Thematic Learning Programme

'PLANNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF COMPLEX PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE'

PSO *capacity building in developing countries*

Thematic Learning Programme

'Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation of complex processes of social change'

Experiences gained from setting up a collaborative action research programme on the PM&E of complex change processes

Learning brief

No. 1 October 2011

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'It is the season of accountability…but over the past few years, almost every organisation or project I have visited is stressed with issues of monitoring and evaluation, anxiously shopping around for methodologies to measure and report on impact to satisfy donors. Adverts for M&E specialists abound as donors seek to further outsource this function to experts, robbing organisations of rich learning processes to which M&E should contribute.' Reeler, 2007

The above quote reflects the issues that the organisations struggled with before deciding to join the PSO Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E). How to balance accountability and learning? How to 'measure' and gain insights into processes of (behavioural) change? How to combine figures and stories? This learning brief describes the setting up of a collaborative action research process which centred on these questions with nine Dutch development organisations and one Belgian NGO. We think our experiences in this ongoing programme may provide insights into the dynamics of setting up a joint action research initiative in which all those involved are learning from their own practice, as well as from each other. In which we constantly had to revisit and revise our questions and actions. And in which we realised that flexibility in the programme was essential, but at the same time also challenging for remaining coherent and relevant with so many actors, interests, questions and intentions involved.

With this learning brief we also want to illustrate that finding time and space to really reflect and learn is vital for change, but is also increasingly difficult in current times in which people, organisations, sectors, communities and even whole countries in the aid environment are being assessed for delivering measurable, observable and clear-cut results. Furthermore, and in any event, learning is key for doing things better and doing better things, and thus obtaining relevant results. Action research (AR) can support this. This is one of the key features of this process that we feel responds to a serious deficit in the development sector: *learning from practice for better results*.

Some initial insights from the TLP PM&E

Throughout the programme, all those involved have been experiencing a fascinating 'balancing act' that has already provided some valuable insights. For example, we experienced that a collaborative effort of this nature requires strong coordination – both in terms of activities and deadlines – as well as of continuous (re)conceptualisation. And while this coordination work is inherently difficult, it is when people and organisations do manage to come together in their thinking and learning that the real value and impact of such an endeavour can be felt.

Another type of learning emerged from the process of focusing the collective research questions of the programme. The proposal was initially to focus on the PM&E *of* capacity development. However, after a literature review and an exploration of the participating organisations' research questions , we realised that we were actually looking at PM&E as an *essential part of* the capacity of an organisation.

And finally, throughout the first year, the programme shifted from an emphasis on *alternative PM&E methods* to *diversified PM&E approaches*. We came to see that it is not about *alternative* versus *mainstream* methods, but about combining what you need on the basis of your ideas of and approach to PM&E. Below, we will further elaborate on the TLP PM&E process and these lessons learnt.

How the TLP PM&E started

The first ideas for a TLP on PM&E emerged in 2010 when several Dutch and Belgian development organisations joined forces to address the challenges they face in their PM&E practice. After various explorations initiated by PSO, a group of ten organisations[1] decided to start this action research in order to find answers to their organisational questions. A time span of two years was planned for the action research to provide enough time for an in-depth exploration of the added value of the various PM&E approaches piloted by the participating organisations. The collaborative character of the research intended to contribute towards creating momentum for change (and feed interesting insights into policy discussions), as well as to foster a process of peer learning and exchange between the organisations.

A Multi-Actor Process

This action research involves many actors with their own roles and interests, thus making it a complex process. From the start, PSO acknowledged that an action research programme with multiple organisations at multiple locations requires a shared understanding of who is involved at which level, for what purpose and in which way. This demanded strong and intensive facilitation, whereby the ten participating organisations were supported in identifying their own research and learning questions together with their Southern partners. Most organisations worked with local consultants in order to support the development of their pilot. The TLP has a convener group consisting of professionals from PSO and HIVA (the Research Institute for Work and Society of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) an academic partner in this programme). In order to constantly check coherence and relevance, the TLP also has an international 'reference group' with experts on PM&E from INTRAC (Nigel Simister), PRIA (*Kaustuv Bandyopadhya)* and CDRA *(Sue Soal).*

