Working paper

Learning from the implementation of outcome mapping, most significant change and logical framework.

Summary of the main insights from a review of four learning histories

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Introduction

With support of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN), HIVA Research Institute for Work and Society of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, PSO Capacity Building in Developing Countries, the Flemish Office for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB), and Vredeseilanden/VECO[1] jointly explored the relevance of various Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) approaches such as Outcome Mapping, the Logical Framework and Most Significant Change in complex development programs.

VVOB, VECO, ETC and TRIAS each developed a learning history about their experiences with the implementation of their specific PME approach. The learning histories of VVOB Zimbabwe and VECO Indonesia focus on their experiences with outcome mapping. ETC worked with Most Significant Change in Sri Lanka while the learning history of TRIAS zooms in on their experiences with the logical framework approach in Honduras.

In this paper we give a brief outline about the learning history methodology and how the learning histories were developed by the four organisations. We then provide a summary of the main findings from the review of the four learning histories. Based on these insights we formulate a number of PME policy recommendations that relate to complex development programs.

Learning history methodology

The power of learning histories is that they allow everyone who was involved in a process to speak, in this case ranging from head office to field office and partners, from manager to program officer. This gives a realistic picture of the process, including different perspectives – including that of the partner organisations. They offer an insight into the assumptions and reasons which led to a particular way in which people acted and thus the result of the process. Creating a learning history is therefore a learning process in itself.

How the learning histories were developed.

The learning histories have been organised around three questions/or areas of interest: 1) the relation between the PME approach and organisational learning; 2) the influence of the PME approach on partner relations; 3) the influence of the PM&E approach on the vision on PME.
The four organisations developed their learning histories in different ways. VVOB used a write shop methodology whereby representatives from the VVOB program, including support team members and their partners took part in a four day workshop to write their own stories related to the three learning questions. This resulted in a collection of very personal stories that give an impression about how various stakeholders in the program experience learning and outcome mapping. In the VECO and ETC cases, the learning histories are based on the outcomes of interviews with various program stakeholders. TRIAS used a combination of interviews and documentation of their internal Planning, Learning & Acccountability System (PLATS) and the PME systems of TRIAS partners. The logframe forms a constituting part of

[1] Vredeseilanden is known as VECO outside Belgium. VECO stands for VredesEilanden Country Offices.

PLATS and the partners' PME systems but is only one element that is combined with other methods and tools. The analysis of TRIAS' experiences with their PME approach is not focused on the specific role of and experiences with the logframe. The conclusions drawn in this cross-case analysis therefore relate mainly to the overall PME approach that was gradually introduced by TRIAS, rather than being an appreciation of the logframe as one element of the PME system. This explains why this paper has relatively less quotes from this learning history specifically relating to the use of the logframe.

Drawing insights from the learning histories

A first review of the four learning histories was carried out during a two-day workshop on 20 & 21 September 2010, with head quarter representatives from the four organisations who developed a learning history and participants from PSO and HIVA. We give an overview of the main insights from this review process below. We structured the presentation of the insights according to the three main questions of the analytical framework of the thematic learning program:

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

Summary of the main insights from the review of the learning histories

1. How does the PME approach contribute to learning about the progress towards the development objectives and satisfy downward and upward accountability needs?

- *Methodological diversity and customisation of PME approaches*

Two common threads emerge from the four learning histories. Firstly the four organisations looked for a PME approach that suited their specific learning needs. This resulted in methodological variety for PME across the four cases. VVOB chose to use OM to help them monitoring changes in behaviour of the direct partners of the programme. VECO adopted the OM approach because their initial logframe based PME system didn't help them enough to learn about the progress of their program both in terms of the internal functioning of the organisation and its contributions to developmental change. ETC explored MSC to learn about the deeper attitudes and worldview of their target groups. TRIAS finally explored the logical framework as part of their PME system at programme level to promote a culture of institutional learning with their partners.

Secondly, the four organisations actively customised their PME approach to make it practically adapted for their context. ETC partners for example customised MSC as a tool for impact measurement that can capture the more qualitative and subtle elements of changes in attitude and worldview of their target groups. VVOB and VECO adapted outcome mapping as an operational monitoring and learning system that helps them to track progress in a participatory way and make sense of it all, and at the same time, use the information that emerges to report towards the indicators of the logframe which they consider as their strategic planning document. Both organisations are using a fusion model of outcome mapping and logical framework approach. In addition to using logframe and outcome mapping, VVOB also uses Most Significant Change to monitor impact at the level of their indirect beneficiaries. TRIAS uses an overall logical framework for their program that is then customized by each of the partners per region. This helps TRIAS partners to work together on different areas of interventions.

