



Planning, monitoring and evaluation in complex social situations

🌐 Complexity in planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME)

Organisations that invest in development programmes are increasingly asked to demonstrate the concrete results of their investments and many organisations are now rethinking their approaches to Planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME). The introduction of results-based management, resulting in the refining of PME approaches, has been one response to meeting these demands.

At the same time, there is a growing realisation that traditional PME systems, such as the logical framework approach, largely treat development as a problem that can be solved through rigorous analysis (problem and solution trees) and thorough planning (SMART indicators). While this approach may suit some development domains, such as infrastructure projects, it faces limitations when it comes to dealing with complex adaptive systems that involve people. Consequently, more and more people are advocating complementary PME approaches, such as outcome mapping (OM), and the most significant change (MSC) approach.



Source:

<http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>

Process organisation

The 'Planning, monitoring and evaluation in complex social contexts' process was carried out within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) by:

- HIVA Research Institute for Labour and Society
- PSO Capacity Building in Developing Countries
- The Flemish Office for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB)
- Vredeseilanden/VECO



PSO capaciteitsopbouw in ontwikkelingslanden



vvoob education for development

Within this DPRN process, the HIVA Research Institute for Labour and Society of the Catholic University Leuven, PSO Capacity Building in Developing Countries, the Flemish Office for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) and Vredeseilanden/VECO jointly explored the relevance of various PME approaches. The aim was to generate practical lessons for future PME policy and practice.

🌐 Towards methodological diversity

A review of PME policies within the international cooperation sector in Belgium, the Netherlands, the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation

Complementary PME approaches

Outcome mapping

Outcome mapping is a PME approach that explicitly recognises that development is brought about by changes in the behaviour of people and organisations. It recognises the interconnectedness and complexity of social systems which are a reality in the majority of development projects or programmes. As such, outcome mapping distinguishes itself from result-based management approaches such as the logical framework, which follow a more reductionist and positivist worldview. Outcome mapping provides a practical PME framework that is not based on predictability and measurement. Instead, it involves a wide range of stakeholders in processes of reflection and feedback to analyse what does and does not work and why, in order to assist and improve future decision making. For more information on outcome mapping see the online learning community: www.outcome-mapping.ca.

Most significant change

The most significant change approach involves the collection of 'significant change stories' from the field. Panels of designated stakeholders and staff select the most significant of these stories in a systematic manner and identify changes. Next, various people sit down together, read the stories out loud and engage in in-depth discussions of the value of these reported changes. After that, teams of people focus their attention on programme impact, to learn through discussion and to identify areas for improvement. The most significant change approach is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It is participatory because it involves many project stakeholders in both deciding the kinds of change to be recorded and data analysis. Monitoring can occur throughout the programme cycle and can therefore generate information which can help people manage the programme. Outcome mapping contributes to evaluation because it provides data on impact and outcomes that can be used to help assess the performance of the programme as a whole.

and Development (OECD) shows the need to move towards more methodological diversity.

The logical framework is still the mainstream PME method that governments and donors in Belgium, the Netherlands and Europe demand for their funded programmes. Interestingly, the development industry is the only sector in which this particular PME method has acquired such an exclusive position. The World Bank and many other donors actively promoted the approach as a useful basis for PME. Combined with the wide dissemination through OECD/DAC publications and in the absence of real alternatives, the 'logframe' became the standard throughout the whole sector.

At the same time, there is growing interest among policymakers in PME methods that are more suited to the often complex contexts of development interventions. This interest is illustrated by a trend towards experimentation with new methods in the Netherlands and Belgium. Moreover, a number of recent large-scale evaluations in Belgium have advocated the diversification of the PME toolbox.

This trend is supported by important international studies. Several recent OECD publications recognise the limitations of the logical framework and recommend the selection of PME approaches on the basis of their usefulness and effectiveness in a specific context. A recent study on the quality of DFID's evaluation reports by the International Advisory Committee on Development Impact (IACDI) advises experimenting in order to develop new models and approaches for evaluation which are more suitable for complex development strategies.

These developments indicate a more open attitude towards methodological diversity. The challenge ahead for policymakers, practitioners and researchers will be to identify which methods are most useful in particular contexts.

