



Considerations for learning-oriented Monitoring and Evaluation with Outcome Mapping

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Outcome Mapping (OM) was developed both as a planning and a monitoring tool. And while it has been used successfully for both purposes, this brief focuses on OM as a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach. In particular, many users identified a need for clearer guidelines on how to make OM M&E more functional and constructive. This brief, based on various events, papers, workshops¹ and conversations on the Outcome Mapping Learning Community (OMLC), attempts to respond to this need.

According to the results of a web survey of OM practitioners in August 2008, there are three interrelated issues that surface frequently and that require further discussion, clarification and practice:

- a) Collection and aggregation of data:** How to modify/ tailor the OM journals to support data collection and storage.
- b) Interpretation and sense-making:** The process of reacting to and interpreting the data.
- c) Usage:** What will happen with the data; How it will feed into decisions.

While OM doesn't provide any hard-and-fast rules of how to deal with each of these issues, it does recognise that each issue must be part of a good M&E system, and some of the key concepts, underlying philosophy and the basic tools certainly provide ideas of how we can incorporate these issues into our M&E systems.

Making choices: Prioritising M&E by identifying users and uses

Usage can, and should, inform both data collection and interpretation. OM

Box 1: About Utilisation-Focused Evaluation (UFE)

UFE makes conscious use of both findings and the M&E process. Process can:

- Enhance shared understanding
- Support and reinforce interventions
- Increase engagement, self-determination, ownership
- Empower partners
- Contribute to programme and organisational development

proposes a utilisation-focused approach to M&E (see Box 1).

Choosing what to monitor and evaluate can be a daunting task, especially when project and programme teams become attached to their planning systems and feel the need to monitor everything. In the web survey, respondents indicated that OM helped to a large extent (47%) or somewhat (33%) in defining users and uses of an M&E framework. The respondents refer to the spirit of mutual accountability that exists because of the participation of boundary partners in the design and implementation of the M&E process. However, further clarity is needed on how to define users of M&E data and how their information needs should be met. A utilisation-focused evaluation approach asks such questions as: 'who needs to participate in the M&E process?', 'what type of information is required and what will happen with it?', and 'which tools are the most appropriate for collecting and analysing M&E data?'

Participation in M&E is understood differently in different project contexts.

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

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

Table 1: Participation in the M&E process

User	Participation in M&E-process (from * = little participation; to *** = significant participation)				
	data production	data collection	data analysis & reporting	sense-making/ learning	receiving reports/ other uses ⁱⁱ
Project team	**	***	***	***	***
Funding agency	/	/	/	* (midterm eval)	***
Boundary partner 1 (e.g. farmers groups)	**	**	***	***	***
Boundary partner 2 (e.g. local municipalities)	*	*	**	**	***
Boundary partners of BP 1/ Beneficiaries	**	/	/	**	**

In addition, it is not easy for boundary partners or other stakeholders to assess the workload of participating in M&E activities when their exact role in the M&E process is not made explicit. A possible way of visualising this is presented in Table 1 (the scale of participation is meant as an example for a particular project; participation will vary from project to project), which distinguishes between the various stages of the M&E process.

A major challenge for people designing M&E systems is to answer the question: ‘how much information do we need?’, and thus separate the ‘nice to know’ from the ‘need to know’. While variables such as timing, cost, capacity, complexity/ sophistication of collection and analysis tools, scale, donor requirements and participation can help prioritise M&E, gaining more insight on what uses could be given to the information, and who the users are, can further help strategic decision-making around M&E systems. In the OM manual, OM

users are encouraged to prioritise on the basis of the potential uses for the monitoring data (Earl, S. et al., 2001), such as:

- Improving performance by feeding learning into the management cycle;
- Helping the programme meet reporting requirements;
- Supplying information for planned evaluations (external or internal);
- Informing publicity documents and communication activities, or building up case-study materials;
- Learning about a particular (risky or new) boundary partner, strategy, or practice over time; or
- Supporting the learning needs of boundary partners.

In her doctoral thesis, Guijt (2008) distinguishes between nine groups of possible learning purposes to which monitoring can contributeⁱⁱⁱ, which could also be used to prioritise M&E (see Table 2).