In order to manage people and expectations, the TLP conveners considered it important to make roles and responsibilities explicit from the start of the process. Below you will find the visualisation of the various stakeholders and their roles in this TLP.
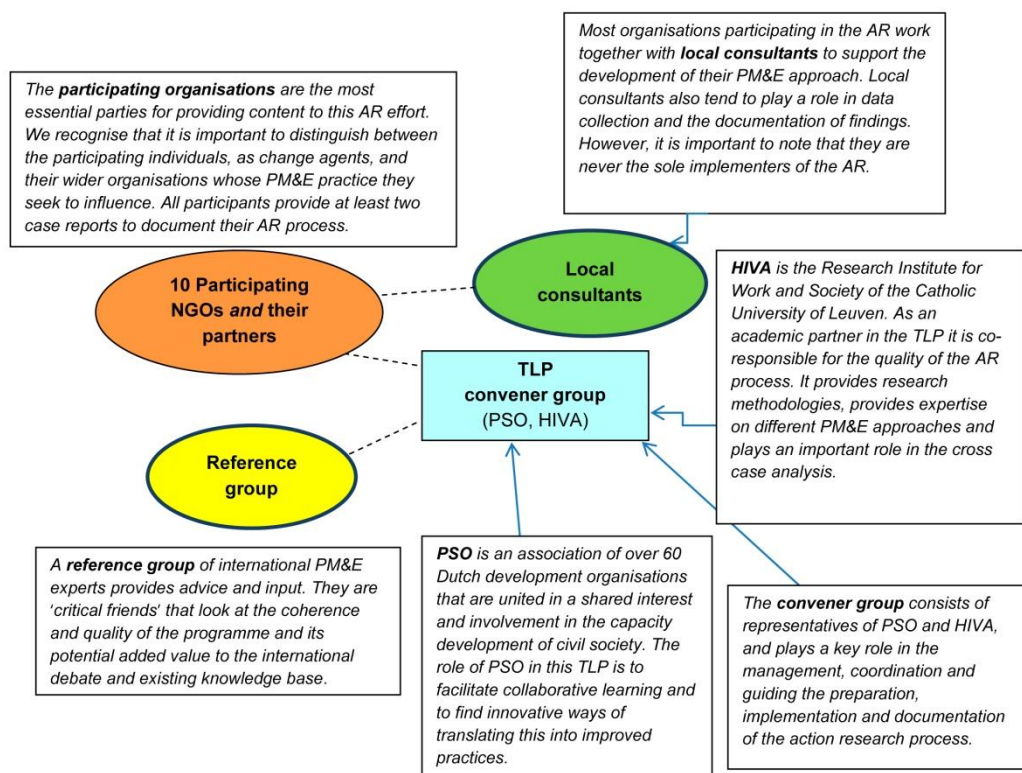

*The **participating organisations** are the most essential parties for providing content to this AR effort. We recognise that it is important to distinguish between the participating individuals, as change agents, and their wider organisations whose PM&E practice they seek to influence. All participants provide at least two case reports to document their AR process.*

*Most organisations participating in the AR work together with **local consultants** to support the development of their PM&E approach. Local consultants also tend to play a role in data collection and the documentation of findings. However, it is important to note that they are never the sole implementers of the AR.*

10 Participating NGOs *and* their partners

Local consultants

TLP convener group (PSO, HIVA)

Reference group

HIVA is the Research Institute for Work and Society of the Catholic University of Leuven. As an academic partner in the TLP it is co-responsible for the quality of the AR process. It provides research methodologies, provides expertise on different PM&E approaches and plays an important role in the cross case analysis.

*A **reference group** of international PM&E experts provides advice and input. They are 'critical friends' that look at the coherence and quality of the programme and its potential added value to the international debate and existing knowledge base.*

PSO is an association of over 60 Dutch development organisations that are united in a shared interest and involvement in the capacity development of civil society. The role of PSO in this TLP is to facilitate collaborative learning and to find innovative ways of translating this into improved practices.

*The **convener group** consists of representatives of PSO and HIVA, and plays a key role in the management, coordination and guiding the preparation, implementation and documentation of the action research process.*

Figure 1: Overview of actors involved and their roles in the TLP PM&E action-research

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[1] Dark & Light, Woord en Daad, Warchild, Oxfam Novib, STRO, Cordaid, ETC, ICCO, MCNV and Vredeseilanden

Setting up the action-research

One of the main challenges of this action research has been to connect research and learning at various levels. There are questions at the organisational level and at the collective level. The conveners, together with the reference group, identified overarching collective questions. In doing so, the challenge was not to force a rigid and too elaborate analytical framework on top of the organisational action research. However, it became clear that reflection and analysis had to take place both at the organisational and at the collective level. The organisations' research questions provide a guide for analysis at organisational level. The analytical framework developed on the basis of a literature study and a review of the organisational questions, provides a guide for data analysis at the collective TLP level.

