We then present the main interim findings and general trends across the 10 cases following the research questions that guide the collaborative action research. We conclude the paper with a set of lessons learned on dealing with development interventions in complex contexts of social change through a diversified PME approach

PSO is an Association of over 60 Dutch Development organizations that are united in a shared interest and involvement in capacity development of civil society. By supporting collaborative action research PSO facilitates organizational and collaborative learning aiming at improved organizational practices.

Exploring complexity oriented PME approaches through collaborative action research

The action research program starts from a joined realization that there are no easy solutions to address the challenges that organizations face in relation to PME and complexity. Attempts to improve the existing PME practice might not be effective if they are designed as just a technicality of procedures and templates. Most often, changing PME practice triggers fundamental discussions about the developmental change we are actually envisaging and how this can best be achieved and followed-up. It might require forms of double loop learning or second order change by NGOs and their partners, to fundamentally reflect about the values, principles and approaches that underpin our work. This is why the participating organisations explore diversified PME approaches in a number of pilot programmes and, at the same time, research their own emerging practice; with the aim to improve it gradually and share lessons learned with others inside and outside the organisation.

Action research was adopted to allow for systematic reflection on actions to develop a more diverse PME approach to respond to the information needs of multiple actors in complex change processes. Figure 1 illustrates the essential steps in the action research.

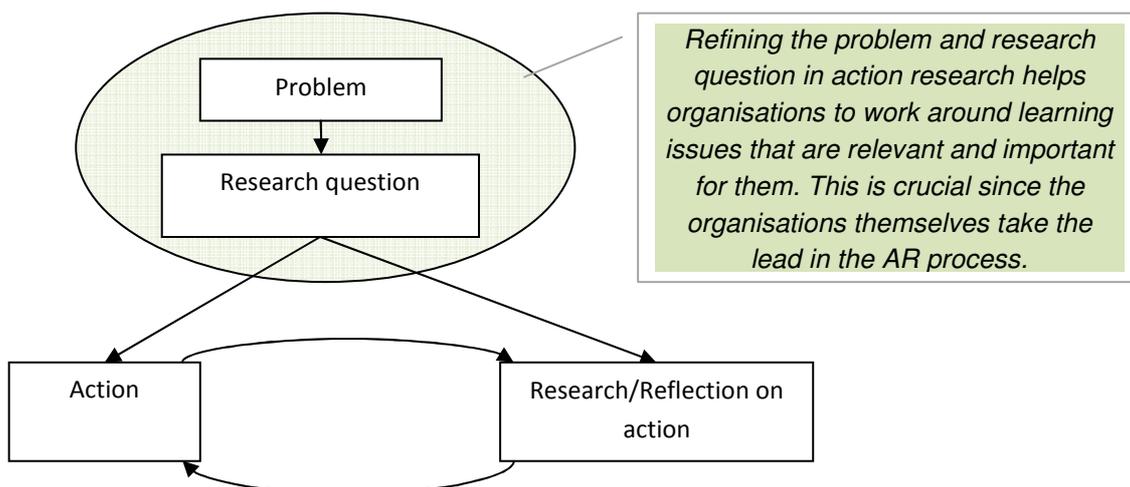


Figure 1: Main steps of the action research process (Adapted from the Bamenda model of practical action research)

A time frame of two years was planned for the research to be able to undertake an in-depth exploration of the potential added value of piloted PME approaches. The collaborative character of the research was expected to help in creating a momentum for change, as well as to foster a process of peer learning and exchange. The specific learning questions of the participating organizations as well as a literature review (Van Ongevalle & Huyse, 2010) and two learning histories (i.e. Vredeseilanden (Kasman, 2010) & ETC COMPAS (Aberatne, 2010) on PME practice that were developed during the preparatory phase helped to focus the collective research question of this collaborative action research. Three sub questions unpack this central question and are used as an analytic framework (see box 2). This analytical framework guided participating organisations in their sense making activities and helps the organisations to analyse the relevance of a PME approach for a specific context or situation.

Box 2

Collective research question:

“How does a diversified PME approach contribute to the capacity of involved organisations and their partners to deal with complex processes of social change?”

Subquestions:

- 1) How does the PME approach help to clarify relationships, roles and expectations of the actors involved in the intervention?
- 2) How does the PME approach contribute to learning about the progress towards the development objectives (of the programme, partner organizations, partner networks, Northern NGOs) and satisfy downward and upward accountability needs?
- 3) How does the PME approach contribute to strengthening the own internal adaptive capacity¹ of the programme, partner organizations, partner networks, and/or Northern NGOs?

What drives NGOs to change their PME practice?

‘It is like starting to learn how to write with the left hand when you are a right handed person....’

That’s how Rolando Gonzalez from the San Salvadorian NGO REDES, partner organization of STRO, described his first experience with outcome mapping during an external evaluation process of their programme on complementary currency systems. When you think of it, some strong motivation is required to learn how to write with your non-dominant hand. Rolando Gonzalez with his colleagues recognized elements of the outcome mapping approach that could help them address some of the challenges that they faced in their PME practice, such as the wider participation of local actors in PM&E and monitoring behavioural changes, for example. Their mainly quantitative PME approach didn’t allow them to learn about the more intangible changes in the local communities and partners. Rolando and his colleagues took the opportunity of taking part in the TLP PME action research in order to explore the usefulness of outcome mapping in their context.

Rolando’s story illustrates how organisations had to come out of their ‘comfort zones’ of doing business as usual, as they decided to participate in the PME action research. It involved participating organizations to identify and expose specific challenges concerning their PME practice. It also involved having the motivation and an enabling environment to explore these challenges and to do something about them. This willingness to strengthen their own PME practice by finding their own solutions provided the rationale for participating in the action research.

Table one summarises the main PME challenges in the various cases and the people taking the initiative to address these challenges in the action research. The various PME approaches that were piloted to diversify the PME systems in the various cases are also highlighted in the table.

Cases	PME challenges to be addressed in the action research	PME approach piloted	People taking the initiative
Cordaid	-The present PME system of Cordaid is not yet in line with the ongoing shift from support to individual projects to multi-stakeholder approaches (Communities of Change). -A PME approach that better informs stakeholders about the changes that are brought about in the complexity of CoC's	-most significant change, outcome mapping and self rated stories	Cordaid, local consultant, local NGOs, network
Dark&Light	-involving local partners in the development of the PME system of inclusive education programme, -strengthen capacity development of local partners? -stimulate learning about programme results at partner level and at D&L level.	Outcome mapping	Programme officer in head office
ETC COMPAS	focus on quantified indicators is experienced as insufficient for making unexpected changes visible and learn from these unexpected changes -learning about project impact at beneficiary level - ensuring ownership of the results by the beneficiaries.	The use of change stories	Partners, communities
ICCO	-Lack of downward accountability of donors partners towards service consumers. -Partner learning towards improved programme service delivery.	Client satisfaction instruments (CSI)	ICCO CSI coordinator and programme officers
MCNV	-PME to stimulate the self learning and self reflection skills of local actors. -making visible strengthened relationships in a multi actor setting - learning from unexpected results - ownership of PME activities	Most Significant Change & Outcome Mapping	MCNV programme coordinator and PME learning advisor.
Oxfam Novib	-Making visible 'difficult to measure' changes (e.g. gender justice) " These changes are often not being made visible when we use for example traditional indicators and log frames.	Most Significant Change	Oxfam Novib head office with support from external consultants.
STRO	-to monitor changes in behaviour -to widen local participation in PME	Outcome mapping	Interested staff within Southern Partner organisation
Vredeseilanden	- obtain more meaningful information concerning the impact or the effects of the value chain programme on the beneficiaries and farmer organisations.	Outcome mapping and sensemaker	Coordinator Planning, Learning, Accountability Head Office
War Child	-difficult to find hard evidence of programme results -Reflection and learning of WCH field offices and partners -analysis of evaluations take too much time to use quickly for learning	M&E toolkit (e.g. impact map, quiz, module evaluation) as a part of the IDEAL instruction package	War Child Holland head office
W&D	- Ownership of PMEL system by its users - Capacity of W&D partners to customize the PMEL system to their own needs	PMEL system	W&D head office

