

Monitoring, evaluation and learning about policy influence: how to get some certainty amidst all the complexity

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Trying to identify any single organization's contribution to policy change seems like an impossible task given the multiple factors that influence policy change. Further, influencing policy is such a complex, long-term and unpredictable process. Many organisations struggle with planning and implementing their MEL systems to measure this contribution. While the literature on how to monitor, evaluate and learn about policy influence is abundant there is little practical advice about how to do it, where to start, how to focus your efforts and cut through all the complexity.

At [Politics&Ideas](#) and [Southern Hemisphere](#) we have identified smart and reasonable ways to use MEL tools, and especially having an MEL plan, can help organisations to:

- Better understand how their research influences (or not) public policy and redefine new potential outcomes, if needed;
- Satisfy their interests (and those of their donors) in enhancing the policy uptake of their research;
- Build their reputation and visibility, and attract more and better support to their work;
- Generate valuable knowledge for all members of the organisation, if it is implemented with a genuine interest in learning; and
- Organise what they are already doing so that it can be useful for real MEL purposes, while letting go of processes and data that may not be useful.

The main goal(s) – whether they involve monitoring, evaluation or learning – should work as a lighthouse when making decisions about methodologies and indicators.

This looks very promising, but is it possible? Where do we begin?

Before sharing concrete knowledge and experiences during this short course, we would like you to think about why you wish to invest time during these weeks to learn about how to monitor and evaluate your policy influence. Any exercise in this sense

involves a great deal of energy, time and resources, so being clear about why you want to do MEL in your organisation, will help with deciding which system will work best for you.

What are the main goals of developing a MEL system?

According to Lindsay Rose Mayka (Open Society Institute, 2008) there are five classic reasons for why an organisation might decide to monitor and evaluate its policy influence:

<p>Accountability: to provide donors and key decision-makers (e.g. Board of Directors) with a measure of the progress made in comparison with the planned results and impact. It can additionally be used as a cost-benefit tool to make funding and resource allocation decisions.</p>	<p>Do we intend to better inform our donors and key stakeholders on the impact we are having?</p>
<p>Support for operational management: producing feedback that can be used to improve the implementation of an organisation's strategic plan. When it comes to practice, if we have a monitoring and evaluation system we will be able to detect those elements of the strategy that are unhelpful, that obstruct our work or that simply need to be reviewed and/or readjusted to improve the organisation's operational management.</p>	<p>Do we want to strengthen and improve the way in which we implement projects?</p>
<p>Support from strategic management: MEL can provide information on potential future opportunities and on the strategies to be adjusted against new information. It can also shed light on aspects we need to improve when thinking of the strategic plan (e.g. obstacles not included so far and which might be worth addressing in the next stage). This offers a more specific vision as to where, strategically speaking, we need to pay greater attention and place our focus.</p>	<p>Do we plan to evaluate our actions in order to make better decisions on the strategic direction of the organisation and/or its programmes?</p>
<p>Knowledge creation: expanding an organisation's knowledge of the strategies that usually work well under different conditions, thus allowing it to develop more efficient strategies for the future and build on what people have learned.</p>	<p>Do we want our staff to have more and better knowledge in order to improve the way they try to influence policy?</p>
<p>Empowerment: boosting the strategic planning skills of participants, including members of staff engaged in the programme, or other interested parties (including beneficiaries). The MEL process increases acceptance of shared objectives and commitment to them, and creates a more suitable environment in which future activities have greater chances of causing a positive impact.</p>	<p>Do we plan to empower our members through greater consensus and commitment to shared objectives?</p>

Among these options, you are certain to find some which are more applicable to the current reality of your organisation than others, depending upon its idiosyncrasy, experience, evolution in terms of policy influence, and the interests and values of its leadership, among other factors. The important thing is to be as

clear as possible about the most significant reason/s to initiate or adjust your MEL effort, and this also should be discussed and agreed upon within the organisation. The key drivers to embark on MEL are crucial: the strategies, methods, questions and indicators chosen will vary according to the type of knowledge to be acquired and how it will be used.