Table 2: Learning Purposes

Possible learning purpose	Guiding questions for M&E data collection and analysis
Adjust overall intervention strategy	Are strategies leading to expected behavioural change? Are those behavioural changes contributing towards the vision? Are we working with the best BPs and clearest OCs? Does the vision still reflect the programme dream?
Improve implementation	Which strategies need to be implemented better and how? Which BP has been most or least effective in achieving behavioural change?
Deepen understanding	What do we/ our BPs want to understand better?
Strengthen capacity	Are we doing everything we can to maintain and enhance our capacity to support our partners?
Be financially accountable	Is the money being spent as we had agreed?
Understand context	How is the context changing and what implications does that have for our work?

Source: Developed by Guijt, I. and N. Ortiz, 2009.

Table 3: Example matrix to plan information needs

		Type of information needed: (from * = not essential information need; to *** = essential information need for stakeholder)				
Information Needs Stakeholders	Project management; strategy monitoring	Progress towards goals	Achievements			Intervention lessons
			micro-level	meso-level	macro-level	
Project team	*** (financial monitoring, output monitoring, strategy journals)	*** (annual eval)	** (impact assessment: every 2 yr)	*** (Outcome journals: 2/yr)	** (working papers: re-search)	*** (annual eval + midterm eval)
Funding agency	* (financial monitoring report)	*	** (impact assessment: every 2 yr)	** (Compilation of Outcome journals: 1/yr)	*** (working papers: re-search)	** (working paper based on mid term eval)
Boundary partner 1					*** (peer review of Outcome journals)	
Boundary partner 2						
Beneficiaries			** (video stories: every yr)			
General public			** (video stories: every yr)			

In the Belgian NGO Vredeseilanden, the M&E system of their OM-based programme has been organised around three main purposes: planning (short-term and strategic planning), learning (programme improvement, organisational learning/knowledge creation and enhanced understanding/negotiation with partners) and accountability (programmatic and financial accountability). In order to satisfy multiple needs, the different purposes of the M&E data to be collected are linked to main users, organisational spaces and the type of information needed (Deprez, S., 2008).

Another way of organising M&E activities and setting priorities is through the development of a matrix that includes stakeholders and the type of information they might require (Table 3), grading the need for the information on a scale. The columns of the matrix can be customised to reflect the types of information (evidence of impact, learning experiences, etc.) a programme sees as most important or appropriate, and the corresponding learning purposes that are being served (accountability, operational improvement, etc.). The matrix allows the stakeholders to reflect about critical information needs, and the various communication strategies

that can be used to address them. Of course, this still needs to be unpacked to define the detailed monitoring activities, such as identifying the time period for which M&E processes and systems are being designed, as this will have practical implications on costs, time invested and actors involved.

A large majority of respondents from the web survey did not agree with the statement ‘the proposed M&E framework in the OM-manual generates a monitoring system with a light workload for the project team’, indicating a perception that OM-based M&E demands significant resources from the project team. To reiterate, it is not always possible or useful to monitor everything about a programme or its partners. Therefore, the number of boundary partners, types of strategy or practices to be looked at should be limited. OM can be modified to consider an entire programme broadly, or it can focus on a particular partner or strategy. It is up to the programme to determine its priorities (Earl, S. et al., 2001). While the users and the use of information can help determine priorities, the programme must also consider (and be realistic about) the time, level of effort and resources it is prepared to spend on M&E.

Box 2: Considerations for choosing WHAT and HOW to monitor

Choosing WHAT to monitor or evaluate:

- Who will use it?
- What will the information be used for?
- When is it needed?

Choosing HOW to monitor

- Which components will be monitored?
- How and when will data be collected?
- Who will collect it?
- Who will analyse, collate and package data?
- Where and when will be discussed and used?

Rhythms and Spaces: Formal and informal spaces and optimal timing for M&E

Optimising the use of M&E data depends on how to increase capacity and opportunity for sense-making and interpretation so that M&E data is also fed into strategic and operational decision-making; “Outcome Mapping encourages the programme team to get together, either face-to-face or in an electronic meeting, to collect data and reflect on the program’s work” (Earl, S. et al., 2001). Guijt (2008) stresses that formal and informal spaces for data collection, collation, analysis and sense-making are therefore important to consider. Different spaces could include stakeholder meetings, phone calls with partners, brainstorming sessions with colleagues, email discussions with peers, donor review meetings, team meetings, etc. One of the recurring findings of evaluations of M&E systems relates to the disconnect between M&E and project management and decision-making. OM encourages the closing of this circle by planning M&E activities in such a way that they will influence other project management activities.

When we look for such spaces and make them intentional, systematic and useful, M&E becomes an integral part of every day events and spaces; daily rituals and rhythms play important roles in M&E processes.

