

PUTTING THE LOCAL FIRST

Learning to adapt when measuring change



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches are under increasing scrutiny, criticised for being too rigid and limiting adaptable programming. This is particularly problematic in the peacebuilding sector which works in unpredictable environments and often benefits from an opportunistic and iterative approach to programming. Rigid M&E frameworks often do not lend themselves to this and even where flexible programming is achieved, M&E is still seen as a limitation.¹ Much of the criticism has been directed at pre-defined indicators and commitments to programme objectives that are unable to match the changing local context.

Over the years, Peace Direct has also witnessed the exclusion of local partners from the design and implementation of M&E frameworks. Denying partners opportunities to influence the course of M&E ignores a valuable source of knowledge and expertise that could be used to enhance programmes – and ultimately, the success of peacebuilding work.

As such, this research set out to investigate how M&E approaches could better lend themselves to changing contexts and adaptation.

¹ Pinnington, 2014.

Through a series of interviews with local and international actors and community focus group discussions, it became clear that what was needed was a systemic change to the way M&E is conceived and conducted. In particular, it requires much more control over M&E to be relinquished to local actors, it requires closer technical support to be provided to those actors and it requires improved relationships and trust with donors. Above all, it requires a better quality of partnership at all levels of the programme delivery chain; partnerships which circumvent linear transactional relationships for richer multidimensional interactions. In this way, learning and adaptation from the community to the donor will be encouraged, and more responsive programming can better be realised. These principles apply to international development and humanitarian interventions as much as they do to peacebuilding.

In order to achieve this, the research makes the following key recommendations which are described in more detail in the final section:

- Use M&E as an opportunity to develop relationships between donors and local actors built on trust and shared learning, establishing ‘psychological contracts’ that

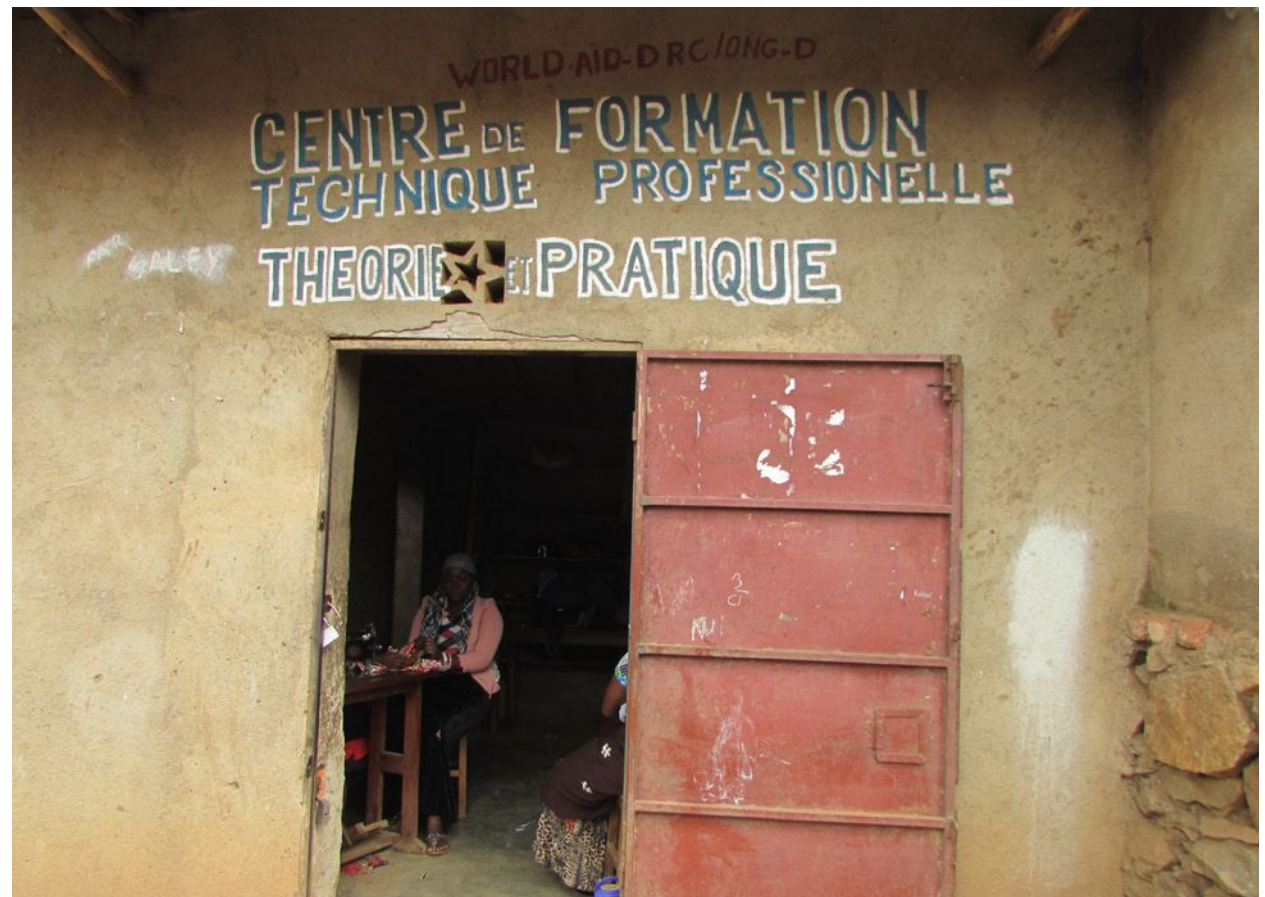
encourage local initiative rather than purely granting contracts that set in stone pre-defined deliverables.

- Donors and other stakeholders should consider pooling M&E resources to increase local M&E capacity and facilitate learning that cuts across programmes.
- Enable flexibility and adaptation of programmes by adjusting existing tools, such as logframes, to encourage learning and to cater for adaptation in response to that learning.
- Seek multiple perspectives and interpretations to explore the complexity of programmes by encouraging a culture of curiosity that extends beyond local delivery partners to communities, local government and the private sector and involve them in the analysis of changes on the ground.
- Strengthen the local voice within M&E systems by developing locally driven indicators and giving greater control over M&E resources to local actors.
- Collaboration and shared learning should include periodic face-to-face learning and reflection sessions with local representatives and groups of decision makers.

- Donors should collaboratively invest in M&E facilitators that can support local actors to reflect collectively on changes on the ground and encourage learning beyond immediate projects.
- M&E facilitators should facilitate learning workshops which bring together local and higher level viewpoints, strengthening the learning process, raising awareness of the context complexity and evidence for why programmes succeed or fail. Such interactions will have the added benefit of building trust between those on the ground and the decision makers at the top.
- Establish continuous feedback loops with communities, implementers and donors (or designated M&E facilitators) to enable more rapid response to the context and flag up failings early.
- Include in M&E frameworks an accountability for learning which sees learning as an indicator of success in its own right.
- M&E processes need to better engage informal learning and knowledge at a local level and not limit learning and reflection to donor reporting cycles. This can be done by giving greater control of M&E resources to local actors to decide when to learn and reflect.

- Capacity building of local actors in M&E should be increased but not because they need to deliver external M&E commitments, but so that they can develop their own M&E frameworks and processes.
- M&E should be controlled by local actors so that they can prioritise when, how and with whom they learn and reflect.

- Local actors should be encouraged to design their M&E in consultation with local communities so that indicators are more context specific and M&E is accountable to the communities – not the donors – from the outset.



INTRODUCTION: PUTTING THE LOCAL FIRST

Traditional approaches to M&E in international development are coming under increasing critique for the rigidity with which success is assessed. Measures of change are typically set in the early stages of project design and developed using static and inflexible sets of indicators. There are numerous studies documenting how strict donor reporting can limit the space for learning and adaptation.³ Eyben and Guijt, in their book 'The Politics of Evidence and Results in International Development' conclude that accountability requirements – marked by '[r]igid protocols for reporting back to donors' – are 'choking the space to learn and adapt'⁴ in the development industry. Critics point to two causes of concern with this practice. Firstly, that it ignores change in local dynamics over the life of a project, or changes within the wider social and political environment in which projects take place that may influence outcomes. Secondly, where organisations work through local partners, predetermined and fixed indicators can constrain and actively impede a partner's ability to deliver the project. Identifying these concerns in current practice has led to increasing calls

for more reflective and responsive M&E frameworks that adapt and learn over the course of a project's implementation.

Working closely with some of these partners over many years, Peace Direct has come to understand how inflexible and rigid up-front design of M&E frameworks can limit the ability of partners to respond to changing circumstances. It is Peace Direct's view that the exclusion of local partners from the development and design of M&E frameworks, and denying partners opportunities to influence the course of M&E reporting during projects, ignores a valuable source of knowledge and expertise that could be used to enhance the reporting process – and ultimately, the success of development and peacebuilding work.

The purpose of this research is to engage with these two issues. It does this by putting the local voice directly at the heart of the investigation, and specifically considers how the M&E reporting to donor organisations helps or hinders how they can deal with changing contexts. The research focused on evaluating the experiences of local partner organisations working on

peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). DRC was seen as a particularly pertinent case for research of this nature because of the highly volatile and changeable conditions in which local organisations are operating. The study is also timely given that the United Nation's Stabilisation Mission in DRC (MONUSCO) is reviewing its International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy (ISSSS), which aims to have a strong local voice informing all of its work and is currently developing an M&E framework for that.

This report highlights a number of recommendations that can help facilitate more responsive programming learning within M&E frameworks. Central to this is shifting a focus away from developing sets of rigid indicators and instead concentrating on M&E frameworks as a process, looking at how local actors can be more involved in developing M&E, encouraging shared learning across stakeholders and generating an environment that can make sense of contextual changes and approve adaptations of programmes.