Who will benefit from MEL?

Linked to the above, we should not forget to reflect on and define how the information that will be gathered can be useful and applicable.

In this sense, there is a very rich approach that has been developed and promoted by Michael Quinn Patton who has created the framework known as [Utilisation-focused Evaluation \(U-FE\)](#). As the author explains [in this checklist](#), this approach begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use. This may also be applied to monitoring and learning efforts as well.

Use concerns how people in the real world apply MEL findings and experience the whole evaluation process. Thus, it is not only about how others will benefit from the results of the effort but also about how they will be engaged (or not), including how

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they reflect on it to learn and make different decisions. We need to begin by asking ourselves and our colleagues: What type of information and knowledge would allow us to become better at trying to inform policy with our research? What do we need to learn? Who needs this information? The real intentions and purpose behind our MEL work will have a clear effect on how this system is nurtured and used later on.

Participation is essential

As such, participation becomes essential. We should involve others from the very beginning of conceptualising and designing the MEL approach in the organisation. In fact, even though many innovative practices have been designed with initial participation from the rest of the organisation (or at least part of it), the main decisions about the final plan, and how it will be implemented and used, usually rely on a few people. And they can be more prone to deciding what works (or not) for others than promoting a genuine culture where learning is valued and rewarded.

Participation also opens up the opportunity to identify current problems and real daily challenges experienced by staff that could be solved by MEL practices. As Molly Hamm from [The Dream Project](#) stated in a discussion initiated about

this by Politics&Ideas as part of the [Evidence based Policy in Development Network](#):

“Staff are much less likely to be open to a new system (an externally developed ‘solution’, if you will) if (1) they aren’t in agreement that certain problems exist, and (2) they don’t see a new system as helping to solve those problems. People in the organisation need to find meaning in the M&E effort because it does add to the work load, and the learning and reflection component is what usually excites people. Hence doing it just for donors or for proving success does not stimulate the required buy-in from project staff to maintain the M&E system adequately. Proving needs to go together with improving.”

The decision to engage others can bear some other interesting fruits: unexpected positive outcomes might emerge: for example, in one of the think tanks we worked with, staff decided that they needed to introduce some changes in the way they design projects as a reflection of how MEL could be conducted. This happens very frequently: when thinking about MEL, people realise that they need to re-think the way they plan as well. People start thinking about which strategies will bring which type of results and how projects are really contributing to the goals of a broader programme.

This is also an opportunity to think, rethink or formalise the (implicit or explicit) current M&E and learning practices. Organisations should avoid seeing these as a luxury; it is not a practice that only those with large budgets or with the specific support of a donor can afford. Each organisation can trace its own and unique path, even starting with baby steps. MEL is an intelligent and promising investment, which will no doubt bear fruit sooner rather than later.

Additional material on monitoring, evaluation and learning for think tanks can be found here:

[On Think Tanks Theme: Communications and Impact](#)
[On Think Tanks on Monitoring and Evaluation](#)

Webinars?

We will center the two upcoming webinars on how you can start or strengthen that investment. In the first webinar, we disentangle the complexity of policy influence, we will help you move from where you are to identify your key drivers and questions so that you have a clearer overall approach to MEL.

Then, in the second webinar, we will share concrete insights and tools that will enable you to draft a MEL strategy, including preliminary considerations on objectives, outcomes, outputs and indicators. This will allow you to develop a skeleton of an MEL plan on which we will happily provide personal feedback so that you (and your organisation, if applicable) end the course with some important decisions in terms of how to monitor, evaluate and learn about your policy influence in the near future.

References

Mayka, Lindsay Rose (2008) “Marcos Alternativos de Evaluación: Desarrollo de una Filosofía de la Evaluación”, OSI-LAP, California.

Quinn Patton, Michael (1996) Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text, Sage Publications.

Quinn Patton, Michael (2002) Utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE) Checklist.

We will provide a list of recommended readings and sources of useful information during the second week of the course.