

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING IN NGO ADVOCACY

Findings from Comparative Policy Advocacy MEL Review Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Jim Coe and Juliette Majot | February 2013



For organizations committed to social change, advocacy often figures as a crucial strategic element. How to assess effectiveness in advocacy is, therefore, important. The usefulness of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in advocacy are subject to much current debate. Advocacy staff, MEL professionals, senior managers, the funding community, and stakeholders of all kinds are searching for ways to improve practices – and thus their odds of success – in complex and contested advocacy environments.

This study considers what a selection of leading advocacy organizations are doing in practice. We set out to identify existing practice and emergent trends in advocacy-related MEL practice, to explore current challenges and innovations. The study presents perceptions of how MEL contributes to advocacy effectiveness, and reviews the resources and structures dedicated to MEL.

This inquiry was initiated, funded and managed by Oxfam America. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) served an advisory role to the core project team, which included Gabrielle Watson of Oxfam America, and consultants Juliette Majot and Jim Coe. The following organizations participated in the inquiry:

ActionAid International | Amnesty International | Bread for the World | CARE, USA
Greenpeace International | ONE | Oxfam America | Oxfam Great Britain | Sierra Club



MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING IN NGO ADVOCACY
Findings from Comparative Policy Advocacy MEL Review Project
Executive Summary Report

Jim Coe and Juliette Majot
February 2013

INTRODUCTION

For organizations committed to social change, advocacy¹ often figures as a crucial strategic element. How to define and assess effectiveness in advocacy is, therefore, equally important. Questions around the efficacy and usefulness of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning [MEL] practices in advocacy are subject to much current debate. Advocacy staff, MEL professionals, senior managers, the funding community, and stakeholders of all kinds are searching for ways to improve ways of working, and thus their odds of success, in complex and contested advocacy environments.

This study considers a sample of what a selection of leading advocacy organizations are doing in practice. We set out to identify existing practice and emergent trends in advocacy-related MEL practice, to explore current challenges and innovations, to assess perceptions of how - and how well - MEL contributes to overall advocacy effectiveness, and to understand the level of resources dedicated to MEL.

This inquiry was initiated, and funded and managed, by Oxfam America and involved the following participant organizations:

- ActionAid International, (Secretariat, South Africa)
- Amnesty International (Secretariat, UK)
- Bread for the World (US)
- CARE, USA (US)
- Greenpeace International (Secretariat, Netherlands)
- ONE (US)
- Oxfam America (US)
- Oxfam Great Britain (UK, National Campaigns)
- Sierra Club (US)

Gabrielle Watson of Oxfam America, and Simon Hearn of the Overseas Development Institute [ODI] served as the core project management team overseeing the work of two independent consultants, Jim Coe (UK), and Juliette Majot (US).

Information was gathered through:

- A survey completed by 46 respondents (MEL professionals, advocacy staff, and senior managers) from across the participating organizations.
- Follow-up in-depth interviews with staff designated as 'MEL leads' within each participating organization.
- Detailed review of participating organizations' documented MEL tools and approaches.

¹ Different organizations use different terms in different ways; for the sake of brevity in this report we use the term 'advocacy' to encompass both high-level influencing and public facing approaches

- Three webinars, in which participants (MEL leads from each organization) contributed to design of the inquiry and discussed findings and conclusions as they developed.

KEY FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Supporting evidence for findings and conclusions and a more detailed discussion is provided in the associated full report.

1) There is widespread acceptance of formal planning and MEL processes as routes to advocacy effectiveness.

Among participating organizations, advocacy staff and senior managers, as well as MEL staff, show support for systematizing and formalizing both advocacy planning and MEL processes - irrespective of funder requirements in that direction. MEL processes are underpinning more formal planning initiatives. Concerns about imposing linear ways of thinking and planning onto complex change processes seem to be very much in the background in practice, even as they appear in the foreground of much advocacy evaluation theory and literature.

2) There is a trend towards centralizing MEL systems, whilst decentralizing advocacy structures and processes.

The tendency towards centralizing MEL systems represents a response to managers' and funders' desire for aggregate information on global impact. However, this may place additional burdens on local actors without bringing obvious direct benefit to them.

An additional centralizing rationale is that applying learning can become more systemic, rather than merely happening in localized and ad hoc ways. However, when advocacy strategies themselves are decentralized, standardizing MEL can be problematic. One way to manage this is to mirror within the MEL set-up what is becoming a more common approach in advocacy - with strategy parameters set and managed centrally, but with operational delivery delegated to local levels.

3) There is often tension between the desire for 'metrics' and the need for more meaningful analysis of progress and achievements.