³ Maclay, 2015; Pritchett et al., 2013.

⁴ Eyben et al., 2015.



1 WHAT IS THE CURRENT PROBLEM?

Over the past several decades, monitoring and evaluation frameworks have become an integral part of the international development sector. Donors and investors no longer operate on the assumption that assistance automatically produces successful and progressive social change. There is a demand for accountability, some means of being able to assess the impact of development work to ensure it is producing its intended outcomes, and at the very least, not creating negative and harmful effects for beneficiaries. As a result, monitoring and evaluation frameworks have become the industry standard for measuring change within international development and have been incorporated into peacebuilding practice.

However, there are increasing criticisms of the way in which many development organisations currently approach M&E. A dominant culture exists that looks to define and measure success criteria at the outset of projects and programmes, during early development and implementation stages. At the end of specific timelines, the value of interventions are measured against the original aims and

assumptions about the nature of change and how it was to be achieved.

Within the field, there is growing awareness that operating projects in this way is failing to recognise that conditions in which social change takes place are not static and projects are not conducted in a vacuum. Rather, development and peacebuilding projects happen within complex and dynamic social systems that are continually changing, as well as influencing those involved in projects. M&E reporting requirements based on narrowly defined plans and predetermined indicators do not take into account these factors and, as a result, can inhibit the ability of practitioners to adapt to changing environments and respond to emerging issues and opportunities.

In particular the stakes are high for projects that are looking to effect social change in unstable situations such as conflict-affected countries. In assisting local peacebuilding in volatile and unpredictable environments around the world, Peace Direct has seen first hand how inflexible M&E framework reporting can be a huge barrier to project success.

Those working on the ground are of course the most sensitive to change. Being members of the society and communities in which the projects are implemented affords local actors greater knowledge, experience and responsiveness to contextual changes, and



the ability to assess the potential impacts of changing conditions. Yet, these partners often have the least power to redefine how projects work.

The unequal power dynamic in the relationship between those delivering foreign assistance and those who receive it is recognised by Eyben and Guijt.⁵ They insist on deeper, more sustained and thoughtful analysis of the power relations that shape the 'politics of evidence and results' in the development industry.

The imbalance of influence in the relationship between the providers of expertise and receivers is a problem that goes deeper than the way individual donors operate. It is an issue that is structural in nature as well. For example, in regard to M&E frameworks, efforts at reform and improvement have historically focused

on producing new methods and tools, rather than seeing the problems as a symptom of the system itself. It is important to note that this piece of research has been sensitive to this issue and in the early stages of Peace Direct's Local First research, steps were taken to address and mitigate these issues.⁶ The study does not claim to escape this relationship, but it has, as far as possible, tried to counter it in the methodology and objectives, specifically by engaging local actors throughout.

⁵ Eyben and Guijt, 2015.

⁶ Pinnington, 2015.

The changing landscape

The move toward more adaptive approaches is part of a wider shift in thinking within international development that has been spurred by ‘two linked strands in the current disaffection with aid practice’.⁷ The first is growing received wisdom that it is critically important to gain deeper and more detailed understandings of country contexts. Part of being ‘context-sensitive’ requires development approaches to be ‘locally-led’ in the sense that they are driven by locally identified and defined problems, rather than predetermined donor agendas.⁸ The second strand concerns the move toward embracing and dealing with the complexities of delivering development in aid receiving countries, which requires greater appreciation of uncertainty and unpredictability in how a development intervention will unfold.⁹ Being more complexity-aware requires embracing the compounding factors and issues that are part of the wider environment, so as not to be ignorant or blind to their effects.

Looking at the development of M&E frameworks, complex problems defy the single input–output logic that characterises the design of logical frameworks used in the dominant M&E approach. Complex-aware monitoring of change also provides the evidence needed for contextually responsive ways of working – the information needed to make changes and strategic adjustments

to an intervention as it unfolds. It also necessitates relinquishing some control (usually enacted through more rigid forms of planning and accountability requirements) over to those on the ‘frontline’. This brings us back to the issue of local implementing partners, who are those usually responsible for real-time monitoring, yet this subject has received less attention in studies on participatory and inclusive M&E approaches.

What emerges from this brief review of wider debates within international development is that the need for more adaptive learning, with local partners most likely best placed to inform this learning, is not exclusive to the world of M&E, but is part of a more general shift in the field.

The report engages with these debates specifically as they relate to the monitoring and evaluation of projects. A key part of the research sought to interview local civil society organisations working on development and peacebuilding projects in eastern DRC to put the local voice at the heart of the investigation. What the report aims to show is how the M&E reporting of these local organisations to donor organisations helps or hinders the way programming can deal with changing contexts, and makes recommendations for improving adaptive programming going forward.

⁷ Booth, 2015.

⁸ Andrews et al., 2012, Booth and Unsworth 2014, Wild et al. 2014.

⁹ Booth 2015, Therkildsen 1988, Ramalingham 2013, Andrews et al. 2012.



2 Methodology

The research used a case study approach, using qualitative, semi-structured interviews with local civil society organisations based in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Eastern DRC was chosen for two reasons. The first is that countries that are conflict-affected typify many of the characteristics that the current dominant approach to M&E is accused of being insensitive to – highly complex, changeable and unstable. This makes them extremely challenging environments in which to deliver development or peacebuilding projects because the underlying causes of problems are volatile and unpredictable. The turbulence and unpredictability of contexts like the DRC's requires practitioners, particularly those at the frontline of implementation, to be flexible and adaptive.

A key critique that resonates with this research is a lack of responsiveness to the complex realities of the DRC conflict dynamics due to limited engagement with local populations. Some observers have gone as far as to argue that international engagement in DRC has not only neglected, but distorted the role of local actors, to the extent that they are led

by dominant donor-driven narratives rather than the realities of conflicts.¹⁰ According to Autesserre, these 'dominant narratives' have shaped inappropriate responses that have the potential to aggravate the problems they intend to solve. Even when donors are trying to be less leading, they can still unintentionally be influenced by the dominant views and interests of their sectors.

The second reason for choosing eastern DRC for this research is that there has been a shift in the international community's response to the conflict in DR Congo, with a greater focus on local solutions to local problems, the most notable being the United Nation's revised International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy (ISSSS). Whilst this shift is welcome, challenges and opportunities will present themselves in ensuring that local voices are genuinely included and that a system of feedback to enable flexible programming is built.

¹⁰ Autesserre, 2014.





CASE STUDY OF A COMMUNITY BASED EX-COMBATANT REINTEGRATION PROGRAMME

To illustrate the complexity and uncertainty projects face, below is a list of factors that affected a community based ex-combatant reintegration project in Beni, DRC, over the course of three years:

- Initially, the local organisation provided humanitarian assistance to displaced people. However, during monitoring activities, beneficiaries approached them and asked whether instead of supporting them with food, the organisation could negotiate directly with the armed groups who were causing their displacement and suffering. They were able to change their project activities and consequently went on to work with the armed groups, designing a community based reintegration programme.
- In January 2014, the government of DRC began an offensive against a key armed group, the ADF-NALU. The ADF-NALU increased its attacks on communities in retaliation, displacing communities involved in the project.
- An armed group known as the M23 occupied Goma – a town more than 330km away from Beni – which led to increased recruitment of combatants back into armed groups in Beni.
- Increasing recognition that recruiting child soldiers is a war crime led a local warlord to ban any child soldier reintegration projects for fear he would be accused of having recruited child soldiers and would be subject to prosecution. This meant the project had to provide assistance to child soldiers within broader community activities, which were not initially funded so as not to draw too much attention to this sensitive work.
- The government of DRC approved its own Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) plan which increased the political complexity of working with ex-combatants, making them harder to access for projects.
- Ex-combatants, although initially interested in agriculture as a livelihood, felt that manual labour was not the most appropriate livelihood option for them and refused to sow the seeds. The project had to adapt to provide goats.
- A group of combatants on a mountain wanted to return to their communities but believed that leaving the mountain would curse them; the project had to adapt by engaging a witch doctor that could counter this belief.

In terms of the UN's Stabilisation Strategy (ISSS) specifically, the inclusion of local voices is enshrined in the concept of 'Democratic Dialogues' which put 'communities and local authorities in stabilisation zones front and centre to help define root causes of conflict and identify solutions to go forward.'¹¹ This progressive, people-centred approach to stabilisation is a major step in the right direction but its success will be heavily influenced by the M&E approach it adopts. By looking at local civil society organisations' experience of M&E reporting to international donors such as the UN in DRC (known by the French acronym MONUSCO), this study hopes to influence the way donors and organisations adapt and learn from the changing context on the ground.

Community voices

To ensure that the local voice was at the forefront of the study, the methodology focused on the practice of local organisations. The researchers looked at the experiences of 16 different local civil society organisations in four areas of eastern DRC: Bunia, Orientale Province, Beni and North Kivu. Interviews were conducted during the first phase of the research (August–September 2015). A second phase was conducted in Uvira and South Kivu (October–November 2015) to explore the experiences of conflict-affected

communities. Conversations were held in six communities (88 women, and 25 men) in North Kivu and Orientale Province. In total, the practice of 20 local civil society organisations, followed by the experiences of 10 different communities were explored as part of the research. Consultation also took place with the MONUSCO Stabilisation Unit in Goma. In addition, interviews were conducted with international agencies in Goma and Bukavu that partner directly with local civil society, including Life and Peace Institute (LPI), Search for Common Ground (SFCG), International Alert and World Vision.