Box 2: What do we mean by spaces and timing?

- When do you interact and share information and make sense of what is happening?
- How often and when do these spaces occur?
- What are the moments and events that are key for data collection, sharing, debate, critical reflection, analysis and decision-making?
- What are the regular daily, weekly, monthly and annual activities that the organizations engages in? (that mark the tempo of its functioning?)
- Which space needs information from which other space?

Source: Adapted from Guijt, 2008.

“Monitoring should not be considered in isolation from the other work that the programme is doing. Therefore, other reporting and information tracking and sharing activities already being used should be explored, so as to avoid duplication and to link the various monitoring tools to existing processes and practices.” (Earl, S. et al., 2001)

Some authors have argued that we should pay more attention to the spaces and the timing (rhythm) of the core organisational processes when we design our M&E activities. As Guijt (2008) explained in the online community discussion, “My problem with not looking at rhythms and spaces is that there is this generic body of ‘desired information’ that isn’t attached explicitly to some kind of sense-making process in a specific sequence. This makes it less likely to be useful.”

Learning for improved action versus doing M&E as a compliance or accountability exercise means different interactions and spaces for debates. Data is collected on what has occurred and the quality of what has occurred, but further questions help with the learning component – why did it happen like this? What does it mean for us? What will be our next steps? Rather than solely focusing on pieces of information (single indicators), the M&E system focuses on forums for analysis and communication to guide information for use.

“In VVOB we have taken advantage of regular planning meetings as learning spaces. This was done by adding an extra session to those meetings to allow for reflection upon the monitoring data by various stakeholders. Specific people are responsible for preparing a brief presentation about the most remarkable observations from the monitoring period; these presentations provide a basis for dialogue about the monitoring data and recommendations or important lessons are written on flip chart and taken up in the planning meeting for the next cycle. This approach has enriched our learning and has helped us to increase participation in the M&E process.” (Jan Van Ongevalle, VVOB Zimbabwe)

Customising data collection and sense-making tools

The OM manual does not, and cannot, provide the multitude of options for customising data collection and sense-making tools as this is based on a) the learning purposes and prioritisation of M&E data collection and interpretation (use and users), and b) rhythms and spaces. By defining these pieces, we have a better chance of designing the appropriate tools to guide data collection, collation and analysis. The journals that the OM manual does offer, however, are a good starting point (as described in Table 4) for tailoring tools.

Table 4: Purposes and uses of each of the Outcome Mapping journals

Journal	Outcome journal	Strategy journal	Performance journal
Purpose of journal	Chart BPs progress	Identify how project or programme is contributing to change in BPs	Reflect on how project/ programme is operating as an organisational unit
Use of journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story of change • Reasons for change (who and what contributed) • Unexpected changes • Lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources invested • Activities and products • Effectiveness of activities and products • Lessons and recommendations (strategies to eliminate or add) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions used to operationalise practices • Lessons
Examples of tailoring the journals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing field journals for programme staff to record observed changes in boundary partners; then discussing these changes in regular meetings. • Using the progress markers to develop questions for field surveys, focus groups or interviews with boundary partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversation guide for team meetings. • Electronic data sheets to be filled out by staff on an ongoing basis when changes are observed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team meeting to qualitatively describe most significant examples (either positive or negative) over the monitoring period. • Develop quantitative indicators for each organisational practice.

While the journals presented in the OM manual are not data collection methods in themselves, they outline the type of information that could be collected and suggest a format for presenting that information. They do not prescribe how the data should be collected, but by suggesting the type of information to be collected, they can give clues for developing surveys, interviews, focus groups, among other methods. Responses from the web survey and conversations with projects that have used the journals with their own modifications are highlighted in the comments below:

“I find the journals rather hard to explain and usually develop my own approach. I have at one time suggested light surveys using [knowledge attitude practice] and analyse these over time to find outcome changes.” (Web Survey, 2008)

“Rather than use the journals with the boundary partners, what we did was bring all boundary partners together for face-to-face meetings every six months and ask them ‘what has been the most significant change in natural resource management in your community/ municipality in the past 6 months’. Then we would ask them what led them to that change; we would then compare that pathway with the progress marker pathway, using the guiding questions in the outcome journal: what factors and actors contributed, what does this mean for actions in the future, etc.” (example from Ceja Andina project)

“We assessed our organisational practices on a monthly basis as a project team, using the performance journal, and simple guiding questions (What did we do and what evidence do we have? What