MEL staff perceive growing demand from funders and senior managers for advocacy results to be represented in quantified form. While MEL staff recognize that there are problems associated with quantifying complex questions of contribution, attribution, and outcomes, they nonetheless harbor the desire to be able to construct metrics that would indicate results in these areas.

Implications of this trend toward quantification can be that:

- a) Reporting focuses on what is inherently quantifiable (generally, activities and outputs), with the result that information about advocacy can be presented in somewhat underwhelming ways, falling short of making the strategic case for investment.
- b) Alongside this go attempts to 'quantify' qualitative information (for example by giving rating scores to levels of support amongst targets): such approaches rely (necessarily) on subjective assessment and are not always considered (and may not always be) robust.

Seeking to contextualize data by pairing quantitative and qualitative information is one approach to mitigating these potential disadvantages.

In addition, ensuring quality of data and consistency of reporting is recognized as crucial to MEL effectiveness, and as an ongoing challenge.

4) Organizations typically have a strong focus on developing approaches to assess and present supporting evidence of outcomes, and their organization's contribution to them.

In different ways, organizations tend to categorize outcomes across three areas:

- 1) Internal outcomes – for example, growth in the supporter base, or other signs of enhanced organizational capacity.
- 2) Changes in policy and practice – and signs of progress towards them (shown for example in 'interim measures' such as the levels of support shown by key targets).
- 3) Changes in the advocacy context – through development of a more active civil society movement for change, for example.

Organizations tend to be better at collecting information at the various levels of change – activities, outputs, outcomes - than in joining the levels up. Paying explicit attention to testing *the links* in any theory of change (i.e the assumptions of how one thing may lead to another) is key here.

Organizations make serious attempts to show their contribution to particular outcomes. However, there is a tendency to construct MEL processes around an organizational viewpoint, with the influence of others - and wider change dynamics - considered as an afterthought, rather than being integral to the system. This limits the usefulness of outcome contribution analysis in informing tactical adaptation and strategic development. It can also contribute to overstating organizational contribution to any given outcome.

5) MEL systems function across inter-linking levels

MEL systems can be understood as typically operating at 3 levels:

- a) At an underlying level, organizational contexts and cultural sensibilities set the parameters within which advocacy-related MEL processes are developed.
- b) The overall system tends to build from a starting point of an explicitly-stated notion of how change will happen (referred to as 'theories of change', 'critical pathways' etc.). From this, organizations create an overall chronological thread through the MEL system, linking short- medium- and long-term elements together.
- c) Derived from this overall structure, a series of specific learning moments happen in response to need and opportunity as well as at fixed agreed times, to support tactical, strategic, program-wide and organizational adaptation.

6) Senior managers play a key role in driving and embedding MEL.

Levels of senior management support correlate positively with perceptions that MEL processes bring benefit, and that organizations are good at learning from experience, for example. Rhetorical support from senior managers alone is insufficient to embed MEL processes within advocacy: actual ongoing engagement and visible follow-up are key.

Organizations experience some difficulty in institutionalizing MEL beyond individual campaigns, and funders may inadvertently reinforce this dynamic (when support for MEL is

tied solely to a specific campaign, for example). Senior management support is important to drive institutionalization forward.

7) 'MEL' systems can provide a bridge between formal and informal approaches.

MEL involves a combination of informal and formal processes and MEL systems are often purposefully aimed at bridging the formal-informal gap. Successful systems build organically on what is already in place, and operate in rhythm with existing organizational processes. Without this, 'invisible' informal processes can be undervalued and important tacit knowledge and innovation may be lost as a result.

8) 'MEL' expertise requires technical and facilitative skills, the balance between which depends on the context.

Structural approaches to organizing the MEL function range from:

- a) Embedding MEL professionals in, or closely linked to, advocacy teams; to
- b) Combining MEL and advocacy functions (with no specialized MEL staff); to
- c) Creating separate MEL analyst teams that sit outside advocacy teams.

Models built around quantitative data collection tend to require specialist analysts. In other cases, MEL staff's abilities to facilitate and coordinate are likely to be more important than specific technical skills. Embedding MEL and taking a facilitative learning approach has the added advantage of being most effective in building wider MEL capacity.

9) The "right" people are generally believed to be involved in MEL processes.

The 'right' people are generally considered to be those who are in a position to do things differently as a result of their involvement. However, as MEL systems evolve and develop, challenges remain for determining who generates and has access to data, who analyzes it, when, and for what purposes.

10) MEL focus tends to be on serving the purpose of 'upward' accountability, with space for strategic learning somewhat constrained.

There are outlier examples of MEL systems that focus on accountability to partners and constituents, but the strong tendency is for MEL primarily to serve the needs of funders and others to whom practitioners are 'upwardly' accountable.