At the end of September 2015, findings from an initial desk study and fieldwork were used to test different flexible and adaptive models for measuring change. These models were tested over a four-week period with Peace Direct partners in Beni (Centre Résolution Conflits/CRC) and Uvira (Chirezi Foundation/FOCHI). Focus group discussions were also held with seven communities to investigate locally-led indicators and the role they might have in improving M&E process.

The primary purpose of the interviews was to gain a more detailed understanding of how local organisations measure and adapt to change. The research also explored how these local organisations view their international partners

and funders – to draw out the ways that their relationships can help or hinder flexible and adaptive learning of these local organisations. This was in order to develop recommendations that are responsive to the approaches, experiences and practice of local organisations, while also being useable and relevant for their international partners and donors. The research identified five essential working practices for more responsive programming. These are explored in Section 3 below. Each is addressed in turn, using examples to illustrate the implications they pose for adaptive learning in M&E, and make recommendations. The five practices are:

- 1. Reviewing systems for measuring change:** what M&E reporting currently looks like for local organisations.
- 2. Seeking multiple perspectives and interpretations:** a multiplicity of actors and different voices are used to explore how complexity and context impact on M&E.
- 3. Enabling flexibility and adaptation:** a lack of agency and space for local partners to influence M&E is a primary barrier to adaptive learning and can exacerbate donor-driven agendas.
- 4. Nurturing relationships and partners:** how local partners view relations with donors and what they think needs to change.
- 5. Learning:** how to facilitate more locally-led, adaptive programming in M&E frameworks.

¹¹ *International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy 2013-17.*



3 FINDINGS

What does M&E mean to local actors and what will aid greater inclusion of local voices?

3.1 Reviewing systems for measuring change

As part of the interviews, local organisations were asked to briefly describe the systems that they have in place to monitor and evaluate their work, and how these systems measure change. What emerged from the interviews is that for the majority of the organisations monitoring and evaluation is done through quantitative techniques. As such, M&E is largely interpreted to be at the activity or output level, almost always using quantitative data. For example, it was common to hear – ‘we conducted X many trainings, with X many people, in X amount of communities’. Also, very few of the local organisations interviewed had been involved in evaluating how their activities connected to broader processes of change, and even fewer had critically assessed the assumptions underpinning their work.

An interviewee working for a local peacebuilding organisation said that an overreliance on baseline surveys to inform their work, and a failure to evaluate and reflect throughout the life of the project had,

by their own admission, reduced the success of their projects. What would have helped the organisation adapt to change, the interviewee suggested, was if the donor had allowed them to conduct ongoing surveys and adapt the project according to results generated.

Another example, which relates to issues of sexual violence, came from a grantee organisation that provides legal assistance to victims. For local organisations providing this kind of support, the reporting requirements of their donors appeared predominantly geared towards demonstrating case management. This involved completing forms to show that the correct procedures had been followed in order to assemble victim court dossiers. Success was then quantified by the number of cases that appeared before court after having gone through the correct case management process.

Ensuring that people who have been sexually assaulted receive medical care and legal advice is of great importance and can, to a certain extent, be easily demonstrated quantitatively – as can the number of dossiers that appear before court. But the management of the case thereafter by the formal justice system is complex and not easily captured in neat quantitative indicators. As one interviewee pointed out, although the cases appear ‘successful’ in the sense that they have appeared before court, many victims

were left feeling that they have not received justice.

‘...partly this is because of the challenge of compensation. In cases involving soldiers, the army has responsibility to pay compensation to victims, but the military will rarely pay....and so victims will return to us unsatisfied and ask for help. But we can’t do anything...’

(A local NGO, Beni, August 2015).

In particularly severe cases of abuse, where perpetrators have been given prison sentences, corruption posed a particular challenge. Several interviewees suggested that if a perpetrator has resources and contacts, they can buy themselves out of their sentence. The reporting requirements placed on local organisations involved in supporting victims, however, do not capture such complex systemic challenges because they are geared towards what can be easily addressed and quantified.

Several organisations involved in direct service provision, for instance legal support and child protection, monitor on a case-by-case basis, which particularly for child protection, can require more in-depth forms of qualitative analysis. However, the vast majority of interviews with both local organisations and their international NGO partners confirmed that the characteristic M&E role of an ‘implementing partner’ is to monitor activities,

not evaluate change. The role of local partners in M&E falls heavily on the ‘M’, but appeared quite limited when it comes to ‘E’.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, only one out of the 16 organisations interviewed had a member of staff whose primary role was M&E. One or two had joint M&E and administrative roles, which could point towards how M&E is considered an administrative, rather than analytical, function. Many organisations stated that they did not have the resources for more sophisticated M&E activities. Where M&E is included in proposals, it often gets squeezed out of the budget due to other pressures. This observation reflects a wider problem in international development practices that sees the lion’s share of M&E budgets allocated to end-line evaluations. Allocating M&E resources in this way also points towards the limited role donors and international partners craft for their grantee organisations in M&E, limiting ownership over, and participation in, the process of measuring change.



For example, one local NGO interviewed complained that they did not have enough funding for M&E visits, and that they would have to be incorporated into activity field visits. This lack of funding for day to day M&E by the local partner is often in stark contrast to the cost of external evaluations at the end of the project.



Where local partners had developed stronger M&E functions within their organisations, usually at the request of their international funders, the results, despite initial resistance, seem to have been positive. This was seen in the cases of organisations that had partnered with Save the Children and International Alert. Save the Children's local partner, for example, was allocated a budget to employ an M&E officer and supported to develop a more formalised M&E system for its projects. Resistance came at the beginning because staff had not critically evaluated their work in this way before. However, with time, increased M&E fostered a stronger culture of learning and adaptation within the organisation.

It was difficult at first because staff members who had been doing the same thing, in the same way, for many years were suddenly challenged to consider different approaches, and many took this personally. But, with time, more and more staff members are

embracing our M&E activities and taking a more critical approach to their work.

(A local NGO, Beni, Sept 2015).

Key findings/ recommendations:

More adaptive learning in M&E could be facilitated by switching emphasis from defining sets of predetermined indicators and instead looking to M&E as an interactive process. The process must include local actors, encourage shared learning across stakeholders and foster an environment that can make sense of contextual changes and approve adaptations of programmes and measures of success.

Getting the right balance of resources for M&E



3.2 Seeking multiple perspectives and interpretations

The previous section demonstrated how M&E based on quantitative data can impede reporters' abilities to be aware and respond to the complexity and contextual nuances of the project environment. The second essential working practice to emerge from the field research is how to deal with a broad range of different actors with very different voices and agendas. We explored the complexity of multiple perspectives in two ways: looking at how a lack of awareness of gender relations can exclude female voices, and how donors and local organisations, as well as local

organisations and the communities they serve, often hold divergent views on the causes and solutions to complex problems, with very little investment made in developing a shared understanding of the context.

Organisations recognised that gender inclusivity is vital in ensuring that multiple perspectives influence M&E activities. Although some organisations hold separate meetings and consultations with men and women, they recognise that the perspectives of women are often harder to capture. Women are less accessible because of their economic role and responsibilities, particularly in relation to household food security, which means

that they are often busy cultivating or selling goods at the market when monitoring visits are made. This suggests that gender sensitive advance planning is needed if women's perspectives are to be adequately included in monitoring activities.

For example, one local NGO interviewed showed how a failure to seek feedback from women in a soap making project meant that they didn't hear until the end of the project that the women were unable to earn an income because they were afraid to go to the market. They were unable therefore to buy the materials needed to make soap, or access the markets at which to sell it.

The need for diversifying perspectives within M&E



In another example, a local NGO showed the lengths that they go to engage women into their monitoring and evaluation approaches:

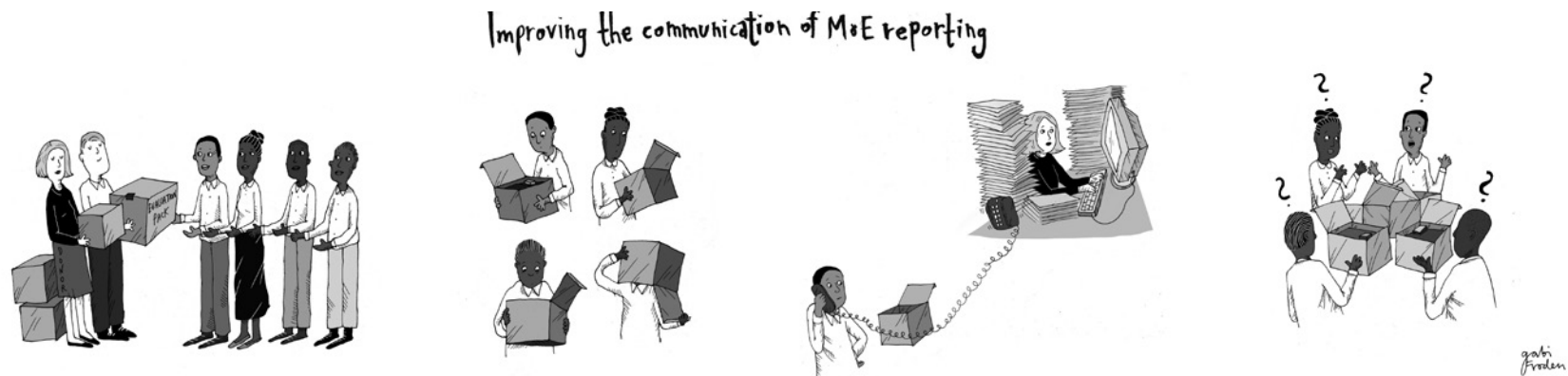
Overcoming female exclusion in Beni

One grantee organisation in Beni had an interesting approach to overcoming the accessibility challenges of talking to women. The organisation provides training in income generating skills to women affected by conflict in North Kivu. The local organisation recognised that women may find it difficult to speak about their personal experience, and that they may not fully appreciate the value or significance of M&E visits. Staff of the local organisation sit down with women and spend time working with them on whatever activity they are engaged in before launching into questions:

...I will usually sit with them sewing for some time before I ask any questions. I started doing this because I found that women are much more comfortable talking to me as they work [than in more formal focus groups]

What these cases illustrate is how different and alternate voices within communities can be lost if interveners are not sensitive to the dynamics of power relations and contextual cultural and social subtleties. The grantee organisation in Beni is a good illustration of how a local organisation, because of its greater awareness of social practices, was able to find a way to bring women's voices into the project in a way that the cultural environment found acceptable and comfortable.