Table 5: Defining and refining what needs to be monitored

‘Lens’	Possible use of information from this lens	Example of information that could be collected
Macro view	Improve implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which BP has been the most/ least effective in achieving behavioural change? • Which BP is the most important for the next period?
	Adjust overall intervention strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at all BPs • Which anticipated and unanticipated changes occurred during the period? • What was the Most Significant Change
Micro view	Detailed understanding of what is happening regarding specific behaviours of interest and why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One PM or cluster of OMs considered for the process of change • One PM per category (expect, like, love) • PM related to a specific theme of interest

Source: Ortiz, N. and I. Guijt, 2008.

should we keep doing? What practices should we alter or add?” (Web Survey, 2008)

Defining uses and users, and the purposes for learning, should help determine the degree of detail that is useful when tracking boundary partners, progress markers, strategies and organisational practices, thereby placing a macro view or a micro view to data collection and interpretation, which can in turn also inform the customisation of the data collection tools. Table 5 summarises the different ‘lenses’ that an M&E system can have.

The usefulness of tools will depend on how the programme integrates them into their management and reporting processes “and on the commitment of programme members to collect data regularly and reflect on their work honestly” (Earl, S. et al., 2008). In addition, it is important to remember that OM cannot interpret the data collected for the program, but is up to the programme team and other stakeholders to determine what the information means in terms of performance and changes in boundary partner behaviour.

Finally, although identifying rhythms and spaces and modifying journals to guide data collection and analysis is essential, some OM practitioners feel that a missing piece to the OM M&E puzzle is the aggregation of data – a tool that can store data in an accessible manner of all the data points from the journals (the behavioural change data, the strategies and internal performance).

Conclusions

One of the perspectives/ complaints we have come across is the concern that OM M&E is not “evidence based” or is ‘too subjective’ because it is not a ‘convincing experimental approach’. However, others recognise that OM is not intended to be an experimental approach and is based on a philosophy that questions objectivity, especially when using a participatory approach, and advocate that because it is mainly used for projects that are focused on complex social change processes, by

systematically determining users and uses of information and collecting and analysing information based on those strategic decisions, OM can, in fact, generate robust evidence – even including concrete and convincing quantitative data.

Being clear about the purpose of M&E can help us be more strategic and streamlined in our data collection and interpretation. The basic steps we have reviewed in order to do this are:

- a) Identify the users of the information and the use that will be given to that information (what actions will be taken, what decisions will be made with the M&E data).
- b) Identify the spaces (formal and informal) in which data will be collected, analysed, debated – and then used to make strategic and operational decisions. Plan for critical reflection events and processes.
- c) With users, uses and spaces in mind, consider:
 - With which view will progress markers, strategy maps and organisational practices be assessed (macro or micro or a mix)
 - Which tools will allow you to get the kind of information you need (OM journals, adapted and customised journals, other tools and methods)
 - The frequency of data collection so that findings are available when needed
 - Who needs to be involved in collection, sense-making and dissemination
 - Quality communicating and reporting
 - The organisational and individual conditions and capacities for collecting and analysing M&E data.

As OM reminds us, we need to tailor approaches and tools to our particular context. These guiding ideas are in continual evolution – so share your feedback and thoughts on the Outcome Mapping Virtual Learning Community! Further evidence, experiences and opinions will help us to continually fill in the ‘missing piece’ of OM and M&E.

References, footnotes and acknowledgements

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- i. One such workshop from which we draw heavily on in this brief is the Outcome Mapping 2nd Generation workshop developed and facilitated by Natalia Ortiz and Irene Guijt in December 2007. The term ‘2nd generation’ was proposed to try and deal with some of challenges with OM monitoring (e.g. learning vaguely defined, monitoring priorities not defined, inadequate considerations for rhythm and spaces for data collection collation, analysis, sense-making; not enough emphasis placed on informal monitoring; and difficulties in analysing qualitative data and obtaining quantitative data). The workshop proposed elements of ‘2nd Generation OM’ such as clarifying learning purposes, building in sense-making opportunities, and exploring ways to monitor outcomes and strategies.
- ii. For example, data to feed into an evaluation; to develop promotional materials; to build into a policy brief; to discuss in a community meeting; etc.
- iii. (1) Financial accountability, (2) Operational improvement, (3) Strategic readjustment, (4) Capacity strengthening, (5) Contextual understanding, (6) Deepening understanding (research), (7) Self-auditing, (8) Advocacy, (9) Sensitisation (Guijt, 2008)