The TLP is set up to collect data, analyse and make sense of it, at three different levels:
- **individual level reflection**: How do I experience my participation in this PM&E pilot through my organisation/project? What do I observe? What do I think about this? And what does this mean for the pilot?

- **group reflection at partner level, project level and NGO level**: How does the partner organisation experience the participation to the PM&E pilot? What do they observe? What do they think about this? And what does this mean for the pilot? (both at project and NGO level).

- **collective (inter-organisational) learning:** If we take a step back from our own daily realities, what do we see happening across the cases? How do we feel about his? What does this mean for our practices?

The collective level learning in particular is highly appreciated by TLP participants, as it intensifies learning through the experiences of others. This happens during the so-called 'collective learning moments' that take place three times a year. As one participant expressed it: '*those moments are very useful and help all of us to get [sic] further in our thinking by reflecting on what we do and why*' (Feedback, 2011).

The following figure describes the steps undertaken in the TLP process, the type of data collection and reflection activities we carry out individually, at group level (partners, project, NGO) and as a collective of organisations. As one of the participant noted: "*By actively participating in the TLP of PSO, we would ... [be able to] reflect on our own implementation of the action research and gain insight into initiatives undertaken by other organisations*", emphasizing again the importance given to the collective part of the TLP.
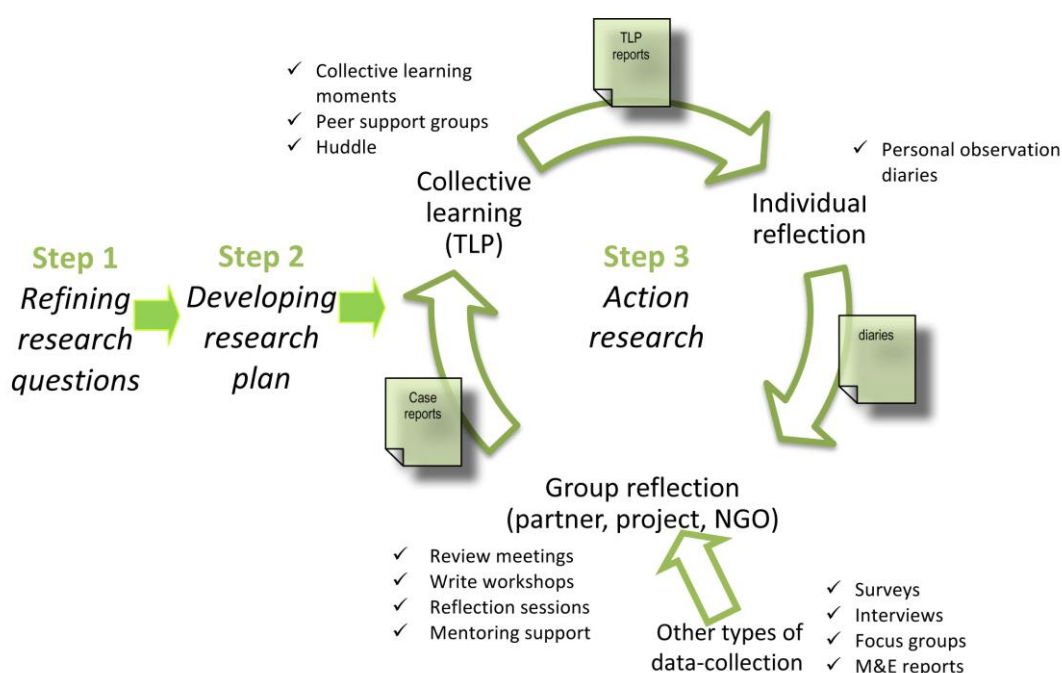

Figure 3: Overview of action-research steps in TLP programme

The development of the research questions

The issue of ownership

The collective and organisational research questions have evolved over time. Working sessions with each of the participating organisations were important to get an idea of organisations' PM&E practices and to explore their research agendas. Parallel to this process, a guidance document was developed as a conceptual background for the collective research effort and the collective research questions[2]. The collective research questions were distilled from identified challenges and issues in wider debates surrounding PM&E and complexity, and from the organisational research questions. During the first phase of the action research, the TLP deliberately allowed collective research questions and the organisational questions to change. It was considered important for participating organizations to 'own' their research questions. The expert reference group advised not to go into how the questions were formulated as '*it is important not lose vibrancy of questions*' and to '*be happy with the questions [as] anyway, organisations will come up with other questions once they are in the process of action research*'. Another observation from the reference group linked the issue of ownership to the specific agenda of conducting action research. '*I feel a disquiet when trying to reformulate organisations' research questions… Accommodate the organisations [and their questions]; then they become the data from which to research*' (reference group meeting, February 2011).