Table 1: overview action research cases

The wide range of PME challenges that are motivating the organisations to take part in the action research illustrates the ambitious and varied expectations we often have for our PME systems. Learning and accountability form a golden thread across the expectations of the various organisations. Most organisations want to strengthen learning processes about the results of their programmes. In most cases this pertains to results that are not involving changes in state (e.g. improved income, improved health services) but less measurable results which are more difficult to monitor.

The action research brought some staff of MCNV in contact with Outcome Mapping (OM), MSC and other methodologies as an alternative to LFA. Especially as far as OM is concerned, this worked for some of us as an “Aha Erlebnis” in respect of OM’s focus on developing roles, organizational learning, behavior change and social network relations of partner organizations. (MCNV Senior Advisor)

As organizations look towards PME for improving their programmes and for achieving better results, they also look for more diverse PME approaches. In several cases, the logical framework based indicators didn’t allow the programs to monitor less visible transformative change in the target groups or beneficiaries (see also quote MCNV). War Child for example actively searched for alternative tools to measure the effects of its psychosocial interventions, for which it couldn’t find hard evidence..

The introduction of outcome mapping allowed the Vredeseilanden programme team to monitor changes in behavior of their direct partners. At the same time, outcome mapping does not help Vredeseilanden to track changes in the livelihood of the farmers who are the final beneficiaries of the programme. Livelihoods surveys are used to fill this gap. In the action research, Vredeseilanden is now exploring ‘sensemaker’ to develop insights in the farmer’s perceptions about changes in livelihood.

Cordaid combines elements of most significant change, outcome mapping and self rated stories to monitor outcomes in its work with networks of women movements that organize themselves in communities of change (CoC). Most significant change was used since narratives better match with the local networks, as the women in these networks are not used to write formal reports. Elements of outcome mapping were integrated because of its potential to help the program develop an ‘actor focused theory of change’. It was also used because of its potential to promote reflection regarding the expected outcomes that were not achieved.

Oxfam Novib has introduced elements of most significant change in their Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership trajectory (GMLT) because they found that the action plans that organizations made to outline their actions in relation to gender mainstreaming did not reflect the deep cultural changes that are needed. Most significant change is thought to be an ‘*opportune technique to surface positive and negative change*’ (Oxfam Novib case report)

The ETC COMPAS case provides another example of a diversified PME system. One part of the PME system involves the use of quantifiable indicators for different capacity areas of communities. This approach has allowed ETC COMPAS partners to quantify and compare the outcomes of their interventions pertaining traditional and organic farming (see figure 2)..

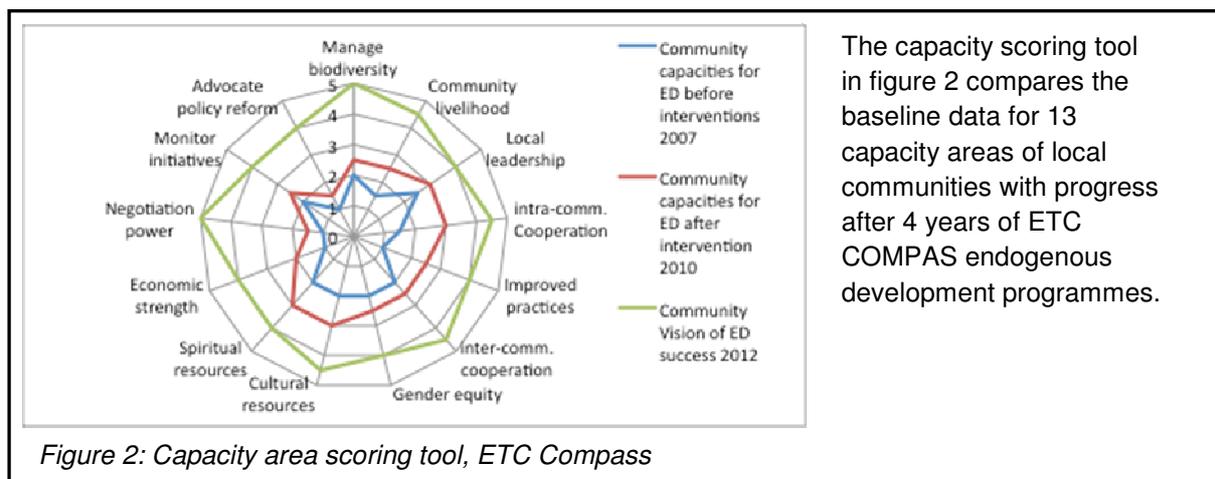


Figure 2: Capacity area scoring tool, ETC Compass

To complement the information provided by the capacity scoring tool, Most Significant change stories were used to develop deeper insight in the spiritual well being of the beneficiaries as this was not captured by any of the indicators of the capacity areas. In Sri Lanka, collecting change stories contributed to ETC COMPAS partners understanding of the importance of Buddhism in the lives of the beneficiaries and on the importance of the chosen intervention strategies (e.g. organic farming, ethno-veterinary practices) being in line with nature-friendly lifestyles.

ICCO explores the added value of Client Satisfaction Instruments (CSI) to enhance downward accountability of service providers toward their clients, as well as partners' learning from practice toward improved service delivery. At a later stage in the action research, ICCO will also pilot Outcome Mapping in an attempt to strengthening their programmatic approach. Dark & Light, member of the ICCO alliance has already started implementing elements of Outcome Mapping with a similar aim of strengthening their programmatic approach and making changes at the level of partners more explicit.

Woord & Daad (W&D) directs its action research toward the capacity of partners to customize the 'planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning' (PMEL) system that has been recently introduced by the W&D head office. The case goes into the importance of a circular relation between the different elements (P-M-E-L) and the identification of roles and responsibilities in the PMEL process.

From the cases we learn that not only the type of result and the level at which the result is sought will determine which PME methods will be most effective. Also the level of participation by different stakeholders, including the people or organisations affected by the programme, and the extent at which organisations are trying to learn from the monitoring and evaluation data, will determine the most useful PME approach. We will explore this further as we try to answer the research questions later on in this paper.

Clarifying relationships, roles and expectations among programme stakeholders

In this section we reflect on our first collective research question by looking across the cases for instances where the PME approach contributed towards clarifying relationships, roles and

expectations of programme stakeholders. We zoom in on the clarification of partner relations, the development of learning relationships and the fostering of ownership of the PME approach.

Clarifying partner relations

The cases provide specific examples of how actor focused PME approaches can help to clarify the relationships, roles and expectations of different partners involved in an intervention.