Secondly, a key characteristic of complex development problems is that different people and organisations often interpret situations very differently.¹² This is as relevant for the relationship between donors and local organisations as it is between different local stakeholder groups. For example, Peace Direct's own experience of bringing local peacebuilders together to



¹² Ramlingham, 2014.

conduct joint conflict analysis also points to the often divergent views held by local organisations. Without actors communicating effectively, working towards commonly held understandings, there is a risk of miscommunication, which can adversely affect development projects, particularly when it comes to M&E. Often donor organisations,

Key findings/ recommendations:

To respond and adapt to complex and dynamic challenges like those in eastern DRC requires the insights of multiple perspectives, including those of the local partner organisations and communities they work with. To ensure different voices inform programme adaptation requires social and cultural sensitivity, especially in conflict contexts that can socially divide. But it also requires a link between the local knowledge and the knowledge of the donor. If international actors do not have the same complexity awareness as local actors, then this limits the advantages of the local knowledge, unless donors are willing to relinquish significant control to their local partners.

when working through local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs), are unaware of the realities on the ground where their projects are delivered. This detachment from context and from partners can result in both parties having very different expectations and understandings of the project and what is being achieved.

In one interview with a local NGO, they had struggled to understand the M&E requirements from their international partners as it had not been explained to them. They received no training and there was no follow-up to help them. This created confusion within the team and often they had to guess what the indicators meant and how they should report.

3.3 Enabling flexibility and adaptation

Having examined how local organisations approach M&E and how they deal with complexity, this section looks at local organisations' experiences of flexibility and adaptation in the face of change during M&E reporting.

Nearly every organisation was adapting to contextual shifts at the activity level. These changes were largely in response to security issues – often involving a move in location, or terminating activities altogether when current locations were no longer safe, under threat from armed groups.

Most of the organisations interviewed were using some form of informal feedback mechanism to ensure that they were connected to the communities they work with, and thus presenting an opportunity for different voices to be fed into their projects. The ability to make regular monitoring visits was dependent on funding and many organisations complained that they did not have adequate resources. This is particularly problematic in eastern DRC where communities are dispersed across difficult terrain with poor road infrastructure. Nearly every organisation had some way of overcoming this challenge, for example, by having community-based monitoring structures in place – either conducted by committees or an individual. In some cases, organisations were only collecting feedback from the community-based monitors when they made field visits themselves. Quite often, monitoring took place in tandem with project activities and trainings by the programme coordinators themselves. Although this is a resourceful approach, it limits the ability of the organisations to respond or adapt in a timely manner to the shifting needs of the communities.

Where grantee organisations were working for international funders, many reported that donors were flexible if changes needed to be made at activity level, as long as there were no major financial implications. Some interviewees stated that higher-level aims, such as programme objectives, were broad

enough to enable flexibility and adaptation. Others indicated that changing higher level goals or objectives wasn't feasible because of contractual obligations to donors. As one local organisation worker stated – 'they [objectives] belong to the donors, they are their objectives'.¹³ The inability of grantees to be able to influence donor objectives and reporting requirements was seen as problematic. A stark example of how adhering to rigid and narrow reporting requirements within M&E frameworks can have harmful consequences was related by one interviewee who recalled having to turn away victims of rape whilst accepting others from the same village:

When we are working in the communities, we are approached for help and support

by victims of rape, but we have to turn them away because our funding is restricted to support violence committed by armed groups.

(Local NGO, Bunia, Sept 2015)

The local organisation, through the project, identified a greater need for support of rape victims within communities, but because of the restrictive criteria of the donor, women raped by men other than those of armed groups were denied help. This case clearly illustrates the advantage that local learning can bring to M&E reporting. The example of the rape victims illustrates Autesserre's (2014) argument that donors often oversimplify the conflict situation in eastern DRC. As a result, they create an inappropriate

response that can aggravate conditions on the ground. Interviews with both national and international NGOs in this study suggest donor preoccupation with the narrative of sexual violence – or 'rape as a weapon of war' – has limited funding opportunities for other issues such as land and property related security.

More broadly, donor concepts of a problem (here, what is understood as violence – armed group only) can lead to categories and delineations in projects that restrict and exclude those who should be benefiting. Trying to find neat solutions to a complex set of problems can make little sense to those who are actually affected by, or are dealing with, the reality of these problems.

Narrowly defining beneficiary groups



¹³ INGO – Key Informant Interview, Goma, Sept. 2015.

These examples favour accountability to donors rather than communities which can inhibit flexibility in the way the programmes are delivered. When the research looked at examples where funding came from communities not donors, what was seen was the opposite – more flexible programmes which were more responsive to realities on the ground, as shown in the box below:

In this example, the members of the network were unlikely to give up at the first stumbling block. Accountability to communities created a strong incentive to manage cases effectively, which in turn led to their strategic, adaptive problem-solving approach. It also highlights the need to have community and context-based indicators.

In the case of a civil society network of human rights defenders, adaptation was connected to a reliance on donations from their members and the communities they seek to defend. The training and support provided by the network is free, but when a case is managed successfully the organisation is acknowledged by the community and often materially rewarded. Therefore, the sustainability of the organisation depends upon their ability to win cases and remain relevant to their community and its needs.

Reflecting on this point has been the impetus for adaptive learning as the organisation developed a way of working that involves using multiple approaches when they take on cases. In this way, they are not relying on one strategy, but have multiple avenues to work through, so where one may not work, there are alternatives:

...we usually go into the field together to deal with a case that has been brought to us... but when things appear different to what we have thought... different actors might be involved. So we need to go back to the office and sit and discuss what went wrong, how we can do things differently. We come up with a new approach and go back again, this time talking to the people we missed first time around.

Key findings/ recommendations:

If higher-level goals or objectives are to remain relevant and rooted in the reality of a project context, they must be driven by the reflections and critical thinking of those on the ground. Interventions need to be informed by sustained and rapid feedback loops between communities, local grantees and their donors. The objectives themselves are not necessarily the inhibiting factor for adaptation. It is more a case of their perceived inflexibility, which could be on the part of both the local grantee and the donor. An environment that fosters open and regular communication between donors and grantees is essential for achieving adaptive programming that is led by local realities and actors on the ground. Such communication should be geared towards reflecting on observed change, measured against assumed change.

3.4 Nurturing relationships and partners

So far throughout this section, many of the findings have touched on, or related to, the nature of the relationship between donors and grantees (and the local partners). The fourth essential working practice puts this relationship directly in the spotlight, considering how local partners view their relations with donors and the effect that has on M&E reporting. One particular focus in the interviews was the degree to which the presence of external funding supported or inhibited the adaptability of local organisations. A range of civil society organisations were consulted: some had multiple donors, others had only one and some had none. Unsurprisingly those not receiving external support were more reliant on volunteers and contributions. These were often network and membership-based organisations (see box in section 3.3).

Greater flexibility was reported in partnerships with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) than with UN agencies, where local organisations were receiving funding from multiple sources. The latter was seen to operate on a traditional ‘implementing partner’ model – the local partners seen as an agent of direct service delivery and as a source of data collection only. Conversely, INGOs were appreciated for having a more



engaged capacity building and mentoring approach, which supported the development of M&E skills.

The study found that most local NGOs with external funding, particularly those that are more developed, are implementing projects that have been externally designed by donors. As was reflected on in Section 3.1, most of these M&E frameworks are based on quantitative methods that constrain the ability of local partners to adapt and learn from changes in the project environment. This can lead to frustration, damaging the relationship between donor and recipient.

One organisation interviewed was working on both externally and internally developed projects. Staff reported that they often find it easier to achieve more positive results in projects of their own design because it allows them more scope to anticipate and shape the project when change happens:

It is harder to achieve results in projects that have been designed from outside because communities feel less invested in them; they don't take responsibility for or have ownership of them.

(Local NGO, Beni, August 2015)

In an interview with a staff member of another local organisation, the interviewee suggested that rather than externals determining project M&E requirements, they would prefer direct empowerment and ownership – formal training in M&E that would allow them to develop their own reporting systems. What is highlighted by this point is the need for more technical assistance. This technical assistance should be targeted towards building LNGO capacity to design their own M&E, not geared toward training how to implement donor designed frameworks.



The larger local NGOs were seen to be more donor-driven and focused, and appeared to show less capacity to be innovative and more flexible in M&E reporting. This dynamic raises questions around wider structural practices within international development and peacebuilding – how the effectiveness of local grantee organisations is defined and understood. The findings from interviews appear to show that donor–grantee relationships are grounded in the dominant model discussed in Section 1 – top-down and asymmetric in terms of donors holding the power to shape measures of success and determine the reporting requirements of projects. They also support the point raised at the end of Section 3.1, that inflexibility in donor and INGO M&E frameworks goes deeper than just being an issue of individual organisations, but is more a systemic problem within the sector itself. What exists is a system that places insufficient value on the knowledge or capability of LNGOs to be responsible or capable of reporting on M&E without the assistance and guidance of their donors.

