A Learning Approach to Monitoring and Evaluation*

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Abstract This article draws on literature from both monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and organisational learning to explore synergies between these two fields in support of organisational performance. Two insights from the organisational learning literature are that organisations learn through 'double-loop' learning: reflecting on experience and using this to question critically underlying assumptions; and that power relations within an organisation will influence what and whose learning is valued and shared. This article identifies four incentives that can help link M&E with organisational learning: the incentive to learn why; the incentive to learn from below; the incentive to learn collaboratively; and the incentive to take risks. Two key elements are required to support these incentives: (1) establishing and promoting an 'evaluative culture' within an organisation; and (2) having accountability relationships where value is placed on learning 'why', as well as on learning from mistakes, which requires trust.

1 Introduction

Both monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and organisational learning are vast and contested disciplines in their own right, and capturing synergies in theory and practice that help to bridge the challenges is difficult. This article draws on the literature to explore ways in which these two fields may prove mutually supportive to improving organisational performance, and outlines some of the implications for adopting a 'learning approach' to M&E. In the next section, insights from theory and practice in organisational learning that might improve our understanding of how organisations learn are presented. The article continues with an exploration of organisational incentives and disincentives to learning through M&E, and concludes by discussing some implications that may be helpful for organisational leaders and programme/project managers who wish to evolve towards a 'learning approach' to M&E.

The Agriculture Learning and Impacts Network (ALINe) has identified a number of weaknesses of M&E in agriculture. These include a failure to specify what M&E is for and to facilitate its use; a lack of stakeholder participation and responsiveness; too much of a focus on inputs and outputs and not enough on outcomes; too little focus on the trajectories for impact; not enough focus on flexibility and learning; and not enough use of findings. Research undertaken by ALINe suggests that a major driver of these shortcomings is one of a failure to address the multiple purposes of M&E explicitly. These purposes include improved delivery, providing upward and downward accountability, refining strategies, empowering stakeholders, and providing global public goods in the form of knowledge and understanding. A failure to address all these purposes, can lead to information gaps and misaligned incentives (Haddad *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*).

This article looks at how M&E within agriculture could improve its focus on flexibility and learning, and in particular, how incentives can be built to support this focus. Some of these incentives relate to the need to address the multiple purposes of M&E, in particular downward accountability, and others relate to the organisational structures and cultures that support learning. Therefore, the article draws on insights from organisational learning that may help in creating these incentives.

2 Insights from organisational learning

Many writers make a clear distinction between *monitoring* and *evaluation*, but it is useful to see them not as two distinct functions, but rather as

two sides of the same coin. A useful analogy is to think about how a car is driven. The driver constantly monitors the speed, but is also evaluating whether the speed is appropriate for the surroundings and the speed limit.[1] M&E can be understood as an integrated process or system in which experience, information and knowledge are collected through various methods, and reflected upon to assess progress and make better decisions towards particular goals and objectives (Guijt 2008). In this sense, M&E mirrors the learning processes that individuals generally undergo; by monitoring and evaluating one's experience, reflecting on this and subsequently analysing those reflections, an individual then takes action that becomes new experience for further reflection. This is, fundamentally, the way in which humans learn as individuals, but it has implications also for *organisational learning*. Organisational learning theory recognises that organisations can learn independently of the individuals within them. One can facilitate processes of organisational learning through rules (formal and informal), procedures, culture and structures within an organisation (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999).

Currently, the literature reveals two main perspectives on organisational learning. The *technical* perspective assumes that organisational learning happens through the effective processing and interpretation of information that an organisation finds useful (Huber 1991; Hayek 1949). However, this perspective has been criticised for making the assumption that people and organisations behave according to rational calculations, and ignoring the political agendas that can influence organisational behaviour (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999). For example, staff may distort information in order to validate previous decisions or support their agendas (Coopey 1995). A *social* perspective recognises that learning emerges from social relationships and interactions, is a political process and is dependent on the culture of an organisation (Cook and Brown 1999; Dewey 1938; Nicolini and Meznar 1995). This leads to a focus not only on formal structures and learning processes, but also on informal exchanges and relationships between staff, and the value placed on learning and knowledge within the culture of the organisation (Orr 1990). This article takes a social perspective to organisational learning.