- *Promoting learning as a way to strengthen accountability.*

The learning histories show how PME can be more than an accountability system towards the donor.
The VECO case illustrates that their outcome mapping based PME system assisted the learning process by ''*creating formal spaces to regularly discuss, reflect on, and analyse the program with team members as well as with partners''* (VECO, p.16). The introduction of outcome mapping allowed VECO to monitor effects that were not tracked with the logical framework approach which they were using before. *''Using the LFA, we measured physical things and ignored what was happening with the human beings! (p6).....* At the same time, the VECO learning history shows that 'upward accountability needs' can also complicate the way alternative PME approaches are incorporated in a PME system. ''*We had to combine OM with the LFA approach for our main donor. We managed the feat of linking two frameworks for example by linking outcome challenges with results. That enabled us to convert outcome maps into logframes. We did that for the donors, keeping OM as our internal framework'' (VECO, p8).* Another interesting observation is that outcome mapping did not satisfy all information needs within the VECO programme, as illustrated by the following quote: ''*The disadvantage of OM is that you are not measuring impact level results, such as changes in farmer's income or changes in the process of commodities... We realised we still needed this kind of information, especially for accountability purposes, and have added these elements in the new chain intervention framework'' (VECO, p14)... ''To the new chain intervention framework, which still has the basic elements of OM, we added elements of results-based models, so as to better fit our context of facilitating market chains'' (VECO, p.15).* These quotes illustrate again the importance of methodological diversity within a PME approach. OM helps to learn about the behavioural changes of actors that may contribute to impact level results. Other approaches may be required to also learn about these impact results.

In the VVOB case, the PME system helped to ensure that lessons from informal stories of the indirect beneficiaries, were not lost but taken up during feedback between various program stakeholders leading to significant adjustments in future practice and program management (VVOB, p12). The learning practice which was already present in the VVOB program became more structured thanks to outcome mapping. *''Outcome mapping is more directed towards*

feedback and critical reflection with less focus on ''did you do what you said?'', but more on ''does it work and is there need to do something else?''(learning history review workshop.). That such critical reflection can contribute to adjustments in programming is illustrated by the gradual shift in the boundary partners the program is working with (VVOB, p11). At the same time, VVOB's learning practice doesn't seem to compromise its accountability requirements. At the contrary, A VVOB head office representative, during the review of the VVOB learning history, shares the following thought: *''The reports of the Zimbabwe program are of high quality. They clearly account for their progress according to the indicators report about the progress towards their indicators that have been clearly formulated''*.

Also the learning history of ETC provides examples of how most significant change helps them to draw 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, p9).*

- *Capturing more complex dimensions of social change*

Learning about gradual evolutions in behaviour change via progress markers: As development ultimately involves changes in what people do, monitoring changes in behaviour is an important element in monitoring systems that deal with complex processes of change. The learning histories of VVOB and VECO show how outcome mapping through its concept of progress markers has helped a program to monitor and learn from gradual changes in the behaviour of the direct partners who are supported by the respective programs. ''*At first, I thought OM was not that far different from the LFA, but it was more human, as it measured the behaviour of the actors. If there were a farmer who would not speak up, but later became willing to do so to improve his bargaining position, the LFA would not measure that. But in OM, his role in making changes would count. That is what really stood out for me. (VECO, p.4) ...The new planning formats changed our focus. Before, when we used the LFA, we also changed behaviours and worked through partners, and this meant we also had strategies for building their capacities, yet we never measured changes at that level ...'' (VECO p 4).*

Learning about the spiritual dimensions of change through most significant change: The ETC case shows how most significant change provided an approach to learn about changes in the attitude of their beneficiaries. Monitoring change in attitude is crucial to understand why people do certain things. It helps a program to learn about the motivation that drives the actors to be involved in certain practices and behaviour. ''*Measuring of number of land cleared, number of terracing completed, number of plants planted and number of man days spent etc are easy to measure through LFA indicators. But making the people to speak from the heart about mental changes behind a particular behavioural change is the important thing'' (ETC p17).*

The various learning instances described above provide examples of how learning about complex processes of change (e.g. change in behaviour of actors) can provide concrete insights in the progress of a programme and can provide valuable information about what is working and what is not, which can in turn inform future decision making and planning. While information about these complex change processes may help towards satisfying accountability requirements there is also some indication from the learning histories that there is need for information about what these complex change processes contribute to (e.g. results at impact level). This discussion is closely related to the often difficult balance between the information needs of donors and practitioners on the field.

Also emerging from these learning instances is the importance of involving the partners or the target groups in the learning process. Such collaborative learning approach can contribute to give the partners and beneficiaries a voice in the programme and may contribute towards downward accountability whereby a programme is made accountable towards the partners it is working with or the beneficiaries it seeks to reach.