Using outcome mapping during an internal evaluation process of their community health programme, MCNV asked local partners to reconstruct their own 'outcome challenge'. During this exercise local partners such as community health volunteers describe an ideal picture of themselves in terms of what they would do, how they would relate with other stakeholders and how they would work or behave in order to contribute in the best possible way towards the vision of the programme. Reflection by the local partners about their own outcome challenge allowed them to assess their own progress. While this helped local partners to reflect on their own responsibilities, it also helped to clarify their perceptions and expectations towards the support given by MCNV.

"Reflecting on the Outcome Challenges and assessing if and how program activities had helped in achieving the outcome challenge was a good way of tracking the progress that had been made"The Village Health Volunteers did not feel they achieved the Outcome Challenge 'Health workers also have a better understanding of hygiene and related practices and can promote hygiene and related practices to the communities' very well. A discussion with them followed, and it turned out they often felt they were failing as the villagers tended to over-demand them and seemed to have unrealistic expectations of what they should and could do. They seemed to feel quite relieved when we confirmed to them they had done very well within their limited mandates, roles and responsibilities"(MCNV).

In the Dark & Light case, outcome mapping provided a planning framework for active involvement of local partners to plan their own change process. This was shown to result in more realistic plans and commitment of the partners to take up their responsibility to make these plans happen. This approach represents a clear shift of focus in the monitoring system towards programme outcomes as changes in the professional practice of the local partners. In fact, these outcomes can be seen as indicators of the partner's capacity. Hence, they provide Dark and Light with a planning, monitoring and evaluation framework for capacity development of the local partners. In this capacity development framework, the role of Dark and Light became clearer. Instead of an instrumental relationship with the local partners for increased service delivery towards the final beneficiaries, the strengthening of the local partners through funding and technical advise emerged as the main objective of the programme.

"By using outcome mapping, especially by describing what would happen for various boundary partners/stakeholders - the shared understanding became apparent in a natural way. The discussion was focused but natural and based in reality." (D&L).

The STRO and Vredeseilanden cases demonstrate that the clarification of relationships is not always an easy process and may not take place automatically. In both cases we observe how the use of outcome mapping helped programme stakeholders to see the urgency and the importance of clarifying relationships between various programme stakeholders.

In the STRO case, the willingness of programme partners to clarify their own role only came after a long process of programme planning involving various outcome mapping training workshops. The case describes how local partners came to the realization that the donor organisation STRO would not be able to continue providing financial support in the long run. This resulted in local partners identifying the strengthening of a local business network as a shared and realistic common point of action within the context of the programme supported by STRO. The setting up of a 'monitoring & evaluation' committee with active involvement of each partner organization was a direct practical result of this clarification of roles and responsibilities.

The Learning history of VECO Indonesia (further referred to as VECO) tells us how local partners didn't necessarily feel immediately comfortable with clarifying relationships because it pushed them to recognize and take up specific responsibilities that were not as clearly described before. Only after some time did this role clarification contribute to more understanding and trusting relationships between VECO and its direct local partners.

"They (local partners) will need to act more as facilitators than as trainers and advisors only; : People do not always feel more comfortable with explicitly defined roles and responsibilities; having our progress monitored tends to make us feel more vulnerable. Discussions focused on 'how did you change, what did you do to make it happen; how would you need to change what you are doing to make it happen' are very different than discussions on 'what activities did you do this year.' It can be much more confrontational if it is not handled with care.(VECO)

The CORDAID case demonstrates the importance of creating a common language to strengthen cooperation and complementarity among programme stakeholders. The case describes how the collaborative development of a suitable PME approach contributed to the ...

"strengthening of a shared vision and common language between different organizations and networks. This in turn is seen as a means to strengthen cooperation and complementarity in the work undertaken.....beyond the creation of a common language, one speaks of a "process of reflection that allows the construction of shared identity" (CORDAID).

Developing learning relationships within and among programme stakeholders

From the cases we learn that clarifying responsibilities and expectations is an important 'stepping stone' towards developing learning relationships among programme stakeholders. This is because it can foster trust. Such trustful atmosphere is important for actors to learn from practice and to feel comfortable to speak about things that are not going well.

The VECO learning history shows that the use of outcome mapping made it more easy for partners to identify their progress and contributions in a larger process of change. This is illustrated by the following quote:

"I remember the first reactions of partners when we used the outcome challenges and progress markers in compiling their plans for 2008: 'Ah! this is how it should be!' Perhaps this was because in the old way of doing things, if they did not produce the planned activities and outputs, it would mean they had failed. Now they could still show progress. This encouraged

them to speak more openly with us about their weaknesses”(learning coordinator VECO Indonesia).

In the ETC COMPAS case, the implementation of most significant change contributed to the field officers changing their own attitude towards their partners. *“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 COMPAS).*

Most significant change also contributed to bringing ‘trust’ on the agenda in the Oxfam Novib case. This is illustrated by the following incidence in one of the preparatory most significant change training workshops: *“the ‘interviewer’ who wrote a story down, told the person who shared her most significant change story that it was not significant at all. “This really hurt the person who shared the story. Especially in this step of the MSC technique, people may feel their experience and input is undervalued or even attacked. In Niger, we identified that the hierarchy that exists between some partners and consultants makes people feel uncomfortable and unwilling to share their experiences” (Oxfam Novib).*

Enhancing ownership

Across the various cases we observe that for PME approaches to contribute to learning relationships, there is need for programme stakeholders to not only own the programme objectives and activities but also the PME activities. Furthermore, we learn from the case reports that such ownership can be fostered by active participation of different actors in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the programme. Ownership of the PME system actually concerns one of the organizational questions of ETC, MCNV, CORDAID, W&D and STRO. Additionally, the cases warn us that such active participation may not happen automatically and may need a considerable effort and investment.

First of all the case of MCNV shows that to ensure ownership, multi stakeholder involvement of partners in the planning phase is important. *“If in a new programme we start off with formulating a mission and vision together with our stakeholders this will already help us in feeling united and feeling mutual ownership. Formulating Outcome Challenges with each group of stakeholders and then sharing the different Outcome Challenges between different Stakeholder Groups can surely help in better understanding each other’s position. Besides, this will help in thinking through the roles all stakeholders have in the program and it can stimulate cooperation to achieve the common goals” (Quote senior programme and policy adviser MCNV)*

The ETC case shows enhanced ownership of monitoring information because the project staff and community members are involved in collecting change stories. This is said to be empowering *“For the NGOs, the normal M&E was to collect the numbers. But when change stories were collected the NGO staff also got empowered, from the understanding of how deep the interventions have affected the beneficiaries”(ETC COMPAS).* The use of change stories also enhances the chance that monitoring information actually leads to change in support strategies: *“Because the change stories can affect both the mind in terms of the information and knowledge shared and also the heart in terms of what really matters or has changed in people’s lives, the information so gathered ‘comes alive’ – is accessible, can be challenging in terms of demanding responses taking into consideration context and culture, and statements (i.e. change stories) can therefore not be easily dismissed” (ETC COMPAS).*

In the case of Dark&Light active participation in PME is closely related to ownership of the program. To promote active involvement of local partners in the design of their inclusive education programme, Dark & Light adapted the outcome mapping intentional design to make it more culturally aligned to the local Cambodian context by avoiding any outcome mapping jargon. Also a gradual process was adopted of almost one year to develop the planning, monitoring and evaluation system in collaboration with the Cambodian partners. This long term planning process allows programme stakeholders to learn more about the actual programme content of inclusive education during the planning workshops and field visits. Based on this content, richer progress markers can be developed. The Dark & Light case reports that defining the programme's scope together with the local partners helped to clarify relationships but also to strengthen collaborative attitudes among the various programme partners. This was illustrated by the observation by the consultant about new linkages between two local partners (KT and ABC) "By using OM, especially by describing what would happen for various boundary partners/stakeholders - the shared understanding became apparent in a natural way" (D&L).

