



Planning, monitoring and evaluation in complex social situations



REPORT

Complexity-oriented Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) From alternative to mainstream?

Public seminar, 10 November 2010, 1.30 – 5.00 p.m.

Concordia Theatre, The Hague

1. What was the background or rationale for this seminar?

Donor agencies and policymakers are increasingly faced with demands by their constituencies to reveal the concrete results of the funds they have invested in development programmes. Similarly, Southern stakeholders and beneficiaries increasingly expect those that implement aid programmes to be held accountable for the results they set out to achieve. The introduction of results-based management, resulting in the refining of a variety of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) approaches, has been one response to meeting these demands. However, studies and evaluations highlight the fact that the critical information and learning needs of donors and policymakers, as well as those of Southern stakeholders and the change agents responsible for the implementation of aid programmes, are often not being met. Back donors still face problems as regards receiving all the necessary information about concrete results and effectiveness from the programmes they fund. Actors in the field are faced by the limited relevance of PME approaches to support essential learning processes. This is especially the case in complex programmes with unpredictable outcomes and a multitude of actors and factors that contribute to the results. Internationally, there is a growing recognition of the possible need to combine traditional PME approaches, such as the logical framework approach, with other instruments for the PME of development programmes that work in complex social contexts. Consequently, more and more people are advocating complexity-oriented PME approaches to address these challenges.

2. The DPRN process

Within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN), HIVA Research Institute for Labour and Society of the Catholic University Leuven, PSO Capacity Building in Developing Countries, the Flemish Office for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) and Vredeseilanden/VECO jointly explored the relevance of various PME approaches such as Outcome Mapping, the Logical Framework and Most Significant Change in complex development programmes. The organisations also assessed the extent to which

the discussions and new insights relating to PME approaches are reflected in the PME policy frameworks of back donors. This was done by conducting a survey of current PME policies, developing learning histories, organising an online discussion forum and reviewing literature on PME in complex situations. This exploration process aims to generate practical lessons that can inform future PME policy and practice. The next and last step in the process was the organisation of a concluding public seminar to which this report refers.

3. Objectives of the seminar

The seminar had the following objectives related to the presentation of the results of the DPRN process. These include:

- a) The main insights from four learning histories on the use of different PME approaches in complex development programmes.
- b) The review of current policy concerning PME in Belgium and the Netherlands.
- c) The main lessons learned from the public discussion on the use of Logical Framework versus Outcome Mapping on the 'Outcome Mapping Learning Community' which was held from April till October 2010.
- d) Provide a forum for discussion of potential recommendations for PME policies, based on lessons learned from practical experience with various PME approaches.

4. Seminar participants

This public seminar was aimed particularly at policymakers at government and NGO levels, researchers, independent consultants and all others who have an interest in rethinking PME practice and policies that can support complex development processes more effectively.

5. Main Conclusions

'The emperor has no clothes'. That's how one of the keynote speakers described his perception of current M&E practice during his keynote presentation at the DPRN seminar. He referred to the fact that generally we still struggle with M&E in our development programmes and it is high time to do something about it. So what is going wrong and what is the way forward? What are some of the lessons that we can learn from organisations that are trying to improve their PME practice? The seminar provided us with the following answers:

What's going wrong with our PME practice?

- The ongoing focus towards result based management is generally characterised by a linear planning logic with an emphasis on measurable results at an often overambitious impact level. This has methodological implications as evidenced by

the continued hegemony of the logical framework approach, which by itself does not help organisations to set up learning centred PME systems.

- The resulting PME frameworks are generally oriented towards accountability instead of learning and therefore less useful for dealing with complex development processes where ongoing learning is essential to deal with unpredictable outcomes.
- There seems to be a lack of genuine dialogue and trust between donors and funded organisations and an increasing competition for funds.
- We are sometimes asked to aggregate results that cannot be aggregated, e.g. aggregating impact across a range of work, carried out by different organisations in different sectors, in different countries. The result can be painful, and using one participant's words: *"If you ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer!"*.

What do we learn from organisations that are trying to improve their PME practice?