As part of the research, project beneficiaries were asked how they provide feedback to the donor organisations.¹⁴ They were also asked how this feedback is received – by both local and international organisations.

Across the interviews, a common narrative arose – that NGOs often arrive, train groups and community members and then leave without monitoring or assessing the uptake of skills. It was also commonly expressed that external interventions were often based on misconstrued interpretations of the context and lives of communities due to a lack of consultation and communication between agencies and communities. This finding supports the discussion in **Section 3.2**. Elsewhere, communities cited ‘false promises’ on the part of NGOs that claimed to be providing support but only visited once and never returned. Many of these complaints have become clichés within the development sector which points to the need for systemic change.

What we have described earlier as the very narrow view of M&E which sits within a contractual relationship from the donor to the local implementer, brings with it a number of problems that inhibit close partnerships. Firstly, if local organisations have the impression that it is the donor that they should ultimately be accountable to, rather than the communities receiving the services, how can a real partnership be fostered? Secondly, how can a contractual relationship promote a nurturing partnership?

¹⁴ The insights and perspectives gained from this part of the research have been used to design a framework that integrates a mechanism for collecting and responding to community feedback.

If the relationship is a vertical one, between the local organisation and the donor, how are multiple perspectives reflected? For example, within one community there may be multiple projects with different implementers and donors. Communities themselves will be creating change, the context and environment will be constantly changing and all of this will be affecting what happens to that community. Yet, M&E looks only at an isolated project centred on vertical relationships.

Fundamentally, what seems to be continuously underappreciated is the importance of relationships and the importance of partnership quality. What these findings reveal is that weak M&E is both a symptom and a cause of poor relationships between local and international actors. On the one hand, poorly considered M&E imposed from the top down alienates local partners from the work being implemented. In return, international partners get lower quality delivery and less impactful results. The outcome is an entrenchment of the status quo, where international actors interpret a struggle with M&E at the local level as a lack of competency, furthering the perception that M&E is safest in international hands.

Without systemic change this status quo will continue. What is needed is to look beyond individual projects and to see how M&E can be used as an opportunity to improve

relationships and partnerships vertically and horizontally. For example, shared learning forums could be held annually between donors and local partners and community members, improving relationships as well as contextual awareness. Local action plans accompanied by locally developed M&E frameworks can act as a bottom up co-ordination mechanism of the international community, rather than the other way round. Local community members can also be trained in M&E to support implementing partners to understand

the impact of multiple projects happening in their communities. Local M&E teams that cut across projects can be supported to constantly investigate changes at the local level and encourage greater curiosity that can feed back to international actors.

By looking at ways to change M&E processes, M&E can be much more than a reporting system but a significant opportunity to improve relationships and partnerships both vertically and horizontally.

Key findings/recommendations:

The importance of relationships and the quality of partnerships from the grassroots up to the donors is significantly under appreciated. The quality of M&E is often both a symptom and a cause of these poor relationships.

Technical support to local actors for M&E is needed, not so that LINGOs can deliver donor M&E developed frameworks, but so that local actors have the capacity to design and create their own M&E, learn and adapt. Trust, standing back and allowing local organisations to make mistakes, is an important aspect of relationship building.

Whilst there are positive examples where INGOs have worked well with local partners, there will always be an unbalanced power dynamic which makes it all the more important that space is created to allow local actors to lead on M&E design and implementation.

3.5 Learning

In the final section of the study's findings, attention turns to how local partners think more adaptive learning could be made part of M&E frameworks. In order to be drivers rather than simply implementers of change, organisations require the space and mechanisms to learn. A key part of this process is having the room and resources to reflect on what has been learned. Single loop learning –implementing change without reflecting on what has happened and why – is not good enough. Double loop learning is essential – being reflexive and really taking time to step back and ruminate on the implications of events and outcomes and how they could be used to inform more effective work in the future.¹⁵ Part of the 'double-loop' learning experience involves measuring assumed change (predicted at the beginning of an intervention) against observed change (arising in real-time monitoring of events as they unfold).

What emerges from this research is that M&E systems commonly used by the international community unintentionally assign learning to coincide with periodic reporting demands. Most in-depth reporting tends to coincide with the end of the project, accompanied by an external evaluation. As a result most of the learning comes at the end of the project – by which point another proposal has probably already been developed to avoid a gap in project funding.

Yet, the field research shows that a strength of local actors is real-time data collection: informal consultations with communities and an interest in internal reflections. For example, one organisation involved in the research holds reflection meetings every morning before laptops are opened or emails checked. The entire staff meets for an hour of intense

reflection and dialogue which enables them to learn on a daily basis from each others' progress and any challenges that they may be facing. As well as reflecting on programme work, the morning meetings have a spiritual aspect that is central to the identity of the organisation and how it justifies its work.



¹⁵ Argyris and Schon, 1978.



An example of this informal type of learning was discussed earlier in Section 3.3, with the network of human rights defenders – their work was process oriented, rather than taking place at mid or end points of project timelines. The challenge with real-time learning of this kind is that it is rarely captured in formal M&E reporting documentation, or even communicated to international partners.

Part of the challenge may be the expectations and requirements placed on grantees by donors and intermediary funding partners. One local staff member from an NGO pointed out that, ‘there are two types of civil society organisation

in DRC: those that follow a plan, and those that learn’.¹⁶ This may be true but there is, of course, an important aspect of survival in local partners following a plan if they are reliant on funding. So, the ability to adapt and learn is still heavily influenced by the donor.

Evidence from interviews suggests that even organisations that hold to the rigid tenets of their funders and do not diverge from reporting requirements are likely to be making daily informal and undocumented adaptations connected to real-time learning. Observing

practices in Peace Direct’s partner, CRC, in North Kivu over the course of a month made this very clear.

A lot of what gets discussed and decided in CRC’s morning meetings does not contribute to wider learning for the organisation or its partners, including Peace Direct. With a more adaptive approach to learning, CRC could be encouraged to critically reflect on the informal learning that they are doing in this space, and through some simple techniques create simple formal structures around this cultural practice that would allow this learning to more effectively influence CRC and Peace Direct’s work. If international partners are to change their own practices to become more adaptive towards M&E reporting, a good place to start would be to look at what their own partners on the ground are doing.

Related to this, it has been observed that ‘tight feedback loops’ and mechanisms are an important way to facilitate real-time learning.¹⁷ In the eastern DRC, the Life and Peace Institute (LPI) partnership model offers an example of a particularly well-developed feedback loop. LPI’s local partners are constantly encouraged to learn and reflect as part of its capacity building approach. They use a continual response mechanism with partners. This involves the partner reporting on their experiences using

¹⁶ INGO local staff member, Bukavu, September 2015. ¹⁷ Andrews, M., et al., 2012 and Pritchett, L. et al., 2013.

LPI's Participatory Action Research (PAR) that involves regular calls or face-to-face meetings. This intense interaction and feedback has fostered closer working relationships that forms the basis for LPI's approach. It encourages local partners to continually test assumptions and theories of change when confronted with challenges, defeats or unforeseen contextual shifts, which allows LPI to be constantly learning from, and adapting to, the context. Autesserre notes that, by allowing their actions to be led by in-depth local knowledge and experience, LPI 'reject universal approaches to peacebuilding'.¹⁸

The kind of process that LPI adopts has implications for most common M&E systems. Firstly, LPI ensures that not just its LNGO partner staff are involved in the learning, but ordinary community members, by creating the space and developing the process to enable this. Secondly, as an INGO partner, they are closely involved in that learning process which gives them a better understanding of the context and confidence that what they are hearing from the ground is accurate and therefore adaptation should be supported.

¹⁸ Autesserre, 2014

Life and Peace Institute

In DRC, the approach of the Life and Peace Institute (LPI) to conflict transformation is strongly underpinned by Participatory Action Research (PAR). LPI describes PAR as a conflict transformation strategy where all parties involved in a conflict are 'engaged in analysing the multiplicity of interpretations of conflict causes and consequences, and the identification of constructive actions for the future'¹⁹. The process therefore involves local partners in both analysis of the conflict and design of solutions for transforming it.

LPI's Participatory Action Research (PAR) model involves four main stages. The last three stages, in particular, are implemented iteratively with the support of a rapid feedback loop between LPI country partners – 'facilitators' – and programme staff at the LPI office in Bukavu. The process requires many repeated stages of action, feedback, response and adaptation:

- 1. Identifying the theme through context analysis (mostly desk research carried out by LPI staff)**
- 2. In-depth research on the identified theme: involving information gathering and sharing by the trained PAR facilitators. This process is supported**

by a feedback loop between LPI staff and local partner researchers, and capacity building of the facilitators; it involves mapping conflict actors and dynamics in detail.

- 3. Community dialogues involving various groups of people who have been involved in and/or affected by the conflict in different ways. This is where the findings from the second stage (information gathering) are shared and discussed. These dialogues can be repeated over a period of up to two years in a process that leads to a communally agreed interpretation of the conflict/s.**
- 4. Design and implementation of projects to address the problems that have been identified through the PAR process. This stage can take up to 10 years to effectively solve the challenges and problems people have identified.**

(Source: Local First in Practice (2014))

¹⁹ Life & Peace Institute.