In the case report of CORDAID it is described that "the process of being engaged in the M&E process and actively participate in the spaces designed for data collection, analysis, reflection and decision making, helped the women of the pilot regions to reinforce their sense of belonging to the program. They managed to reflect and identify the added value of networking for being more effective in their policy work (individually and collectively), as well as for being recognized as legitimate stakeholders on the women rights field". Furthermore the CORDAID case shows how creating these learning spaces had great potential to contribute to the conceptualization and sharing of the vision and the objectives of the programme.

Similarly, the VECO learning history illustrates that the 'more intense' relationships had to do with the organization of local partner meetings. These meetings make that partners feel part of the monitoring process. "The partners give their contributions and we take these contributions seriously, reflecting on them and using them to plan improvements to the program" (VECO).

Learning about the progress towards the development objectives

"In the normal logical framework, evaluations are more connected to impact which is at the highest level of the objective hierarchy. But in the change stories, the impact can be identified and explained at the 'project implementing stage' itself. This can help to identify gaps in project implementation and make necessary adjustments to the project plan during implementation". (ETC COMPAS)

It is a central hypothesis in this action research that for a PME approach to support an organization or a programme to deal with unpredictable complex processes of social change, it will need to help programme stakeholders to learn on a regular basis about the effects of the programme, about changes related to their own capabilities and any changes in context. It is assumed that these lessons

can then be used to adjust programme interventions accordingly based on what seems to work and what doesn't within a specific context. In this section we explore if and how the piloted PME approaches in the cases contributed to such learning and programme improvement. We will pay attention at the extent to which the piloted PME approaches are able to provide insight in change processes that are difficult to quantify, and that are not always planned. We also try to give specific examples of how such learning contributed to improved programming.

Monitoring the 'immeasurable' and Capturing the 'un-captured'

Across the cases we can observe that the motivation to diversify PME systems with alternative PME approaches partly stems from an attempt to monitor and learn from programme results that are rather difficult to measure.

War Child Holland for example faced challenges in monitoring changes in psychosocial wellbeing of children through Western survey tools. Young people would feel tested and insecure with such tools and therefore not empowered by them. To address this challenge War Child Holland introduced participatory M&E tools into their PME system. These tools such as the personal goal exercise and the impact map provided space for the children's perspectives to be heard. This resulted in two concrete lessons for programme facilitators. Firstly the facilitators became more aware of the individual differences between the children and of the need to take their views seriously. As a result, programme facilitators started to organize meetings with parents to raise awareness about the implications of individual differences among children and on how to deal with these. Secondly, the personal goal exercise did not only help to clarify the expectations of the children but also allowed the facilitator to learn about the children's expectations and to help the children to set more realistic goals (instead of becoming president or professional soccer player).

ETC COMPAS sought to complement their PME approach with alternative PME methods to be able to measure social change and spirituality. As described before they used elements of most significant change which involves the collection of stories of change by NGO staff and community members. There are several findings that illustrate that most significant change stories indeed fill information gaps and inform diverse actors in the ETC COMPAS program about progress on the more complex change processes that the program is working towards. This is illustrated by the following extract from the ETC COMPAS case report:

During the collection of stories, Sri Lankan partners had reflections on their interventions. The discussions based on the change stories made them to understand the worldviews and spirituality at a deeper level. This helped to plan further activities in a different way. For example the GSS field officers discuss the spiritual aspect with the beneficiaries quite openly now and are able to understand spiritual dimension of Endogenous development more comprehensively. Before, this was more problematic (ETC COMPAS).

From the ETC Compass case we also learn that the information generated by the change stories can lead to specific lessons that can inform future programming. This is illustrated by the following example:

"...organic farming is a technical system which does not need any rituals. But when explained in terms of traditional farming with spirituality being an essential part of it, farmers are more inclined to accept it. That is how COMPAS Sri Lanka partners have modified their strategies to now promoting traditional farming, whereas they were earlier promoting organic farming." (ETC COMPAS)

The organisational learning questions of Oxfam Novib, Cordaid and STRO focus on a more diverse PME approach that enables them to monitor changes in behaviour and attitudes that were left 'unmeasured' by their original PME system. In the Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory

(GMLT) that is supported by Oxfam Novib, “participants requested M&E methods that would help them to make visible, complex changes related to the advancement of Gender Equality in the ideological, informal layers of the organization, and the difficulties encountered to make those changes happen”. STRO and partners strive for a more diverse PME approach to capture behavioural changes in their Local Economic Development (LED) efforts which are “usually intangible changes not easily measured with simple quantitative indicators/tools”. Cordaid sought to make visible the outcomes achieved by complex networks of women groups and the changes in the capacity of these networks. For each of the three organizations it is still too early to report on how their more diverse PME approach helped them to learn about development results. It is interesting to note, however, that each of the organizations use different elements of a variety of methods to enrich their PME approach in order to respond to their information needs in these complex program contexts. Oxfam Novib uses Most Significant Change, Cordaid uses most significant change and elements of outcome mapping and STRO uses outcome mapping. The common finding that surfaces in the three cases is that they underestimated the support and coaching that is needed to guide different actors involved in implementing ‘new’ PME methods and/or tools. For Cordaid it became clear how difficult it is to design learning tools with the participation of a diversity of networks that are on different levels of knowledge, from different cultural backgrounds and living in different contexts. The difficulties faced in the STRO and Oxfam Novib cases are illustrated by the following extracts from the case reports;

“it is necessary to provide continuous follow-up to partners activities in the field, even when they are convinced of being able to perform all the PM&E process on their own in its initial stage”. And “it takes more than the two initially previewed workshops to promote a wider and sustainable learning process of the Outcome Mapping basic concepts and its implementation.”(STRO)

“The assessment made clear to us that partners need more time and guidance on Most significant change and the documentation of the process than was given to them so far. Their e-mails made us doubt whether they were systematically using the tool. (Oxfam Novib)

Learning from unexpected changes

Related to monitoring the immeasurable is monitoring and learning from the unexpected. One of the motivations of MCNV to widen its PME approach to include elements of participative and qualitative PME methods was to be also able to collect information about unexpected results, and not only monitor progress on the results that were planned for. Apart from outcome mapping, MCNV also used elements of most significant change in an evaluation of their community health development program in Laos. They found that, when aiming at uncovering unexpected results of the program intervention one has to be careful about what probing questions to ask when collecting stories and decided to obtain broad information about changes in the villages without defining domains of change first. They also learned that the selection of significant change stories and the dialogue during this reflection process which was done by MCNV staff and volunteers were key in providing useful insights in the programme. The following quotes from the MCNV case report illustrate two examples of such insights:

“One Village Health Volunteer selected a story in which the gratitude for the water pump installed in the village was expressed. A Village Health Volunteer in the same group scored the story very low and why? Not because he did not like the story, but because he was disappointed that in his village, no pump had been installed”.(MCNV)

“MCNV and partners realized that some of the stories sketched a rather ‘ **desired picture**’ instead of a **realistic** one. ... We felt that the participants were giving us ‘false’ information still gave us, by doing so, very valuable information indeed. The fact that they ‘lied’ about new practices they had adapted showed they felt ashamed of their indigenous values and practices regarding reproductive health. The question raised among our MCNV staff how new reproductive health messages had been developed and we wondered whether they might have been too patronizing and directive, possibly insufficiently taking into account the valuable aspects of the traditional habits (MCNV)”.