- No PME system by itself can guarantee learning to take place. The key towards a learning centred PME system is a 'learning culture' in the organisation. It requires people who are genuinely seeking to customise their PME system in such a way that it helps them to learn about their own adaptive capacity and the results they achieve.
- PME systems characterised by methodological diversity can help organisations to deal with complex dimensions of social change. Some of the cases discussed during the seminar were using a combination of outcome mapping, most significant change and logical framework. This helped them to monitor changes in behaviour, and attitudes on the one hand, and to develop donor reports according to the indicators of their logframe on the other hand.
- We also learned that within the current policy environment, organisations have more space at operational level to apply different PME approaches than is often assumed.
- Developing an actor centred theory of change is an essential step in the development of a learning centred PME system because it places the people or actors involved in the programme at the heart of your PME activities.

Recommendations for policy makers:

- Make organisations accountable for their learning.
- Prioritise an open dialogue about the problem of impact.
- Avoid imposing one rigid format for PME.
- Avoid overload of procedures and guidelines for funding.
- Ask organisations to justify their PME approach on the basis of their actor centred theory of change.
- Develop internal capacity around complexity oriented PME methodologies
- Develop learning relationship with organisations that are supported.
- Support experimentation with alternative PME approaches (e.g. PSO/TLP action research)

Recommendations for NGOs

- Stimulate critical dialogue with policy makers about the relevance and feasibility 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.
- Showcase successful development results that were obtained through a variety of alternative PME approaches.

6. Seminar presentations

Mirjam Ros (University of Amsterdam)	Opening address by DPRN coordinator.
Nigel Simister (INTRAC)	<p>Key note address: "International developments in policy positions of donors regarding PME"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The presentation explores some key influences that have affected the PME debate over the past twenty years. Moreover, a number of donor trends are discussed in terms of PME instruments, funding agreements and type of information. The effects of these trends on civil society organisations, as well as the way forward in terms of PME are also discussed.
Mqaphelisi Sibanda (VVOB Zimbabwe)	<p>Testimony from practice: "learning centred PME"</p> <p>The presentation describes a practical example of a programme that customised PME in such a way that it facilitates learning and satisfies accountability needs. Formal and informal learning processes within the PME system are described and the various methodological choices are highlighted.</p>
Jan Van Ongevalle (Hiva)	<p>Presentation "PME policy, an enabling or limiting factor for dealing with complex change?"</p> <p>The presentation gives an overview of current PME policy in Belgium and Netherlands with reference to the broader policy context in Europe and OESO/DAC. The presentation also suggests a number of policy recommendations based on the insights from four learning histories around the</p>

	<p>implementation of alternative PME systems.</p> <p>The presentation is drawing from the following background papers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working paper: A survey of Government Policy for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of development programmes. - 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. - Learning History VVOB - Learning History Vredeseilanden/VECO - Learning History ETC - Learning History TRIAS (working draft)
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7. Main recommendations from the seminar workshops

<p>Workshop 1: discussing three scenarios for PME policy. Anneke Maarse (PSO) & Wouter Van Damme (VVOB)</p>	<p>Recommendations for PME policy and practice suggested during the workshop:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For the NGOs: Value failure as a source for learning; Practice what you preach. 2. For the back donors: Respect timeframes needed for change; Invest enough in design; Incentives for innovation and creativity; Stimulate iterative planning (don't force partners to plan things they cannot (e.g. activities planned for several years...)); Engage in reflection.
<p>Workshop 2: Creating the space to experiment: Do NGOs have more space to use alternative PME approaches than often assumed? Steff Deprez (VECO) & Wouter Rijnveld (Woord & Daad).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshop presentation VECO - Workshop presentation Woord & Daad - Recommendations for PME policy and practice suggested during the workshop: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Be creative; Do what you believe in (and minimize extra effort); Do what makes sense to us; Avoid creating duplicate, parallel systems. 2. Build M&E into your organizational spaces; Organize

	PME system around places and times where decision making, planning and learning takes place.
Workshop 3: What consequences does a complexity view on social change have for PME? Huib Huyse (HIVA) & Cristien Temmink (PSO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recommendations for PME policy and practice suggested during the workshop: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a mismatch between what science says (less detailed planning, more learning-oriented monitoring), and what PME policy makers do (more SMART and detailed planning). There is clear need to address this gap.