Some theorists have posed that organisations learn through 'double-loop' learning (Argyris and Schon 1978). This involves not only reflecting on experience and knowledge and acting on it, but also using such reflection to question critically the underlying assumptions that previous strategies were based on (Argyris 1992). The concept of 'double-loop' learning within organisational learning highlights the importance of collective reflection: the need to reflect on our deeply ingrained assumptions about how the world works and challenge these assumptions (Chambers 2002). Collective reflection supports learning through the collective and mutual challenge of assumptions (Moon 1999). The critical self-reflection it entails can be challenging to undertake, as it risks exposing one's mistakes, or appearing to be disloyal to colleagues and friends when critically reflecting on experience (Argyris and Schon 1978; Eyben 2006). It can also prove threatening to senior management if junior staff are allowed to reflect critically on managers' actions and decisions (Guijt 2008). This can be a key challenge when facilitating processes of organisational learning.

Since the social learning perspective understands learning to occur through social relations, this inevitably implies potential for conflict and power struggles, and the need for organisational learning processes to recognise power relations within the organisation (Elkjaer 2003). From this perspective, not everyone's learning or knowledge will be equally valued, and some learning or knowledge might challenge those in power. Furthermore, if we recognise that knowledge is power, individuals and organisations may not wish to reveal knowledge from which they perceive they derive their power; particularly as information generation and exchange is becoming increasingly important in development projects. This raises the possibility that important knowledge is not shared or imparted for fear of the loss of power this may entail.

All this has implications for the structures (both formal and informal) which facilitate organisational learning within an organisation. These structures need to be both formal and informal, encourage trust amongst staff, allow staff to learn collectively, and support staff to engage in free and honest conversations (Roper and Pettit 2003; Senge 1990). Learning processes also need legitimacy, therefore organisational

learning needs to be supported by strong and engaged leadership (Hailey and James 2003; Plaskoff 2003)

3 Incentives and disincentives to link M&E systems with wider organisational learning

There is a body of literature which looks at how M&E systems could be better linked with wider organisational learning processes. Some commonly identified disincentives to this (Preskill and Torres 2001) are as follows:

- Anti-learning organisational cultures can be reactive, not proactive;
- Leadership talks about learning, but doesn't learn itself;
- Communication channels and systems do not support organisational learning or make a link with M&E;
- Information is not willingly or transparently shared because of a belief that information is power to be held by a few;
- Discourse on challenging assumptions, and asking questions is not valued and dismissed as controversial behaviour;
- Staff do not trust one another;
- A fear of making mistakes and risk-taking is discouraged;
- Independent work is more highly valued in incentive terms than collaborative work for a greater collective good;
- M&E activities are seen as threatening to the *status quo* and authority;
- M&E activities are 'one-off' events, and are not continuous or grouped to capture learning;
- Diverse stakeholders are seen as too overwhelming to involve in M&E activities;
- M&E activities are regarded as costly in terms of money, time, and/or personnel resources;
- A fear of change within the organisation may exist; and
- People do not see the value or are suspicious of any data collection effort.

However, the literature also offers some helpful suggestions for incentives to encourage a link between M&E and organisational learning, which are geared towards improving better practice and in time greater impact.