Also the learning history of ETC provides examples of how most significant change helps them to draw unexpected but robust lessons that informs their program activities, as illustrated by the following quote:

We came across an incidence where our proposal to increase the house hold income of selected families was not accepted by the community. We suggested that beneficiaries can increase household income and nutrition by breeding village hens (eggs). We failed in this facilitation. Later the MSC revealed the real reason to reject out proposal. Villagers did not like to breed animal for meat because it is against their worldview. This is a very good point to stress that any project planning or implementation should learn and respect the worldview of the target group (ETC COMPAS).

Satisfying downward, horizontal and upward accountability needs

PME at final beneficiary level to promote learning and upward accountability.

ICCO, War Child Holland, ETC COMPAS and Vredeseilanden pay explicit attention to PME at the level of their final beneficiaries. Also here we see that the organizations use different (elements of) PME methods.

In addition to its outcome mapping framework and ‘value chain analysis’ monitoring tools, Vredeseilanden has developed an impact assessment framework, based on DFID’s Sustainable Livelihood Analysis approach, to assess the changes in the livelihood of small-scale family farmers and to understand how Vredeseilanden programmes contribute to these changes (intended/unintended). This information feeds upward accountability and learning needs within the programme. Despite their already diverse PME approach, Vredeseilanden still faces challenges to obtain meaningful information from their impact assessment at farmer level. Vredeseilanden is currently exploring ‘Sensemaker’ (i.e. use of micro-narratives) to monitor the perspectives of farmers about changes in their livelihoods.

As mentioned before, War Child Holland uses a methodological diverse M&E toolbox to capture changes at the level of their beneficiaries. The elements of the tool that focus on impact are still under discussion. The main finding is that although the tools are already used by War Child Holland staff in Uganda, it is difficult to analyse and interpret the large amounts of qualitative monitoring information. War Child Holland is planning to explore Sensemaker in order to address this challenge.

ETC COMPAS uses most significant change stories to monitor at the level of their final beneficiaries. This allows them to respond to the 'spiritual' needs of community members:

"We have not done away with the existing monitoring system. It is important to know the quantities. But the existing M&E system does not account for quality, especially changes like spiritual empowerment...in order to explain 'the why-part' some other method has to be used. We experiment with change stories in this context" (ETC COMPAS).

PME at final beneficiary level to promote downward and horizontal accountability

ICCO explores Client Satisfaction instruments, mainly to promote downward accountability of the civil society organisations (CSOs) that ICCO supports. This approach is already bearing fruit as illustrated by the following quote from the ICCO case report:

"it was reported at the review and learning workshops that the management of the various organizations had already initiated some reform measures on their own even before the review workshops. This readiness of attitude to accept voices of the clients and learn from them is a major score for the project at this stage as it has overcome one of the potential hurdles anticipated" (ICCO).

"Harki tudhataa harka kennati gadi"
(The hand of the receiver is always
below the hand of the giver) (Oromo
proverb, Ethiopië)

When ICCO partners implemented the client satisfactory instruments in Ethiopia they learned that beneficiaries find it difficult to express their dissatisfaction with services that are delivered for free. This is also illustrated by the Oromo proverb in the textbox. To overcome this problem field officers had to take their time to explain more clearly to the

beneficiaries that service providing organisations valued sincere feedback for their own learning and improvement of services.

Interesting is that ICCO staff is also planning to apply the client satisfaction tool to strengthen horizontal accountability within their own partnerships. This will allow ICCO to monitor the satisfaction of its partners with ICCO's support: *"Last month....we were discussing their first round of implementing a client satisfaction tool. It was a huge eye opener to all of us.... I am actually scheduled to have George from the network secretariat in Blantyre synod to administer the tool on me – assessing the client satisfaction between ICCO and the network!" (ICCO program officer, Malawi).*

The case report of W&D also pays attention to downward accountability: 'The new PMEL system of W&D includes some elements that seek to stimulate downward accountability, especially toward the beneficiaries. Score cards have been developed that assess a range of aspects relevant to quality of service providers. Besides accountability to beneficiaries horizontal accountability within the partner organisations is also promoted. To this effect, it has been stressed that 'it is important that staff that has been involved in data collection will be given relevant feedback on the end products (monitoring report, analyses) and on the effect these end products have had (e.g. on program management, as input on regional alliance meetings).' In the next case report W&D will be able to provide data about how this has been done. Furthermore, W&D seeks to strengthen horizontal accountability among the partners of its alliance through participatory peer assessments of their progress towards result

indicators. Peer assessments of partner's organisational capacity has also been proposed and will be implemented in a later stage during the action research.

Satisfying upward accountability

Related to upward accountability, Dark & Light did some 'technical tweaking' to align the outcome challenges of their outcome mapping framework with the result areas from their logical framework in order to satisfy their donor requirements. Vredeseilanden integrated more result based monitoring tools to monitor impact at the level of their beneficiaries. And ETC COMPAS integrated change stories in their reports to their donors. However, at this stage in the action research we do not have enough data yet to analyse if upward accountability needs have indeed been met. What we do observe across some cases is the challenge to analyse and synthesise the qualitative information that is generated by the alternative PME approaches that have been piloted. This is illustrated by the following quote from the ETC COMPAS case report:

"one constraint in change stories will be in terms of reporting and accountability: how to present them to donors who have little time for reading/listening? The strength of the change story is the story itself. Making them concise or quantifying them would kill its spirit." (ETC COMPAS)

We expect that the next phase of the action research will enable us to address the issue of upward accountability in the final cross-case analysis to be brought out mid-2012.

Strengthening the adaptive capacity of programme stakeholders

Earlier in this paper we highlighted the importance of an existing learning culture for the exploration of diverse PME approaches in response to specific PME challenges. In this section we highlight to what extent the implementation of such diverse PME approaches helped to further strengthen this existing learning culture and the adaptive capacity of the organisations and programme stakeholders across the various cases. We do this by looking across the cases for indications of increased reflection on PME practice, investment in the support for PME and learning and changing organisational practices.

More explicit reflection on PME practice

The exploration of alternative PME approaches contributed in various cases towards more explicit reflection processes about PME practice. In certain cases these reflection processes were triggered by specific challenges that were experienced during the PME pilot and which needed to be addressed. The various M&E tools introduced to the partners of War Child Holland for example, to monitor changes in psychological wellbeing of children turned out to be too time consuming. This resulted in field staff putting M&E exercises in a separate session instead of integrating them into the normal intervention modules as planned. Also the need to adapt the tools to the local context was highlighted after it was observed that the questions from the 'quiz' tool were too easy for children in Uganda but too difficult when implemented in Sudan. This resulted in War Child Holland recognizing the need to involve the partners more in the design of the M&E tools and to provide more training in their effective use and adaptation and in the analysis and use of the information that they generate.

Another example involves STRO, Oxfam Novib and Cordaid who came to the realization that it involves much more than a few initial training workshops to customise and implementing an alternative PME method such as most significant change or outcome mapping. In the three cases the donor organization and their partners got drawn in to a longer than expected journey that didn't necessarily lead to immediate success.