In discussions with the participating organisations, the convenor group also paid attention to the rationale behind the research questions. As stated by one of the convenor group members '*questions need to be grounded. Why ask these questions? What is actually the problem you are addressing*?'[3]

A shifting focus

During the first year of the action research programme we have seen important developments in the focus of the TLP (and its central research question). The initiative was launched under the working title 'Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating (PM&E) of Capacity Development: an action research on balancing accountability and learning.' The central research question at the time was: *how can complexity-oriented PM&E systems and associated methods contribute to understanding change that will lead to more effective capacity development interventions?* During the first year, this focus has evolved as a result of internal discussions, contributions from participating organisations and input from the reference group. This clearly reflects that co-creation is an important feature of this collaborative action research effort. Below, we will briefly elaborate on the key developments in defining the focus of the action research.

*From **PM&E of** capacity development to **PM&E as a part of** capacity development*

The original version of the research framework lacked clarity on the link between PM&E and capacity development in the action research. Some issues raised in this respect were:

> '*All [sic] way through the documents I feel a disconnect with capacity development. How does the content of the documents relate to the PM&E of capacity development?*' (Nigel Simister. INTRAC)

> '*It is not clear how you see the connection between PM&E and broader organisational effectiveness*' (Sue Soal, CDRA)

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[2] See J. van Ongevalle & H. Huyse (2010) "Dealing with complex reality in planning, monitoring and evaluation - Choosing the most suitable approach for a specific context"

[3] The problems addressed refer to the balance between accountability and learning, the need to clearly define roles and responsibilities in PM&E, the internal adaptive capacity of organisations and other such topics. See also Annex 1.

The convener group realised that the link between PM&E and capacity development in this action research lies in that we explore how PM&E approaches can *contribute* to the capacity of Northern NGOs and their partners in the South when dealing with complex change processes. Capacity development in complex environments requires continuous action learning, leading to flexible capacity development strategies. The PM&E *of* capacity development is touched on, but not considered the main focus of the action research programme.

*From a focus on **alternative PM&E methods** to a focus on **diversity in PM&E approaches***

The first version of the TLP working paper provided the impression that the focus of the action research was merely on piloting methods. After intensive discussions with participating organisations it was decided that the more important questions to be used as points of departure, were the challenges that organisations and their partners face with their existing PM&E practices. It is not about implementing the various steps of a method in its 'pure form', but about selecting and customising (aspects of) different PM&E methods that are suitable in a specific context, and combine these in such a way that it helps our PM&E practice to better deal with complex processes of change. So we started with the use of the term alternative PM&E *approaches* (including an attitude towards PM&E and the willingness and flexibility to combine various approaches when this is helpful), instead of *PM&E methods*. In other words, the action-research is not about using qualitative versus quantitative methods, but rather about combining the methods in the most helpful way, always in relation to the purpose you need them for and embedded in the practice they should provide insights into.

Then another discussion emerged about the use of the word *alternative*. What is alternative and what is mainstream? Is this not different for the various organisations? Finally it was decided to change the research question from: 'How do alternative PM&E approaches contribute to the capacity of Southern partner organisations/networks, and Northern NGOs to deal with complex processes of social change?' to '*How does a diversified PM&E approach contribute to the capacity of organisations involved and their partners to deal with complex processes of social change?'*. Note that it was also decided to avoid the use of North and South as that does not reflect the global context we operate in.

The balancing act of setting up a collective action research process

This TLP aims to bring about change in PM&E practices. It works towards a more enabling environment for using diversified PM&E approaches that are suitable to complex development processes. The action research programme hopes to empower individuals within their organisation and the wider context they work in by supporting them in gathering evidence about the added value of using a diversified and complexity-oriented PM&E approach. In the programme *the practitioners are the researchers*. They are the ones that feel an urgency to change the way PM&E is taking place in the development effort they are involved in. This strongly contributes to the energy in the TLP and to the programme's potential to actually bring about change. Below we describe a number of potential tensions we face within the programme and how we are trying to mitigate these.