3.1 *Supporting the incentive to learn why*

To effectively link M&E to organisational learning, M&E systems need to help organisations learn *how and why* an intervention

has been successful or not, to facilitate double-loop learning. This requires understanding the complex set of factors that led to a particular outcome, and the assumptions on which interventions are based. Methodological innovations, for example 'Theory of Change' approaches (Ortiz and Taylor 2008), offer ways of building and articulating such an understanding. This is often challenging, however, due to development interventions occurring within complex and dynamic environments, with multiple interventions occurring simultaneously, with interactions among many agents and processes, lacking strong feedback loops (Douthwaite *et al.* 2003; Horton and Mackay 2003; Rogers 2008). There is a need to create incentives for mixed and adaptive methods within M&E, which capture both qualitative and quantitative information, acknowledge multiple causal pathways, and are flexible enough to capture surprises and deal with change. It also highlights the need for participatory forms of M&E, which can capture multiple perspectives and support the collective reflection required for organisational learning.

3.2 *Creating incentives to learn from below*

Development organisations can be accountable in different directions. Accountability may be upwards (to donors), horizontal (to partners), and downwards (to beneficiaries). However, many development organisations have distorted upwards accountability where they are ultimately accountable to donors but not the communities they work with (Rebien 1996; Roche 1999). This can result in M&E systems not addressing downwards accountability as well as they address upwards accountability. An existing incentive appears to value the knowledge and learning that donors demand rather than the knowledge and learning that other stakeholders value or require, which would balance more 'bottom-up' learning being captured.

This distorted accountability is, in part, a result of the difference between for-profit and non-profit organisations. For-profit organisations see a direct link between the customer and the success of the business, and thus are incentivised to engage in organisational learning that values the knowledge and experiences of the customer. Development organisations on the other hand are set up to serve communities but often see their core accountability to their donor, which

neither receives the organisation's services nor generally is capable of monitoring whether that organisation is adequately serving the community (Power *et al.* 2002; Rebien 1996; Roche 1999). This is not to say that all upwards accountability relationships will automatically lead to such incentives. However, it does point to the importance of the quality and nature of the upwards accountability relationship in providing the incentives to learn from downstream efforts (Benjamin 2008).

3.3 *Supporting the incentive to learn collaboratively*
The internal structures, rules, procedures and culture of organisations create strong incentives or disincentives to learn through M&E systems (Levitt and March 1988). For example, the systems and structures of an organisation mediate the ability of staff to interact, collaborate, and communicate with each other. If these are integrated, they can create opportunities for mutual learning, but traditional organisational structures often create silos, which may lead to disincentives for cross collaboration and learning (Preskill and Torres 1999). This can be seen in the 'ghettoisation' of M&E systems, where a particular member of staff or department is responsible for M&E and others are responsible for implementation, with limited interaction and mutual learning. The incentive is for some staff to 'do' and different staff to 'learn'. Integrated management systems can go some way to address this by creating incentives for cross-team working. However, this situation can be reinforced by the culture of an organisation. For example, an organisational culture that rewards staff for disbursing funds can create incentives to act quickly and manage multiple projects, leaving little time for learning unless learning is equally rewarded and recognised (Pasteur and Scott-Villers 2006; Guijt 2008).

3.4 *Creating incentives to take risks*
In organisations with a hierarchical culture, senior management can regard learning as a potential threat to their authority (Argyris and Schon 1978; Guijt 2008; Schein 1996). Some writers have argued that the single most important incentive for organisational learning is a 'learning leader' (Hailey and James 2003), a leader with a positive attitude towards learning and who practices learning themselves. 'Learning leaders' form a critical part of a 'learning culture' (Schein 1996) which creates incentives for staff to take risks.

The value an organisational culture puts on learning is closely related to the attitude towards mistakes. Organisations evaluate their mistakes in different ways (Korten 1984). If an organisation regards mistakes as failures, the incentive for staff is to hide their mistakes away and learning at the organisational level will not occur. However, if an organisation regards mistakes as sources of learning, the incentive is for staff to reflect on, discuss and learn from mistakes, and be less fearful of taking risks.

4 Implications for a 'learning approach' to M&E
Having reviewed some of the insights from organisational learning and explored the question of incentives and disincentives to linking M&E systems with wider organisational learning, this final section will discuss the implications for developing a 'learning approach' to M&E.