Organisations that operate in this way tend to have very good relations with their donors and in turn those donors have faith in their decisions and recommendations. But our findings highlight this kind of relationship as atypical. Yet, if it is widely recognised that LPI has a strong model and that model is possible because of the good relationships with local actors on one side and donors on the other, then similar relationships need to become more widespread.

It seems that relationships and learning can and should go hand in hand; that there is an opportunity through improved M&E systems to create a nexus that brings relationship building and learning together with substantial benefits for the way development is delivered. Through strengthened networks donors can become more contextually aware and through a process of shared learning build relationships based on trust and confidence. In doing so, donors and other international partners will feel more comfortable about being locally led and more open to adaptation based on a shared understanding of why that adaptation is needed.



Key findings/recommendations:

- Commonly used approaches to M&E can unintentionally inhibit learning or confine learning to externally decided reporting periods. This wastes an opportunity to tap into local capacities to collect real-time data, often collected through informal processes.
- There is a disconnect between more informal processes for M&E and formalised ones meaning that a lot of knowledge and learning does not get shared upstream to international partners, yet international partners are typically the dominant decision makers.
- Where there is a good commitment to regular learning, opportunities to engage a wide range of stakeholders can be found and this in turn can reassure external stakeholders that work is of a high quality.
- In this way, participatory learning from the grassroots up to international partners can provide a good opportunity for building relationships based on trust and shared understanding, creating an important opportunity for M&E to do much more than simply verify a project has taken place as planned.

4 How can indicators and tools contribute to flexible and adaptive programming?

The consultations with local actors revealed a systemic problem that limits flexible programming and appropriate M&E for peacebuilding. But they also highlighted that indicators and poor understanding of M&E tools could help or hinder, depending on how they were conceived. As part of our research, we wanted to interrogate the extent to which indicators and tools could contribute to the change we wanted to see.

To do this we tested different tools to assess how easily different M&E approaches could be adopted and adapted by local organisations. It found that local actors needed more technical and financial support than expected to adopt new tools. For more information on the tools, see:

www.peacedirect.org/putting-the-local-first.

To investigate what impact indicators could have on M&E processes, focus group





discussions were held at the community level to understand more fully what locally driven indicators may look like and what this means for M&E.

We had hoped that by using different tools or different indicators, there could be substantive changes that enabled existing M&E processes to be more relevant and user friendly. However, this component of the research re-affirmed what the consultations with local actors in DRC had shown – that indicators and tools are helpful but to really see substantial change, they are not enough on their own and more systemic change is needed.

Reviewing indicators

In order to research how to develop locally-led indicators, focus groups were organised in seven villages in the territory of Beni. During focus groups issues relating to key drivers of conflict, insecurity, meaning of peace and peacebuilding were discussed in order to gain information to generate adequate indicators.

It found that even within this relatively small area, grievances faced and drivers of conflict differed significantly between villages. Community-specific project objectives would therefore be needed to accurately address drivers of conflict. Community-specific indicators, similarly, would be needed to measure change across those objectives.

For example, in villages severely affected by the armed group the Allied Democratic Forces - National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF-NALU), key concerns focused on ending the killing of civilians and being able to farm safely to contribute to livelihoods. They were concerned that the lack of livelihoods was fostering further frustrations and potentially contributing to the formation of new resistance groups and thereby creating further insecurity.

In nearby villages not directly affected by the ADF-NALU, community concerns centred around issues deriving from bad governance, structural violence and infringement on political and socioeconomic rights, rather than direct killings. They were concerned about:

- current socio-political institutions that do not guarantee inclusion and transparency in decision making on the use of public resources
- the taxation system, which was seen to discourage local entrepreneurship and deepening economic deprivation in rural areas
- the restriction of free movement
- social, economic, political and cultural inequalities between ethnic and other identity groups.

These variances across relatively small distances can make large scale programmes complex and tend to lead to an M&E

framework that becomes so generic it can start to lose its relative meaning. Whilst vague frameworks can allow greater flexibility, is this really what is desired? Would more context specific M&E approaches provide both more accuracy as well as have the added buy-in from local actors, where communities set the agenda and the means to measure success?

These findings highlight the need for locally led and flexible indicators. However, few methods for developing such indicators currently exist. The following section discusses initiatives to develop indicators for measuring levels of peace and security.

The Everyday Peace Indicators,²⁰ the Peace Evaluation Across Cultures and Environments (PEACE scale), Catholic Relief Globally Accepted Indicators (GAIN) (2010), and the Common Indicators of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS)'s New Deal Technical Working Group (2013) have all sought to collect bottom-up information to develop indicators of change that can be used to gain information about individuals' perceptions of the level of peace and security in their communities. Whereas the Everyday Peace Indicators are country specific, the PEACE scale and IDPS have both come up with indicators that can be used



across countries, for example to measure progress within specific programmes or development goals²¹.

The Everyday Peace Indicators stand out from these three as communities themselves led in choosing the areas and issues to be used for assessing changes in peace and conflict. The list of indicators that emerged is therefore different from the standard indicators that international organisations and INGOs often use. One example of an indicator, for example,

is 'Barking dogs at night', as 'Barking dogs are seen as an indicator of prowlers at night and thus of insecurity: if dogs bark then it is likely that burglars or potential muggers are around and thus people stay indoors'.²²

Overall, the benefit of these tools is that they seek to gain information from an individual perspective. They examine or measure peace at the level of the person and immediate environment and recognise the agency and significance of actors at the sub-state level.²³

²⁰ MacGinty and Firchow, 2016. ²¹ IDPS focuses on indicators for fragile states and stresses that only some of its indicators can be used across countries and should be supplemented by country specific indicators. ²² MacGinty and Firchow, 2016. ²³ MacGinty, 2014.

However, apart from the Everyday Peace Indicators, these initiatives were not locally led in their development and none of them measure change at a community level, which is the level that most local organisations operate at. Furthermore, as MacGinty also recognises, these indicators were developed at one specific point in time and therefore reflect circumstances in that moment in time only.

²⁴In other words, while these methods are useful to draw comparisons across contexts or even countries, they are unlikely to capture the drivers of conflict at the community level and do not address the issue of flexible programming. For this reason, Saferworld (2016), IDPS (2013) and CRS (2010) argue that indicators that are used across contexts should be complemented by context specific indicators. However, at the moment it seems few methods exist for developing genuinely locally led and flexible indicators.

Saferworld explains the need for using country specific indicators that are researched at local level. In their work *Doing Things Differently*²⁵, they highlight the need for M&E processes to be led, fostered and supported by local organisations. Using outcome harvesting, their approach is centred on empowering local front-line staff, communities and partners to ‘monitor’ what matters to them and collect and analyse evidence together on peace, conflict and programme impact. Unlike other evaluation methods ‘it does not have predetermined

outcomes [...] but rather collects evidence of what has been achieved in the programme or project area by asking a few core questions, and works backwards to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change’.²⁶ As the aim of this is to be flexible and straightforward enough to be used in complex, rapidly-changing contexts it is used not only for evaluation, but also for monitoring to fully appreciate local contexts and any unforeseen negative or unexpected outcomes of projects. This allows Saferworld to surface these early, and discuss how to add in any further strategies to mitigate them, or adapt the work – building in an important conflict sensitivity lens.

An ODI report from 2016 by Valters et al.²⁷, similarly explains how to modify traditional logical frameworks (logframes) to make them adaptive and flexible to allow for changes based on M&E findings, thereby enabling more adaptive programming in international development programmes. These approaches allow for a degree of upward accountability to the funder but rebalance accountability towards programme end-users.

The findings here point to the challenges of developing context specific indicators that can benefit from local knowledge and can shift as the context shifts. Such processes that need to be alert to real-time changes and very much grounded at the local level do not

seem to be compatible with the typical M&E processes witnessed in DRC. This again points to the need for systemic/structural changes to the power relationships between donors and local organisations .

To build on the discussion of systemic change, the final part of this research looked at examples where systemic change does appear to have been realised, albeit still with limitations. This review is outlined in the following section.

²⁴ MacGinty 2014

²⁵ MacGinty 2014

²⁶ Saferworld, 2016

²⁷ *Ibid.*

5 Success stories

Having outlined the challenges seen in DRC and elsewhere for why flexible programming does not happen, this section shifts focus to look at specific cases where donors have tried to proactively introduce more adaptive and responsive practices and procedures into M&E reporting. It considers each case in turn and then ends with a discussion using the cases to identify lessons that demonstrate ways in which flexibility and adaptability can be introduced into reporting structures.



Constituents' meeting in Enugu, Nigeria.
Photograph George Osodi/SAVI



CASE STUDY 1: THE STATE ACCOUNTABILITY AND VOICE INITIATIVE (SAVI)²⁸

Background

The State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) is a multi-year DFID programme that works in several Nigerian states and aims to build the capacity of different constituencies (State Houses of Assembly, media, civil society) to demand better performance and create pressure for more accountable governance. Starting in 2008, the programme has gone through three iterations/contract amendments.

How flexibility and adaptive working are incorporated

SAVI was designed in a radically different way from most empowerment and accountability programming. Programmes aiming to strengthen governance at the demand side usually work through accountable grants to a number of civil society organisations. Building on earlier DFID programming designed in the late 1990s, SAVI was designed to work through in-house state-level teams that in turn support a range of partners. Apart from small seed funding, grants have not been part of the programme.