One year after a large scale initial training for partners in most significant change, Oxfam Novib had little information about how this approach had assisted the partners in the monitoring of their gender mainstreaming programmes. They learned about the importance of integrating most significant change in the existing PME systems of the partners.

STRO came to the realization that an extensive training effort of several outcome mapping workshops did not necessarily lead to its implementation by the partner as expected. At one stage for example, STRO's partner decided to adapt outcome mapping for their strategic planning in the communities where they work. But at a later stage, the same partner 'forgot' to take outcome mapping into consideration while elaborating its operational planning framework for one of the projects involved in the PME pilot and for which they received the OM training. Further reflection with the partner turned this apparent 'setback' into a breakthrough in the partner's PME practice through the partner's recognition that the operational plan would be much easier to use when using the outcome mapping approach.

Ongoing reflection within the women networks in the Cordaid case contributed to the development of a PME system that didn't involve a structured and detailed planning process at all levels involved (local, regional, national). Instead it involved a retrospective analysis and identification of changes pertaining key stakeholders that were influenced by the women networks.

From the examples above it becomes clear that the reflection on PME practice and the exploration of new PME approaches needs investment of time and resources. We see this trend in all the cases. Vredeseilanden, for example, organised a first exploratory workshop with representatives from all sections of the organisation to introduce them to the Sensemaker methodology and to obtain an organisational mandate to proceed with this exploration process. Dark and Light invested time of one staff member to undertake several field missions to plan the PME system of their inclusive education programme in Cambodia with support from a local consultant. In some cases like ICCO, Oxfam Novib, Cordaid and STRO, external consultants were hired for initial training and longer term coaching. Even with the help of external consultants there is considerable time investment of staff within the supporting donor NGO to coordinate the exploration process involving follow up, reflection, and adjusting the exploration process if necessary.

Creating the space for learning

Across the cases we also observe that spaces for reflection may not materialise automatically as people are or too busy or don't see it as a priority. In most cases specific time and space for such reflection was deliberately planned. The MCNV case report shows that learning during the selection of significant stories can be a tiresome process and may not just happen automatically but needs the necessary space and facilitation. This is illustrated by the following quote from the MCNV program and policy advisor:

"In our workshop, the sharing of stories took a long time because of slow reading and misunderstandings caused by the translations. By the time stories had been selected participants felt tired and were not ready for another round of discussing each other's

selection. We decided to cut it short by asking the groups to present their selection in plenary and ask the other participants to comment. This did not really work as people felt shy to speak up, felt shy in a big group and as they were tired anyway....In case we do decide to use MSC in monitoring we ...need to consider how to facilitate group discussion and avoid plenary sessions with groups as much as possible”.

The VECO learning history illustrates how the creation of formal spaces “to regularly discuss, reflect on, and analyse the program with team members as well as with partners” has strengthened learning processes within their outcome mapping based PME system. The various organizational spaces and rhythms are shown in figure 3 below.

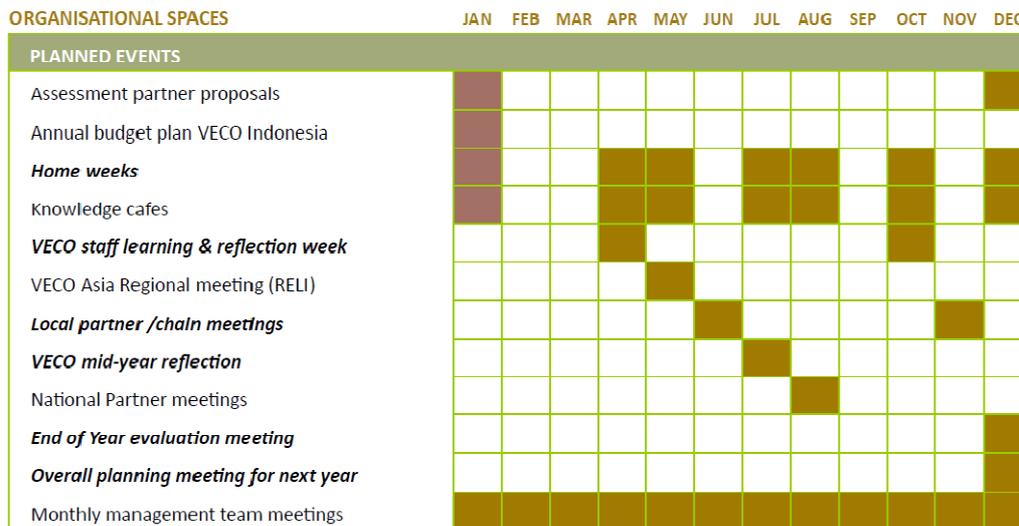


figure 3: main organisational spaces and rhythms of the VECO Indonesia PLA system

The organizational learning spaces shown in figure 4 are considered by VECO and its partners as sense-making events to ensure that the information collected is reflected upon and supports planning.

The W&D case shows the significance of explicitly linking PME to learning “just the introduction of the concept of PMEL versus M&E helped us to close the loop and integrate all elements into our actual project cycle”. (participant in a PMEL workshop). The W&D case shows how space is deliberately made for collaborative learning during regional alliance meetings that take place twice every year.

In the Cordaid case, representatives from the networks of women groups meet twice a year to reflect on their achievements in the programme using a process of structured dialogue. The importance of this learning space is illustrated by the following extract of Cordaid’s case report:

“Further than the M&E findings, the process of being engaged in the M&E process and actively participate in the spaces designed for data collection, analysis, reflection and decision making, helped the women of the pilot regions to reinforce their sense of belonging to the program. They managed to reflect and identify the added value of networking for being more effective in their policy work (individually and collectively), as well as for being recognized as legitimate stakeholders on the women rights field.” (Cordaid)

Change in organisational practice

An important lesson from the previous sections is the fact that diversifying a PME system can be a long drawn out and unpredictable process that needs engagement both at partner level as at the level of the supporting donor NGO. This may involve the 'unlearning' of certain ways of doing as shown in the STRO case (i.e. unlearning the use of established operational planning methods). But in the long run it can set in motion processes of organizational change. Actually most organisations participating in the action research are still in the middle of implementing the pilot and did not reach the process of organisational change yet. However, there are signs that changes are set in motion. .

The W&D case shows the importance of attention for PME and learning at the level of their partner organisations. It was decided that each of the partner organisations would appoint a PMEL coordinator in their organisation. At the regional partner meetings held in spring 2011, it turned out that all partners had a PMEL coordinator appointed and that the discussions on the tasks, role, responsibilities and the place in the organization of the PMEL coordinator both between W&D and partners and within the partner organizations, had stimulated internal discussions and shaped partners' ideas on a division of tasks and responsibilities with regard to PMEL. The following quote is illustrative for these changes taking place:

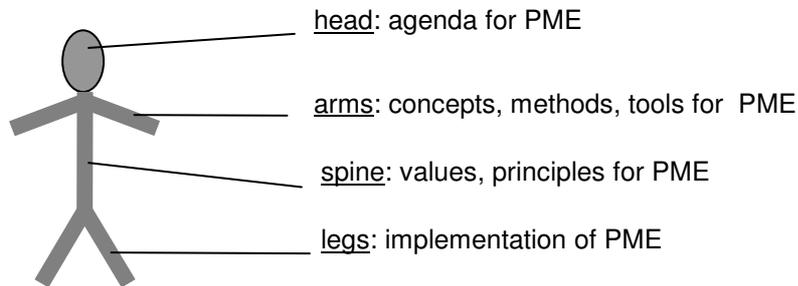
"The profile of PMEL within our organization has been raised significantly, which can be seen from the fact that in the recently adapted organogram the PMEL coordinator has been placed at the senior management level."