Each of the organisations has its individual information needs; at the same time we have to ensure coherence in the collective research framework.

An important step was the development of a collective research framework (see Annex 1) that has strong links to issues raised in the international debate surrounding PM&E, as well as to the initial research questions of the participating organisations. This framework was shared with the participants and adapted in line with their input. However, it remains a challenge to keep ensuring that the action research feeds the collective research framework. We attempt to address this using the tailor-made coaching of each of the participating organisations by the convenor group, and by periodically bringing the participating organisations together during collective learning moments.

The participants in the TLP are programme coordinators and staff of partner organisations who are already confronted with heavy workloads and deadlines. There is little time for data collection, reflection and documentation. Also, conducting action research is not their core business.

We have learned that it helps to create a shared understanding of what we expect from each other in terms of activities and deliverables throughout the action-research process. Together with the participants, we have formulated a set of 'non-negotiables'. One of the non- negotiables is the development of an operational research plan which adheres to a given format. This forced organisations to think about the data they need, how and when they are going to collect this, and where to plan all the action and reflection moments for each organisation. The convener group has committed itself to providing tailor-made coaching, including timely feedback on case reports and operational research plans.

> ***Non-negotiables*** *are a number of activities or deliverables that we all commit to. It is important to be clear and explicit about the non-negotiables to know what you can expect from each other and what you have to prepare for when deciding to take part in the programme.*

The Way Forward for the TLP PM&E

We are now half-way in the action-research process and the first year has been an interesting experience of co-creation, adaptation and gaining focus in the programme. It has also been inspiring to be part of a process which organisations put a lot of energy into and take the space and opportunity of the TLP to learn and improve their practices. And as the TLP is actively seeking to connect with other initiatives and efforts that relate to PM&E practice, we co-hosted the INTRAC conference that took place in June 2011[4]. In this manner, *'the effects of participating in the TLP PM&E goes beyond our single pilot [AR]' (feedback from a* TLP participant, 2011). PSO aims to take all those interested on a journey to explore PM&E approaches that support authentic learning for dealing with the complexity inherent in social change processes. We will do so through frequent publications and by creating spaces for exchange and discussion.

If you are interested in learning more about the PSO Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) on PM&E of complex processes of social change, please refer to the PSO website (http://www.pso.nl/content/planning-monitoring-evaluatie or http://www.pso.nl/search/node/Planning%2C%20Monitoring%20%2526%20Evaluation), and/or contact Cristien Temmink (Temmink@pso.nl) or Eugenia Boutylkova (Boutylkova@pso.nl).

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[4] For further information please refer to: http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/conferences.html.

Annex 1 : Current framework with the collective research questions

Collective research framework

The central learning question of the TLP is: '***How does a diversified PME approach contribute to the capacity of involved organisations and their partners to deal with complex processes of social change?***'

Three sub-questions unpack the central question and are used as an analytic framework to help us to analyse the relevance of a PME approach to a specific context or situation.

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

Results can mean different things to different actors and different actors also have different roles, responsibilities and expectations with regard to those results. To be clear about roles, responsibilities, understanding and expectations among these actors and stakeholders it is important to clarify the intervention logic or the planning with a specific focus on the actors that play a role in it. Different actors may have an interest in different types of results at different levels. It will help to clarify which type of results a particular PME approach focuses on.

2) How does the PME approach contribute to learning about progress towards the development objectives (of the programme, partner organisations, partner networks, Northern NGOs) and satisfy downward and upward accountability needs?

We will need to analyse the level of complexity we face and choose and customise an appropriate PME approach or a combination of approaches that make sense for the particular context. Therefore, when trying out a certain PME approach, we want to reflect on whether and how it supports the stakeholders to learn about progress towards the development objectives at various levels. In the TLP we have based ourselves on a broad definition of accountability, namely on being accountable to multiple stakeholders, in both upward and downward directions. We want to examine to what extent the selected PME approach (or combination of approaches) contributes to satisfying downward and upward accountability needs.

3) *How does the PME approach contribute to strengthening the internal adaptive capacity[1] of the programme, partner organisations, partner networks and/or Northern NGOs?*

This question looks at the internal learning of the change agent itself, be it the programme, the partner organisation, the network or the Northern NGO. As part of the action research we aim to find out how their implementation of complexity-sensitive PME approaches contributes to the strengthening of the internal adaptive capacity of the actors involved.

Adapted from Huyse and van Ongevalle (2010)