Consequently, partner organisations and stakeholders have no formal accountability relationship to the donor – they can work in politically smart, adaptive ways depending on (changing) circumstances, supported by the in-house state teams. These take on all the usual accountability requirements around planning frameworks, financial forecasting and reporting on pre-planned results. In addition to the in-house state teams, a central team of technical advisers and operations managers provides support, mentoring and a checking function on monitoring and reporting. SAVI has also been flexible in terms of its geographic focus: it began in five states in 2008, then expanded to three more in 2011 and a further three in 2013. Each time, learning from the other engagements has informed a new set of in-house state teams. This set up allows for maximum flexibility at the state level, where the in-house state teams, through a process of ongoing political economy analysis, work with a number of local partners and stakeholders to tackle issues in a locally driven, politically smart manner.

Despite the success of this approach, the programme has documented how it has continued to grapple with the tension between the donor requirements for the articulation of up-front results and spending forecasts, with

²⁸ This case study is largely based on SAVI documentation, in particular DFID (2016) *Moving Targets, Widening Nets (...): The Experience of the State Accountability and Voice Initiative in Nigeria*.

the organic, fluid and adaptive approaches needed to affect change in the complex and highly political arena of the social contract between citizens and the state. In addition to the tension with spending forecasts and up-front results, donor reporting and evidence requirements can also pose challenges where issues are politically sensitive and change can only be affected through off-the-radar, behind the scenes negotiation processes.

Alongside the reiteration of the programme through new DFID design processes and contract amendments, the logframe of the programme is currently in its fourteenth version. Initially it is a basic, largely narrative logframe focused on reporting on activities to review whether the programme was on track to achieve its targets. From 2010 onwards, donor pressure for more detailed quantitative results and milestones resulted in the development of numerical indices to measure change in attitudes, behaviour and skill. Further pressure from the results agenda brought additional impact level indicators on the extent of passage and implementation of certain pieces of key legislation. Here, flexibility was maintained by splitting these processes into fifteen different steps, and then specifying milestones and targets only to the extent of x number of stages progressed (out of the fifteen) in x number of states, without

pre-defining more detailed results. Effectively, this means that although the level of ambition is agreed up front, how or where this is achieved is left open.²⁹

SAVI has also developed a number of monitoring, evaluation and learning tools to support its adaptive programme management. The programme's Theory of Change is used as a practical tool for reflection by programme partners and SAVI staff alike. The way it sets out incremental steps to achieve systemic change helps partners to plan their approaches and activities, whilst it helps SAVI

staff measure change in partner capacity. Organisational Capacity Assessments (OCAs) and Partnership Capacity self-Assessments (PCAs) are tools partner organisations can use to self-assess their capacity as citizens' voices. Setting out various levels of capacity, these tools are used to set strategic plans and subsequently self-monitor progress.

Contribution overview

Because SAVI sets the level of ambition rather than more detailed outcome targets per state, it uses outcome harvesting to



Citizens taking part in local radio programmes in Kano, northern Nigeria.
Photograph George Osodi/SAVI

²⁹ Clare Manuel calls this the 'level of ambition model' and contrasts it with the 'pre-determined menu model' of LASER. Manuel, 2016.

capture detailed results. These are captured in Results Evidence Sheets by SAVI staff. Apart from the results captured, these also set out the backstory, describing in detail how these results were achieved. By adding detail on the cost of SAVI support and the value of partners' efforts and government responses, the tool also helps to analyse value for money. Finally, the numerical indices that were developed to measure impact and outcome level changes are analysed by independent peer review mechanisms and survey teams.

CASE STUDY 2: THE LEGAL ASSISTANCE FOR ECONOMIC REFORM PROGRAMME (LASER)³⁰

Background

The Legal Assistance for Economic Reform (LASER) programme is a £4.3 million DFID programme implemented by The Law & Development Partnership and KPMG. Running over three years (2014-17), it aims to support a number of developing countries to strengthen their investment climate through a variety of means within the commercial law and justice sector.

How flexibility and adaptive working are incorporated

LASER was explicitly set up to work on institutional reform in an iterative, adaptive way. It has developed an 'hourglass approach' to programming that sets out five phases of iterative 'design' that are part and parcel of the programme itself. This iterative design process begins with the consideration of a wide range of potential problems, followed by some analytical work, to find a first entry point for institutional reform. This can be a relatively small issue; what is important is that it has traction with the development partner - it has to be something people in the country care about. Support is then expanded into a broader programme where appropriate.

The programme began with a year-long inception phase and in a number of initial countries. In each, a range of potential issues were identified and analysed from a number of different perspectives. However, decisions on which entry points to start with were not made solely on the basis of analysis. Instead, technical expertise was offered to help counterparts think through issues and identify where there was willingness and scope to find solutions. No funding was offered from the outset and the links to broader goals of institutional reform were left unclear at

the beginning. Setting up the partnership is more important than the exact nature of the problem that is initially being addressed. In some countries, these initial scoping efforts did not result in further programming or funds being spent. In others, the technical advisers funded through LASER help scope out approaches or leverage funding from other donors or expand existing programmes.

The programme works to an overarching logframe across the different countries. Underneath this, each country has a nested logframe which can be adjusted in consultation with the donor. At the country level, a flexible menu of optional outputs is agreed upon and revised regularly. Payment milestones are set on a six-monthly basis only. The LASER programme also uses a number of additional tools to support its flexible approaches. Resident technical advisers keep problem diaries to describe and analyse the issues they initially encounter. This helps to set out the detailed thinking that underpins later decision-making processes around what course to pursue or which adaptations to make. Theories of change are also regularly reviewed. All reflection is done in regular feedback loops with close consultation between programme managers and resident technical advisers on the ground.

³⁰ This case study is largely based on LASER documentation, Manuel, 2016.

Contribution overview

Similar to the SAVI programme, the LASER programme encountered a certain amount of resistance from the fiduciary angle and the results agenda. The first annual review of the programme emphasised the need for more upfront planning and clarity around the results ambitions of the programme, alongside a request for more detailed up-front forecasting of spend. The tensions between planning and flexibility can be read even from the wording: 'Indicators and milestones need to be amended to lessen this subjectivity to the greatest extent possible, while still allowing for an appropriate level of flexibility in a demand led programme of this nature'.³¹

³¹ DFID (2015) LASER Annual Review Summary Sheet. On the DFID Development Tracker website.

CASE STUDY 3: MERCY CORPS UGANDA'S NORTHERN KARAMOJA GROWTH, HEALTH AND GOVERNANCE PROGRAMME³²

Background

The Northern Karamoja Growth, Health and Governance (GHG) programme is a five-year

programme implemented by Mercy Corps in Uganda and funded by USAID. With a budget of \$55 million over five years (2012-18), it works across economic growth, health and governance sectors to improve access to services for the poor. The programme has employed a systemic approach to changing behaviours, relationships and incentives amongst a diverse set of actors (civil society, private sector, government stakeholders) by using a number of different ways of working. Working in a dynamic, conflict-affected environment, the programme has been set up to continuously adapt to ensure its activities and strategies remain relevant.

How flexibility and adaptive working are incorporated

One of the components of the programme involves improving access to quality animal health drugs. Following an analysis of the distribution chain, the programme initially set out to strengthen the Community Animal Health Workers (CAHWs) network that had been receiving training from NGOs and government. Because these CAHWs were found to be lacking access to working capital, the programme began to explore how this could be changed. During the first six months of the programme, the GHG team found two main obstacles to their plans: the CAHWs were suffering from a lack of

capacity and distrust from local communities and arranging access to finance for them was going to be difficult. Instead, programme staff found two local drugs shops that were working well. They facilitated a link between the drugs shops and an international supplier of animal health drugs, which led to a significant drop in prices of certain drugs and helped improve access in this way instead.

Enabling such a change in strategy required a deep understanding of the local context. In the GHG programme, ongoing analysis of the context is facilitated by a culture of investigation and curiosity. Staff are encouraged to continuously ask questions and challenge assumptions and planned solutions. Because programmatic decisions are made as a team, all staff have a vested interest and sense of ownership in the programme. An open and communicative relationship with the donor agency has further helped encourage this adaptive approach.

This culture of curiosity and engagement is encouraged by a strong management team that models these characteristics. Managers actively encourage constructive criticism and praise debate as good conversations. They are open about mistakes they themselves make and how they learn from these. This culture of ongoing discussion and questioning of approaches is supported by a number of monitoring tools

³² This case study is largely based on published documentation on the GHG programme, in particular Engineers Without Borders/Mercy Corps (2014) *Navigating Complexity: Adaptive Management at the Northern Karamoja Growth, Health, and Governance Programme*.

such as weekly reports and after-action reviews. Without being overly prescriptive in how these should be used, these tools structure and embed ongoing learning and reflection on the programme's activities. Strategic reviews and an ongoing questioning of results chains and Theories of Change help to influence thinking at the strategic level.

Contribution overview

Flexibility is also built into the programme in the way the aim of the programme is stated. Instead of focusing on narrow, quantitative outputs, the Theory of Change and results chain is carefully detailed to enable work towards systemic changes. Learning and adaptation were made part and parcel of the programme from the outset. It was conceived as a non-permanent facilitator of system-wide changes instead of implementing activities to achieve preset targets for a certain number of beneficiaries. In this way, the GHG team has been able to make changes to a number of indicators in its original logframe. They stopped working with CAHWs directly and dropped related indicators like 'average working capital received by CAHWs' and 'quantity of supplies delivered by drug suppliers to CAHWs', changing these to '% of CAHWs receiving embedded services from local drug shops'.

What these cases tell us

There are a number of lessons that can be



drawn from these cases that demonstrate practical ways in which flexible and adaptive working can be introduced to reporting. Adaptive approaches hinge on an ability to understand complex and dynamic contexts and the (potential) impacts of interventions on these changing contexts. Firstly, programmes can be set up with an inherently flexible structure. For example, the SAVI programme has done away with the usual approach of implementation through accountable grants, instead setting up teams of in-house

experts that work with local organisations. Accountability requirements are taken away from these local partners, allowing them to operate with maximum flexibility.