The belief that learning and accountability goals can be mutually accommodated is widespread. But this is not fully borne out by the evidence: key dynamics around learning and adaptation include that:

- a) Organizations typically struggle to adapt based on past experience.
- b) Tactical learning is more prevalent than strategic learning.

MEL processes appear to be less oriented towards uncovering strategic limitations than tactical ones. This could be because identifying operational learning carries less risk, whereas exposing strategic flaws or weaknesses could come at a cost in terms of reputation or future funding.

At the organizational level, MEL - and the associated systems and processes adopted - may function as *an expression* of organizational culture, as much as a *driver of it*. One consequence of this is that MEL tends to be more directed towards considering how

existing strategies can be delivered more effectively rather than calling those strategies into question.

There are examples of MEL bringing strategic benefit, particularly by more clearly defining objectives and goals within an overall theory of change.

11) Ease of use is an area of particular concern.

MEL processes are generally not seen as easy to use. They can be made easier through developing streamlined systems for information gathering, producing clear supporting guidance, and ensuring proactive and tailored dissemination of information. Linking processes can also create synergies and streamline tasks.

Advocacy staff generally welcome the opportunity to engage in formal reflection and evaluative processes as long as they deliver both time-efficiency and value. Good preparation for such moments is vital to ensure this.

12) MEL staff consistently rate the perceived benefits of MEL processes more highly than advocacy staff and managers do.

Perceptions of the *actual* value of MEL are mildly positive, but somewhat muted. Advocacy staff and managers regard MEL support as important. But there is only limited support overall (with some variation, depending on some of the factors discussed) for the idea that MEL in practice fulfills key potential benefits, and only a partial overall sense that MEL processes help make advocacy more effective.

13) There is currently weak evidence that MEL actually drives advocacy effectiveness.

The purpose of MEL is to increase advocacy effectiveness. But evidence of actual MEL contribution to this is mainly anecdotal, more assumed than demonstrated. In this absence of formal evidence, MEL staff tend to find that engagement is the only path to enthusiasm.

14) Information is lacking on the cost side.

The consensus is that investing in MEL processes represents, on balance, a reasonably efficient use of resources. But systematic evidence about financial and staff resources dedicated to MEL was not easy to collect. There are a number of reasons why: where MEL begins and ends is not easily demarcated, for example. But, whatever the reasons, attempts to provide more robust cost/benefit analysis of MEL's contribution to effectiveness could usefully be explored.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING GOOD PRACTICE IN MEL

Our findings from this inquiry point to a set of key principles that can help guide good practice within organizational advocacy-related MEL approaches. Many of these principles reflect existing understanding in the field of advocacy evaluation that this research has helped to substantiate. Some are more emergent.

In building an approach to MEL, organizations should:

1. Ensure that centralized systems and parameters invite localized adaptation.
2. Subject moves towards quantifying information to a 'robustness test' to ensure that any such analysis and dissemination supports meaningful use.
3. Give particular focus to testing the links in the chain of change, rather than merely assessing the various elements in isolation.
4. Develop systems that fully contextualize contribution, including understanding the intervention of other actors and an overall sense of complex dynamics at play.
5. Design MEL systems to fit around existing advocacy programs, establishing a firm link to planning, including strategic planning and budgeting processes.
6. Build on the motivations and interests of different users, and their different uses of data and analysis, to devise learning moments and opportunities at key short-medium- and longer-term stages of the advocacy program.
7. Secure active involvement of senior managers in review and analysis processes.
8. Prioritize the facilitative role of MEL professionals in building evaluative capacity organization-wide, including through design (and constant iteration) of ways of working that make it easy for people to engage meaningfully in MEL processes.
9. Take active steps to rebalance accountabilities where necessary, countering a clear tendency to prioritize upwards accountability, to funders in particular.
10. Pay particular attention to building capacity for strategic - as well as tactical - learning and adaptation.
11. Develop an overarching approach to MEL that is intentionally designed to challenge and test strategy and the assumptions underlying it, as well as to improve implementation of existing strategy.
12. Gather evidence of MEL costs and benefits.

These principles could usefully be developed and corroborated further, with practical recommendations, in a good practice guide or set of minimum standards for advocacy related MEL.

There are a number of key areas where further exploration of principles and practice could be developed and encouraged. These would include developing organizations' evaluative capacities, balancing learning and accountability imperatives, exploring when and how best to use metrics, and assessing costs and benefits of MEL more robustly. As part of this, it would be important to find ways for the NGO community to engage directly on these topics with (a) the funding community, and (b) partners and those who are the intended beneficiaries of advocacy efforts.