Within M&E theory and practice, the concept of 'evaluative inquiry' has recently arisen in response to linking M&E systems to organisational learning (Russ-Eft and Preskill 2001; Preskill and Torres 2001). Evaluative inquiry takes us beyond seeing monitoring and evaluation as discrete acts separate from other aspects of project or programme management, instead arguing that all aspects of the project or programme cycle, from inception onwards, need to adopt an approach that institutionalises learning and reflection. For this to happen, an organisation needs to adopt an 'evaluative culture', which has four distinguishing features (Preskill and Torres 1999):

a M&E processes are integrated into the organisation's work processes and performed primarily by organisation members;

b M&E processes are continuous and ongoing;

c M&E processes depend on the democratic processes of asking questions and exploring individuals' values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge through dialogue and reflection.

d M&E processes contribute to a culture of inquiry and occur within systems and structures that value continuous improvement and learning.

Preskill and Torres (1999) observed that the organisational systems and structures required

When preparing their M&E system for an urban agriculture project, this NGO intentionally sought to integrate organisational learning and its M&E system. They introduced a learning cycle within the M&E system, based on planning, acting, observing and reflecting which helped staff to use M&E as a source of learning. The action part of this cycle proved critical in fostering changes in attitudes and assumptions as it allowed staff to see the concrete application of new learning. Another element was mutual feedback between facilitators and staff. This reciprocity meant that all participants appreciated feedback but also felt more comfortable receiving it, as they were also able to respond. It developed an atmosphere of trust. Finally, the M&E system ensured that learning was immersed in day-to-day activities of staff, thus reducing time constraints and institutionalising learning.

Source Tuckermann (2007).

to facilitate this 'evaluative culture' are those that:

1 Support collaboration, communication, and cooperation among organisation members as well as across units or departments;

2 Help organisation members understand how their role relates to other roles in the organisation and to the organisation's mission;

3 Recognise and reward individuals and their capacity to learn as the organisation's greatest resource;

4 Value the whole person and support personal as well as professional development;

5 Use reward systems which recognise team as well as individual learning and performance, and encourages risk-taking;

6 Demonstrate that the leadership engages in and supports learning.

Whilst the concept of 'evaluative inquiry' can help to create internal incentives for linking M&E systems with organisational learning, it does not address how to create incentives in the external environment. This requires a shift to organisational relationships that provide incentives for mutual sharing of information and learning (Drew 2002). These are accountability relationships where value is placed on understanding how and why an intervention has succeeded or failed, where mistakes are regarded as sources of learning, and where the political

nature of learning is acknowledged (Eoyang and Berkas 1998; Watts 2005; Guijt 2008; Rogers 2008; Korten 1984). These kinds of accountability relationships require trust.

5 Conclusion

This article has explored how incentives can be created that improve the focus of M&E on flexibility and learning, and in particular, how to link M&E with organisational learning. Based on a review of the literature, we have argued that two key elements are required: (1) establishing and promoting an 'evaluative culture' within an organisation; and (2) having accountability relationships where value is placed on learning 'why', as well as on learning from mistakes. The way to encourage such a culture and such relationships seems to us to be dependent on trust. Trust is required within an organisation for staff to feel supported to take the time to reflect and learn, to have the confidence to take risks as well as learn from mistakes, and to be honest about what has worked and what has not. Likewise, trust is required in accountability relationships to prevent the perception that being open about challenges and 'failures' may prejudice further support, in either direction. Trust takes time to develop, and once lost, it can be hard to regain. It seems worthwhile, therefore, for all development organisations, donors and partners alike, to invest in long-term, respectful relationships based on mutual trust. Through such an investment, they are more likely to see M&E findings contributing constructively and usefully to organisation-wide learning processes, and ultimately to improvements in overall performance of the organisation.

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