8. Seminar panel discussion

Panel Moderator	Huib Huyse (HIVA)
Panelists	Piet De Lange (DGIS), Sue Soal (CDRA), Wouter Van Damme (VVOB), Cecile Kusters (University Wageningen), Wouter Rijneveld (Woord en Daad), Nigel Simister (INTRAC)
Panel question 1: Is it worth discussing about different approaches and tools, or is it all about how you use them?	<p>Summary of responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to focus on the underlying approach that informs your practice before focusing on the PME methods and tools. This will help you to choose the right PME method and use it in an appropriate way. - Organisations may have more space than assumed to customize a PME system that is relevant for them.
Panel question 2: To what extent do people feel that government policies are too restrictive or conducive for allowing methodological diversity?	<p>Summary of responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A tension may exist between the back donor's assumption that they only set guidelines for PME without imposing specific approaches or methods and the NGOs that feel that certain policy guidelines such as the requirement of reference groups/control groups, long term planning and smart indicators, does have some specific methodological implications.
Question 1 from public: How to deal with complexity through PME was the theme for this seminar. But complexity is still not coming	<p>Summary of responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From a policy point of view there is still a concern that NGOs are not doing enough to monitor outcomes, as evidenced by one recent evaluation

up. Participatory approaches have been a response for dealing with complexity. So what does the panel feel can be done to address complexity?

involving several Dutch NGOs. Having no information about outcomes makes it difficult to deal with complexity.

- The following focus points were suggested to deal with complexity: Be clear on your theory of change, promote a learning culture across different levels in the aid chain (e.g. from head office to field level), make sure you do monitor those outcomes that you *can* monitor, using the appropriate methods.

Question 2 from public:

Organizations might actually have 50 different systems (in response to Nigel's comment) Southern partners sometimes face a situation of having many different M&E systems because of the many requirements for different donors. So they are stuck with that.

Summary of responses:

- Still some way to go towards alignment of donor requirements towards partners. That is a working point for many Northern NGOs.
- Need for clarity on what donors want from the partners they support. Also the different responsibilities of the different stakeholders at different levels need to be clarified.
- Partners can be creative in satisfying donor reporting needs by, for example, repackaging the same information in various formats for different donors.
- Also avoid collecting too much information that is not used.
- It is important to invest time in developing trust and strengthened relationships.

Question 3 from public: A lot has to do with decisions you make at the start of a program; allowing space and time to design a good program and to bring partners together and for staff to start understanding the programme. But in current practice, programmes are often quickly developed. What are these basic incentives in the aid system that press us to be acting that fast way? What is needed to break with that?

Summary of responses:

- Ownership of PME system is important. Imposing PME systems on Southern partners to satisfy back-donors demands will not work.
- Consider informal learning processes which are not always spot during formal evaluations but which can be very effective for learning.
- How much do we have to expect them to tell us in our own terms. Maybe there isn't always need to have a technical professional system as long as they can satisfy information needs even for the donor?
- Local accountability, upward accountability, local PME system is most important for organization in South that wishes to develop itself.

9. Other background documents to this seminar

Summary of online discussion on the use of logical framework vs. outcome mapping (April to July 2010)

<http://www.outcomemapping.ca/resource/resource.php?id=300>

Summary of online discussion on OM and logical framework (August – September 2010)

<http://outcomemapping.ca/resource/resource.php?id=304>

Summary: A map of responses and discussion around the question: It can be very tempting to pick and choose specific parts of Outcome Mapping you want to use to compliment the logical framework approach (or any other PME methods), but at what point does it stop being outcome mapping? In other words, what are the core values of outcome mapping that we cannot let go of when we try to integrate outcome mapping and logical framework approach?



The 'Complexity oriented Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME)' seminar is being jointly organised by HIVA, PSO, VECO and VVOB as part of the DPRN process 'Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation in complex social situations' (<http://pme.global-connections.nl>). The aim of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) is to stimulate informed debate and discussion of issues related to the formulation and implementation of development policies and to create opportunities to promote open

exchange and dialogue between scientists, policymakers, development practitioners and the business sector in the Netherlands and Flanders. For more information see www.DPRN.nl and www.global-connections.nl.