The question that needs to be answered is whether alternative PME systems are indeed complementary and suitable for complex contexts and whether they indeed contribute to more effective programming and the delivery of sustainable results.

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

There is a danger of the debate on PME approaches turning into an unhelpful discussion between proponents and opponents of the logical framework approach. It is more helpful to explore the advantages and disadvantages of different PME methods based on what works for whom in which context. The challenge is to identify how elements from different approaches can complement each other and lead to more effective PME.

Recent experimentation with new PME approaches that suit complex processes of social change has yielded several insights:

1. No PME system by itself can guarantee that learning will take place. The key to learning-centred PME is a 'learning culture' within the organisation. This requires people who genuinely seek to customise their PME system in such a way that it helps them to learn about their own adaptive capacity and the results they achieve.
2. A methodological diversity of PME approaches can help organisations to deal with complex dimensions of social change. Combinations of outcome mapping, the most significant change approach and the logical framework will help to monitor changes in behaviour and attitudes, as well as to develop donor reports according to their logframe indicators. It is important to be aware of the particular advantages and weaknesses of the different methods.

3. Within the current policy environment, organisations have more space to apply different PME approaches at operational level than is often assumed.
4. Developing an actor-centred theory of change is an essential step in the development of a learning-centred PME approach, because it places the people involved in the programme at the heart of PME.



In outcome mapping there are three types of progress markers, namely 'expect-to-see', 'like-to-see' and 'love-to-see' (Source: www.pso.nl).

🕒 Recommendations

The process activities generated several recommendations on the use of complementary PME approaches for policymakers and NGOs.

Recommendations for policymakers

- Make organisations accountable for their learning.
- Prioritise an open dialogue about the challenges related to measuring impact.
- Avoid imposing one rigid format for PME.
- Avoid an overload of funding procedures and guidelines.
- Ask organisations to justify their PME approach on the basis of an actor-centred theory of change.
- Develop internal capacity around complexity-oriented PME methods.

- Develop learning relationships with organisations that are supported.
- Support experimentation with alternative PME approaches.

Recommendations for NGOs

- Stimulate a critical dialogue with policy-makers about the relevance and feasibility of long-term detailed planning.
- Utilise the available space to implement alternative PME approaches.
- Northern NGOs should lead by example in their PME demands towards their Southern partners.
- Demonstrate successful development results that were obtained through a variety of alternative PME approaches.

Follow-up

The DPRN process has successfully linked up with a number of similar initiatives. The dialogue about alternative complexity-oriented PME approaches will continue through three main follow-up activities. Firstly, the 'outcome mapping effectiveness working group' which was formed on the online outcome mapping learning community will coordinate a study on the effectiveness of outcome mapping, aimed to draw recommendations for PME policy and practice (2011–2013). Secondly, the PSO Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) on alternative PME approaches for complex social situations will continue until mid 2012. Through its engagement with DPRN, the TLP will also build in a focus area on PME policy (2010–2012). Thirdly, VVOB, Vredeseilanden, Coprogram and HIVA have started consultations to continue a process that is similar to the DPRN process in Belgium (2011).

Process output

The 'Planning, monitoring and evaluation in complex social contexts' process included the publication of several documents on PME practices and policies. The results of these were discussed in a synthesising seminar in The Hague on 10 November 2010.

This resulted in the following publications:

- Concept note: 'Rethinking our traditional PME systems – Still struggling with PME'.
- Paper: 'A survey of Government Policy for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of development programmes' (Policy review).
- Paper: 'Dealing with complex reality in planning, monitoring and evaluation – Choosing the most suitable approach for a specific context' (Literature review).
- Paper: 'Learning from the implementation of outcome mapping, most significant change and logical framework' (Summary of review of four learning histories).
- Learning brief: 'The end of logframe's hegemony?' (Lessons from an online discussion on the Outcome Mapping Learning Community).
- Seminar report: 'Complexity-oriented Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) – From alternative to mainstream?'.
- DPRN process report.

All publications are available on the website: <http://pme.global-connections.nl>

This infosheet was made by DPRN. With a view to stimulating informed debate and discussion of issues related to the formulation and implementation of development policies, DPRN created opportunities to promote an open exchange and dialogue between scientists, policymakers, development practitioners and the business sector in the Netherlands and Flanders from 2003–2011.