2. How does the PME approach help to clarify relationships, roles and expectations of the actors involved in the intervention?

- *Clarifying the relationships between program stakeholders*

Both the VVOB and VECO learning histories show how outcome mapping can help to clarify partner relations within a program. The concept of boundary partners and spheres of control, influence and interest provide a useful framework to clarify the relationships, roles and responsibilities of different program stakeholders.
''Boundary partners are a crucial element of outcome mapping to develop better partner relationships. The boundary partners are allies in 'doing' but also in learning. And this promotes the learning relationship between the program team and the boundary partners'' (learning history review workshop).
''now I see that development is about the small changes people make. And monitoring is about paying attention to these small changes…..the narrowing of the focus of OM to the [boundary] partner level makes us more mindful and honest about the degree of influence or control we can actually have'' (VECO, p26).

- *Developing 'learning relationships' within and among program stakeholders.*

The MSC approach helped ETC to strengthen a learning relationship with their beneficiaries. *Discussing with community members is interesting. But motivating the beneficiary to reveal the crucial changing points is an art to learn. Success of this exercise is mostly depending on the relationship we build among our staff members and the community. Our approach has been a bottom to top from the beginning of the process. However, MSC process contributed to improve the relationship…(ETC, p12)*

The VECO learning history describes a change in partnership relations. The relations become deeper and more intense. Partners state that they got a clearer understanding of their

outcomes which they feel they share with VECO. The more intense relationships also had to do with the organisation 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, p23) In the four learning histories we see a commitment to invest in learning relationships. Investing in relationships with partners and involving them in monitoring and learning takes time. In the stories we see that this time is well invested to promote learning.

3. How does the PME approach contribute to strengthening the own internal adaptive capacity of the program, partner organisations, partner networks and/ or Northern NGOs?

- *A learning culture as a condition for learning centred PME*

The four cases suggest that the presence of a learning culture in an organisation is an essential condition for learning to take place in PME. This learning culture is characterised by cooperation between various program stakeholders, an environment of trust that allows dialogue and a strong desire to learn from our practice in order to improve it. It is this learning culture that has guided program teams in the four cases to look for appropriate PME methods or approaches that could support them in their learning process. In the VVOB case there was already a strong learning culture before Outcome Mapping was introduced in its new program. Also VECO Indonesia had been engaged 'in a global strategic planning process, in which the idea of becoming a learning organisation was embraced'. VECO staff felt that the logframe based M&E system limited feedback and insights on qualitative program results – both in terms of the internal functioning of their organisation and its contributions to development results. Outcome mapping was adopted in response to these challenges. ETC was facing the problem that the indicators from their logframe did not help them to learn from the spiritual and deep attitudinal changes among their beneficiaries and explored if Most Significant Change could help them satisfy this learning need. Also in the TRIAS case there was a strong willingness to stimulate the participation of the program partners in the processes of PME so that lessons can be learned from their practice.

- *Strengthening a learning culture through PME*

While the presence of a learning culture is essential for any PME system to be learning oriented, particular PME approaches can also help to strengthen such learning culture. For example there are illustrations of how the focus on participatory sense-making in OM contributed to a safe learning environment for program stakeholders to share their views and critiques in VVOB. *''Amazed how people are able to express their ideas, feelings about learning, partners, … People are honest, open and clearly used to formulate what they think….Stakeholders in the program are more articulate about what learning means. They are able to talk about it and make it more explicit. This is an indication that learning is part*

of the daily practice. OM approach has consciously or unconsciously contributed to this learning culture'' (learning history review workshop).

The VECO learning history mentions the confusion that was part of the development of a sound planning, learning and accountability system including elements of outcome mapping. This 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 flexible. *The notion of being able to change plans along the way is more present now compared to the time when I started. (VECO, p9)*

In the ETC case, the implementation of most significant change contributed to the field officers changing their own attitude towards their partners. *For this exercise (i.e. 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, p17)*

In the TRIAS case the PME system was seen to support capacity development. ''*we have noticed that the organisation of information flows, the PM&E process, is actually becoming the back bone of capacity development interventions with our partners. If we want to have well governed organisations, then the PM&E process is ideal to work on this higher objective of organisational strengthening (learning history review workshop).* It is important to note that the logframe is only one element of TRIAS' overall PME system which includes other methods and tools such as 'Assessment of Impact of Micro-business Services' (AIMS[2]), social performance management, social performance indicators, partner round table meetings, …(TRIAS, 19), which measured levels of attrition, satisfaction and impact. The tools used for assessment are: expenditure surveys, satisfaction evaluations, and interviews regarding loan use strategies. It is therefore difficult to specify the specific role or contribution of the lograme towards TRIAS learning processes in their PME system.

- PME as part of daily practice.