The VECO learning history shows another example of changing organisational practice. The development of a sound planning, learning and accountability system that included elements of outcome mapping led to some initial confusing. The resulting discussions that came from this confusion eventually proved to be an invaluable source of learning, and contributed to the capacity of VECO to be able to adjust plans. If there is one element that has contributed to an increase in the learning capacity of VECO as an organization it is this flexibility. *The notion of being able to change plans along the way is more present now compared to the time when I started. (VECO, p9).*

Also in the ETC COMPAS case MSC is not just seen as a method of PME, but as an alternative mind-set regarding the nature and purpose of development (i.e. holistic well-being of community members).

Towards a balanced PME approach

The various case reports that emerged in this study provide a unique insight in the exciting exploratory journey of organizations that together with their partners, tried to diversify and improve their PME practice. From the various case stories, we learned that it takes more than just the right PME tool or method to improve one's PME practice. While the implementation of the appropriate tools remains an important aspect of PME there are also some other important dimensions of a complexity oriented PME approach that emerged from the cross case analysis. We use INTRAC's metaphor of the human body for capacity development (Lipson & Hunt, 2009) to describe the different dimensions of such complexity oriented PME approach.



The spine

The spine relates to the values or principles for PME. We adopt the definition of Lipson and Hunt for values: “Values are ideas and qualities that are informed by, and in turn inform, beliefs, principles and aspirations that are important to the actors involved in PME activities” (Hunt & Lipson, 2009, p39).

Across the cases we observe two important values for PME practice. A first value is the strong commitment towards **active participation** of multiple programme stakeholders during the design and implementation of the PME system; This value manifests itself in the following ways across the cases:

- An explicit attempt towards an ‘actor focused’ PME approach is visible across all the cases, involving programme stakeholders to reflect on their own change process and roles or expectations within the programme.
- At the same time it was observed that the participatory design is very time and resource intensive. This is illustrated by the D&L, STRO, Cordaid and Oxfam Novib cases.

Various cases also demonstrate a strong commitment towards fostering ownership of the PME approach among the various programme stakeholders. This is evidenced in some cases by understanding that developing ownership can take time and by being prepared to support this process over a longer period (i.e. not just the one shot training workshop in a certain PME method or tool). At the same time, while the new PME approaches were introduced to address specific needs of both Northern NGOs and partner organizations, the initial initiative of introducing these new PME approaches came in the majority of the cases from the Northern NGOs. It will be a point of interest during the further course of the action research how this situation may affect future ownership of the PME approach at partner level.

A second value pertains the commitment towards **collaborative learning** among various programme stakeholders during PME activities.

- Across the cases we see that reflection often takes place through processes of dialogue between different stakeholders. There are indications that this contributed to collaborative learning processes within the PME activities. We notice a deliberate attempt in the cases to facilitate such dialogue and collaborative learning processes and to provide the necessary means and space for them. Participatory design of PME systems with a focus on changes aimed for versus changes observed leads to extensive dialogues between stakeholders at all levels. These discussions lead to a common language (CORDAID, D&L), shared visions on

what is aimed for (STRO, D&L, MCNV, CORDAID, War Child Holland), and a stronger identity of the network (CORDAID).

- In the different cases we also see an explicit commitment towards a continuous process of capacity development of the Northern NGO and the Southern partners. This means that the relationship between Northern NGOs and Southern partners is not merely instrumental to achieve improved service delivery towards the final beneficiaries. While improved service delivery is an important part of the agenda for PME (as we will see below), the strengthening of the Southern partners and the Northern NGOs remains an important value and principle that informs overall PME practice. We see this evidenced through Northern NGOs being adaptive towards the needs and the rhythm of the Southern partners. This is for example illustrated by the long term customized coaching support for partner organizations in the cases of STRO, CORDAID; W&D and Oxfam Novib. Judging from the considerable time and resources that have been invested in some of the cases to accommodate these needs and rhythms we can conclude that this value can be a strong guide in PME practice. The

The head

The head refers to the agenda for PME. The agenda provides the underlying reason why one is involved in PME. In other words, the agenda gives the answer to the following question: "PME for what?" From the different cases, the following answers emerge to this question:

- All cases seek to **learn from the effects of their programmes**. Effects can mean different things among the different cases but one common denominator is the recognition that effects are changes (both positive or negative) at the level of programme stakeholders that are outside the sphere of control of the Northern NGO and to which the programme has contributed (directly or indirectly). The action researches of Oxfam Novib, MCNV and ETC COMPAS highlight the importance of a PME approach to give insight in both, planned and unplanned effects in order to learn about the effectiveness of their support strategies. This is especially relevant in complex programs that have emergence as a key feature, and where support strategies might be developed by a trial and error approach. Most significant change was potentially useful to give insight in unplanned changes and failures, but this is highly dependent on the way the most significant change process is facilitated and designed. Both War Child Holland and MCNV report that it is one thing to gather additional information on changes, but that resources and expertise have to be allocated to analyse the data and that there is need to carefully discuss who will be responsible to do that, at what level and for whom.
- **Improved programming by using the lessons generated by the PME system** is another aspect of the PME agenda. The cases show that using the lessons learned to improve practice does not happen automatically. In several instances stakeholders had to be actively involved in making sense of monitoring information during reflection sessions. This asks for a learning culture and sufficient space for learning. The VECO learning history and the cases of Cordaid, ICCO, War Child Holland and ETC COMPAS show evidence of how learning and reflection is organized and integrated in working practices and how this contributed to making adjustments in the programme. This drive for programme improvement also implies that a diverse PME approach has to cater for the information needs of different actors. The case of ICCO shows that client satisfaction instruments provide valuable monitoring information, if

used in culturally appropriate ways, about client satisfaction, allowing service providers to improve their services.

- **Satisfying upward and downward accountability needs** is a third important aspect of the PME agenda across the cases. In several instances (e.g. Oxfam Novib, Cordaid & War Child Holland), an important reason to step into the action research was the fact that their programmes were facing challenges to demonstrate results and therefore became concerned about possible questions from their management or back donors. This aspect of the PME agenda is possibly not always that explicit in the communication between Northern NGOs and Southern partners, but it did partly motivate the PME exploration process in the action research. As we already mentioned in the ‘Spine’ section, in most cases this exploration process is actually initiated by the Northern Donor organization.

This aspect of the PME agenda can sometimes lead to a balancing act with the values of PME such as active participation and ownership. The PME agenda of MCNV for example of dealing with complexity includes the openness for unplanned results. Their case report narrates the fact that the involvement of Village Health Workers in the collection of stories mainly led to ‘desired’ answers and stories; this was one of the factors that made them decide to have MCNV staff to collect the stories. The case of STRO is another example which shows that their partner was so enthusiastic about using the Outcome Mapping framework in their strategic planning process that after one outcome mapping training they said that they did not need further coaching and involvement of the consultant. This resulted in confusion about individual responsibilities of partners and a delay in the process. Again a balancing act...where to let go and where to steer when accountability needs need to be met?.