Flexibility can also be built into the design of a programme. For example, a learning component can be part and parcel of the programme design, with learning and adaptation an actual result that the programme is held accountable for. Or programmes can engage in multiple potential entry points

simultaneously, dropping what doesn't work on the way. Another way to encourage adaptability is to formulate expected results in a broad, aggregate manner. There are different ways of doing this. On the one hand, the level of ambition can be set out in advance without specifying exactly in which policy area or which location this is being achieved, for example in the SAVI programme. On the other hand, more precise results can be agreed upon, but with a flexible menu of optional outputs as to how to go about achieving these, as for example in the LASER programme.³³ Other flexibility measures can include flexibility in milestone setting (for example, in the LASER programme milestones are never set more than six months in advance). The LASER programme also works with nested logframes: one overarching programme logframe and separate frameworks in each country that can be adjusted even further.

Finally, a programme can also increase its flexibility by finding ways to constantly review what it set out to do against an ongoing analysis of the (changing) context. Here, monitoring and review are key. A number of tools have been designed and are being experimented with to track contextual changes and enhance feedback loops

within programming cycles. They can help programmes to adjust indicators or even change output statements based on a review of what is working and what is not.

Theories of Change or results chains are important tools to facilitate the understanding of complexity. They are often designed at the start of a programme, but adaptive approaches are increasingly using them throughout the programme. By continuously testing Theories of Change, context, assumptions and approaches can be reviewed and adapted, as for example in the SAVI programme.

Another important set of tools to enable adaptive approaches is the methods of contextual analysis. A number of different ones have been developed, including conflict analysis and political economy analyses. An important point about contextual analysis is to consider how it can be updated continuously throughout the programme so that changes in volatile contexts can be tracked and taken into account. This can be done through formal or more informal processes. For example, in Mercy Corps' GHG programme, staff are encouraged in 'situational awareness' and 'socio-political intelligence gathering'³⁴, whereas the LASER programme works with

more formal political economy analyses.

Other tools focus on ongoing review and reflection processes. Weekly reports and after action reviews are used by the Mercy Corps team in the GHG programme in northern Uganda. The LASER programme uses problem diaries to structure ongoing reflection. Other tools, like real-time evaluative inquiry and peer reviews, help integrate review and evaluation processes into the programme cycle instead of utilising them at a few pre-set points in time only. Finally, as adaptive programmes move towards broader, qualitative outcome statements, new techniques are being developed to measure results, including outcome harvesting. The SAVI programme has developed a specific tool to enable this: the Results Evidence Sheet. This list of tools is by no means exhaustive, and it is important to note that tools can only support flexible and adaptive approaches, not create them. For more information on tools investigated in this report see:

www.peacedirect.org/putting-the-local-first.

³³ *Clare Manual* calls these the 'level of ambition model' and 'pre-determined menu model'. *Clare Manual (2016) LASER Second synthesis paper: Delivering institutional reform at scale: Problem-driven approaches supported by adaptive programming*. ³⁴ Allana, 2014.



6 Summary of findings and key recommendations

Over the years there has been a lot of criticism of M&E practices and in particular that:

- **logframes are too rigid**
- **local voices are not heard**
- **tools are too complex**
- **indicators are not context specific**
- **there is too much focus on quantifiable indicators, etc.**

Whilst progress has been made to address some of these concerns, the findings in this report suggest that little has changed on the ground for the majority of local organisations, beyond a few isolated examples. Local NGOs often still find M&E perplexing, indicators can hinder adaptation to the local context, resources for M&E are limited and local voices do not really influence the M&E process.

Whilst the research did look at alternative indicators and tools, it quickly became clear that more was needed to really effect change; that there were systemic problems that inhibited learning, limited flexibility and adaptation and excluded local voices. This research hopes to contribute to the M&E debate by highlighting the problems associated with current M&E practice.

It is widely acknowledged that M&E can be used for much more than measuring change.

It can be used as an opportunity to encourage collaboration across programmes, to engage local actors to continuously feed into how macro level strategies should adapt to the changing contexts and to build relationships between local and international actors, fostering greater trust and giving confidence in locally-led programming.

For this to happen, it is vital that the international community finds ways to relinquish control for programme design and delivery to local actors. Based on principles of shared learning, the international community should see this as an opportunity to be much more integrated with local actors, substantially increasing their understanding of the complexity of a local problem and its potential solutions. In turn this will contribute to a shift towards evidence-based adaptive programming with a high degree of local leadership – a must if we are to increase the success of programmes in complex and fragile environments.

Key Recommendations

- Greater effort should be made for policy makers and local actors to pool their time and resources to engage in shared learning with local actors that cut across programmes.

It is understood that donors and other stakeholders have limited time, but periodic learning sessions that are well organised and well facilitated can minimise this burden. Learning sessions can be a relatively efficient way to bring together multiple stakeholders and donors to learn from each other and deepen their understanding of the context and the complexity of the issues that they seek to address.

- Donors and recipients should explore together the idea of a 'psychological contract' which defines mutual obligations, expectations and ways of working that are often absent in formal grant contracts. The psychological contract would set out the principles that learning, adaptation and flexibility are permitted when accompanied by the right evidence and rationale. This contract could include donor best practice, for example, not setting pre-defined indicators at the outset but encouraging local actors to set the measurements of the project.
- Donors should collaboratively invest in M&E facilitators that can support local actors to reflect collectively on changes on the ground and encourage learning beyond immediate projects. This collective learning at a local level will allow a better understanding of programmes and encourage greater collaboration.
- Collaboration and shared learning should

include periodic face-to-face learning and reflection sessions with local representatives and groups of decision makers – for example government officials and donors. M&E facilitators should facilitate learning workshops which bring together local and higher level viewpoints, strengthening the learning process, raising awareness of the context complexity and evidence for why programmes succeed or fail. Such interactions will have the added benefit of building trust between those on the ground and the decision makers at the top.

- Efforts should be made to engage local civil society beyond NGO staff to the private sector, community members and local government. In doing so M&E can be used as an opportunity to build relationships across stakeholders and encourage shared learning beyond an individual project. This will also help to foster a culture of curiosity across a broad range of civil society – an intellectual empowerment that will have long term benefits.
- Within the international community a similar embracing of curiosity is needed. As with all actors, time and bureaucratic pressures can hinder best practice but through small systemic changes international actors, including the donors, can build much more meaningful relationships from the grassroots up.



Enable flexibility and adaptation

There is a real or perceived sense that donors and INGO partners are inflexible, that projects are not allowed to change beyond small no-cost tweaks to activities. But if higher level goals are to be achieved – especially in peacebuilding and stabilisation efforts – programmes need to be better able to respond as the context changes and opportunities arise.

Recommendations:

- Traditional approaches such as logframes should have greater flexibility built into them. For example, rather than focusing on assumptions, logframes could: include triggers for change which can then open up the space for changes to indicators; or use 'nested' logframes that can provide more context

specific M&E frameworks within higher level objectives; or offer menus of results that allow for flexibility within wider parameters.

- Establish continuous feedback loops with communities, implementers and donors (or designated M&E facilitators) to enable more rapid response to the context and flag up failings early.
- Include in M&E frameworks an accountability for learning which sees learning as an indicator of success in its own right.

Seek multiple perspectives and interpretations to explore the complexity of programmes

As local capacity for M&E is inconsistent, M&E responsibility tends to be led by international actors or local NGOs well-trained in standard M&E practices. Whilst there is a place for this, it should not be at the exclusion of local actors who can contribute to and enhance the learning and understanding of programming success and failure.

Recommendations:

- M&E processes need to better engage informal learning and knowledge at a local level and not limit learning and reflection to donor reporting cycles. This can be done by giving greater control of M&E resources to local actors to decide when to learn and reflect.

- External facilitators should be appointed to help foster a culture of curiosity that extends beyond immediate projects through collaborated reflection sessions. These might be across multiple projects, NGOs and donors and should include community members, the private sector and local government.
- More should be done to establish community curiosity for success and failure of programmes, establishing community monitors who can work across programmes and contribute to understanding the reasons for success and failure of interventions.

Build on the existing systems to inform change

The research in DRC found that a reliance on quantifiable indicators which are collected and analysed periodically can inhibit the understanding of complex social challenges and confine learning to when donor reports are due. However, local actors typically collect real-time data – albeit informally – in parallel to formal M&E processes but this often goes undocumented. Furthermore, the inflexibility of donors (real or perceived) means that often there is little incentive to learn as programmes cannot be adapted to incorporate that learning.

Recommendations:

- Capacity building of local actors in M&E should be increased but not because they

need to deliver external M&E commitments, but so that they can develop their own M&E frameworks and processes.

- M&E should be controlled by local actors so that they can prioritise when, how and with whom they learn and reflect.
- Local actors should be encouraged to design their M&E in consultation with local communities so that indicators are more context specific and M&E is accountable to the communities – not the donors – from the outset.

Conclusion

As shown in this research, developing contextually appropriate indicators and tools that are more accessible to local actors is not enough. What is really needed is a systemic change to the way M&E is conceived and conducted: involving local actors in developing M&E procedures, encouraging shared learning across stakeholders, building closer relationships between donors and local partners, and generating an environment that can make sense of contextual changes and approve adaptations of programmes. In doing so, local, national and international actors can develop more optimal working relationships which benefits the local people they seek to support. We sincerely hope that these recommendations will help encourage this practice.

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