Across the four learning histories, PME is not seen as something outside the day to day practice done by external PME experts. Instead practitioners within the four cases have taken up various elements from different PME methods with the necessary leadership and in so doing have strengthened their own internal capacity.

In the VVOB case for example, the PME framework which is a blend of OM, LFA and MSC has contributed to the responsiveness of the program. *''M&E is viewed as a normal part of their work, thanks to the clarity of roles gained through use of OM. The VVOB team does its part, our partners do theirs and we meet through sharing our learning and strategically plan together how to move on. We believe that monitoring the work we do is as important as doing the work itself!'' (VVOB, p26).*

This is also reflected in the VECO learning history: the ultimate test of learning is the ability to apply what has been learned. *"this period too, for the first time, we dared to make*

[2] Assessment of Impact of Micro-business Services' (AIMS) involves assessment tools such as expenditure surveys, satisfaction evaluations, and interviews regarding loan use strategies.

changes in the program directly based on our learning ... we held a year-end reflection in which the ideas emerging from the reflection were directly linked into concrete plans for the coming year…there was a direct bridge between our insights and our ability to make program adjustments" (VECO, p12).
In the ETC case MSC is not just seen as a method of PME, but as and alternative mindset regarding the nature and purpose of development (i.e. holistic well-being of community members), its results and sphere of influence.

Recommendations for PME policy

During the learning history review workshop of 20 & 21 September 2010, a number of recommendations were formulated for PME policy, based on the insights from the learning histories. These recommendations are mainly directed towards back donor agencies but may also be relevant for PME policy makers at organisational level. Some recommendations, specifically for NGOs, that emerged from a PSO thematic learning programme workshop from 9-10 November 2010, are also presented. We hope that these recommendations can stimulate further debate around PME policy.

1. Stimulate organisations to strengthen their learning processes.

   - The learning histories illustrate the importance of orienting a programme's PME system towards learning about complex change processes in order to develop a deeper understanding about development results. Therefore it may important for policy makers to make learning part of accountability. Learning and accountability are often not well balanced. Current accountability requirements ask for elaborate result-oriented reports but there is a risk that organisations can get away without convincingly demonstrating what they have learned. Accountability requirements could be adjusted so that organisations are asked to become more accountable for their own learning. This could be done by asking organisations to prove what they have learned with their partners in order to build institutional capacity around the themes they are working.
   - Stimulate organisations to set aside space, time and resources in their subsidy requests to make their PME systems more learning centred. . This would help to avoid that learning in PME becomes an add-on activity.
   - Promote an open dialogue about the problem of impact and ask organisations to show how they are dealing with this problem in a realistic way (for example by explaining and showing how they are contributing to results at outcome level instead of taking impact at ultimate beneficiary level as the only measure of success).

2. Promote methodological diversity for PME.

   - Accept that dealing with complexity has various methodological implications. Therefore there is need to avoid the imposition of one rigid methodological framework or format for PME. Instead provide the space for organisations to choose

and customise the methods and approaches that they find most useful for their context. But at the same time, as was indicated above, organisations will have to convincingly explain how the PME approach they adopted is expected to contribute to learning and accountability and to more effective programming.

- Donors could develop clarity on the kind of information that they require and the learning oriented principles that they would like organisations to adhere to in their PME work.
- Realise the importance of a good mix of qualitative and quantitative data.
- Avoid situations where organisations invest too much time in planning because of an overload of procedures and guidelines for funding requirements at the expense of time for monitoring and learning.
- Because of the complexity and fast changing reality of processes of capacity development, there is need for participative and process oriented formats and guidelines for PME. If you only value what is measurable then you may miss crucial information which is needed to learn about how best to contribute towards your objectives.
- Ask organisations to clearly describe their theory of change in which the various relationships of influence between the various stakeholders is described. Organisations can then build up their argumentation for using a specific PME approach based on their theory of change.

3. Related to capacity of back donor/policy maker
   - Invest in own responsiveness and learning attitude.
   - Develop donor's internal capacity around complexity oriented PME methodologies so that organisations who experiment with such PME approaches are not misunderstood by the donor who may not be familiar with these approaches.
   - Developing a learning relationship between donor and supported organisations could stimulate a collaborative learning process about processes of PME.
   - Support experimentation with alternative PME approaches such as the PSO TLP action research that investigates the effectiveness of alternative complexity oriented PME approaches.

4. What can NGOs do to further the PME policy debate?
   - Stimulate critical dialogue with policy makers about the relevance of long term detailed planning.
   - Utilize the available space to implement alternative PME approaches more effectively
   - Northern NGOs should also lead by example in their PME demands towards their Southern partners.
   - Show case successful development results that were obtained through a variety of alternative PME approaches