The arms

The arms refer to the concepts, methods and tools involved in the PME approach. Here we deal with the nuts and bolts of PME. When we look at the “nuts and bolts” across the cases we observe a striking methodological diversity. From the cases we learn that when dealing with complex contexts it helps to plan and monitor such changes from an actor oriented perspective. In other words, this involves looking for change within people or concrete actors involved in or affected by the programme. Unsurprisingly, this often leads to diverse information needs of different actors at different levels in the programme (e.g. donor organization, local partners, beneficiaries, ...). Addressing these diverse needs also requires a diverse PME approach as we have observed in the cases. Table 2 below illustrates the main PME approaches that are being applied in the action research cases. The table also specifies at which stakeholder level the PME tools are used to monitor programme effects.

Northern NGO level	Partner level	Final beneficiary level
-Reflection meetings/workshops internal and with partners.	-Outcome mapping - Most significant change -reflection meetings -PMEL outcome level indicators	-Most significant change -Sensemaker -Client satisfactory instruments -IDEAL toolkit: impact maps, quiz, personal goal exercise,... -PMEL impact level indicators

Table 2: overview of the main PME approaches according to stakeholder level

The table shows that the piloted PME approaches are mainly directed towards changes at the level of the partner organizations and the final beneficiaries. It will be a point of interest in the further course of

the action research to explore how the PME approaches also affect PME practice at the level of the Northern NGOs.

The legs

The legs relate to the actual implementation of the PME approach or how the PME approach is put into practice. The cases learn us that making an organisation's PME challenges and expectations explicit and having the motivation to do something about them often lies in the hands of an individual or a small group of people taking the lead. We also see across the cases that taking action to diversify and strengthen your PME approach does not always come easy. Several organizational and contextual factors can hinder such action. The cases provide us with concrete examples of factors that can contribute to an enabling or disabling environment for reflective action around PME.

Disabling factors:

- Shortage of time for reflection and for trying out new PME approaches emerged as a critical limiting factor across the cases. *"Finding time for M&E remains a difficult one, also as implementing actors (either staff or partners) usually plan too little time for this (deputy country director, War Child Uganda)".* Time shortage actually resulted in a number of cases not taking part in the action research. Of course it remains to be seen in the further course of the action research if its indeed time shortage or rather the way time is prioritized which is at play here.
- The absence of PME capacity can be another limiting factor, such as the lack of specific competencies needed to be able to apply new PME approaches. In some of the cases using most significant change stories (MCNV, ETC, Oxfam Novib) gathering stories of sufficient quality was seen as an important challenge.
- One might also face resistance resulting from previous or ongoing innovation initiatives as was illustrated by the case of VECO. *"Vredeseilanden has already invested quite some energy in improving its M&E system (adopting parts of Outcome Mapping, a new chain intervention logic) and a new rather complex method might make the PLA system more heavy and would absorb too much energy", (Vredeseilanden advisor).* and ICCO *"I wonder what the added value of CSI can be; actually, it appears to me as just another "nice" method that partners apparently need to follow".(PME advisor)*

Enabling factors:

- The availability of an actual request for alternative PME approaches by the Southern partner organisations. In the STRO case, the local partner organization requested to explore outcome mapping in its strategic planning exercise after it was introduced to the methodology during a formative evaluation process.
- Explicit support from higher management by providing financial resources or time for staff involved in the PME pilot emerged as another important enabling factor. *"The Research and Development department and the regional desks of Oxfam Novib also guaranteed financial input to execute the pilot" (Oxfam Novib).*
- An environment of trust that allows dialogue and the presence of a group of people with a strong desire to learn from practice in order to improve it is a third enabling factor. It is such an

enabling environment that has supported program teams across the cases to look for diverse PME approaches that could support them in their learning process.

So did we learn anything yet about dealing with complexity through PME?

There is an old saying which says that ‘happiness lays at a small place close to home’. Looking at the insights from the first leg of our action research described in this cross case analysis it appears that the ‘key’ for dealing with complex processes of social change lies within our reach within our organizations or programmes. The various dimensions of this ‘key’ represent the concrete lessons that we have learned during our action research.

1. It takes a learning culture within an organization or programme, to take up the challenge of diversifying and strengthening a PME approach. A learning cultures is one of those ‘container’ concepts that can mean everything and therefore become meaningless. However, the insights of the first stage of this action research help us to unpack its actual meaning. In all the cases we learned that a crucial element of a learning culture is the presence of a group of people who have the motivation, the courage, and the mandate to address PME challenges in their organizations or programmes by introducing new PME approaches. The cases further show how support from higher management and trustful relationships can nurture such learning culture.
2. Actor focused PME approaches that were explored in the cases were shown to have the potential for enabling dialogue and collaborative learning. As such they can contribute towards more trustful relationships and active participation of various stakeholders in the PME activities. But it also takes a lot of effort. Several cases misjudged the amount of resources that were needed to support and coach stakeholders to use new actor focused PME approaches. It needs organizations to strongly value the need for collaborative learning and active participation to be able to sustain such efforts.
3. One central hypothesis of the action research is that the ability to regularly learn about what works and what not and adjusting the programme accordingly, can help organizations to deal with complex unpredictable change. This implies a PME approach that facilitates circular relations between the P, M and E.. At this stage in the action research we do have indications that a diverse PME approach using different PME methods has contributed to specific insights about the programme’s results that wouldn’t have been learned otherwise. However the examples of such insights are still few and limited to a small number of cases. We hope to get more such examples in the next phase of the action research so that we can make more robust claims about this hypothesis.
4. In all the cases we see how a methodological diverse approach helps organizations to deal with complex contexts. The various levels in the programme where change can happen and the various information needs from different stakeholders ask for a diverse ‘PME toolbox’ as well as skills and resources to apply a mixed approach that aligns with the different levels of complexity in a specific program.
5. Across the cases we observe indications of how exploring diverse PME approaches has contributed towards increased internal adaptive capacity of the organizations involved in this exploration process. This was evidenced by a stronger reflective practice and a deliberate investment in learning practices (e.g. reflection meetings, peer assessments, ...). That these effects are not merely the result of an initial enthusiasm generated by the PME exploration process is illustrated by the changes in organizational culture and practice in relation to learning

that we observed in various cases. It remains to be seen during the next phase of the action research if these changes in internal adaptive capacity will be sustained throughout and beyond the PME exploration process.

The way forward in the action research

This paper shares the insights from the first stage of an ongoing action research. Some of the cases were still in the process of setting up their new PME systems (e.g. Dark & Light, MCNV, War Child Holland, Vredeseilanden). Other cases only went through a first monitoring cycle of their new PME systems. It is therefore too early to make strong conclusions or evaluative statements about how the various PME approaches helped organisations to deal with complex processes of change. The action research is currently in its second phase and we will be able to report more results towards the end of 2011. Below we list some points of attention or questions that emerged during the first phase of the action research and which will be further explored during the second phase:

- Across the cases we will be looking for more specific examples or illustrations of instances that provide us with answers to our hypotheses or research questions. More specifically we will be looking for concrete instances where the PME approach helped organisations 1) to strengthen relationships, 2) to learn about programme results 3) to satisfy accountability needs and 4) to strengthen adaptive capacity at various levels.
- Also during the second phase we will explore to what extent the PME pilots lead toward sustained organisation-wide change in PME practice. At this stage in the action research there is still a concern that the interest in the new PME approach may fade after the action research.
- Another point of interest will be the balance between learning and accountability across the cases. We will be on the lookout for instances where a stronger focus on learning can indeed help to satisfy accountability requirements.

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