Dealing with complexity through Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation (PME)

Mid-term results of a collective action research process

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Overview

This paper shares the first results of an ongoing collaborative action research in which ten development organisations explored different Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) approaches with the aim of dealing more effectively with complex processes of social change. There are four reasons why we think this paper may be of interest:

1) The paper illustrates a practical example of action research whereby the organisations themselves are becoming the researchers.

2) Unpacking the main characteristics of complexity, the paper uses an analytic framework of four questions to assess the effectiveness of a PME approach in dealing with complex social change.

3) An overview is given of how various organisations implemented different PME approaches (e.g. outcome mapping, most significant change, client satisfaction instruments) in order to deal with complex change.

4) The paper outlines the meaning and the importance of a balanced PME approach, including its agenda, its underlying principles and values, its methods and tools and the way it is implemented in a particular context.

Acknowledgments

1. Introduction

A number of recent trends in international development have contributed to bringing Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) higher on the agenda of many development organisations.

Firstly, there is a growing international call for results-based management, whereby development actors are asked to be accountable for and demonstrate the achievement of 'measurable' results (Paris Declaration 2005). Many organisations try to strengthen their PME systems in order to provide an answer to this call.

Secondly, there is a fierce debate about the extent to which organisations should focus on quantifiable, easily measurable results versus less quantifiable results that are more difficult to measure. This debate is well illustrated by former USAID president Andrew Natsios (2010), who notes that: *''… those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable.''* There is a danger that results-based management could be associated with PME for quantifiable results. The strong focus by the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation on quantitative data and semi-experimental set-ups within their subsidy cycle of 2011-15 is an example of such trend. In response, organisations dealing with more complex transformational change (e.g. social change, capacity development and policy work) are looking for complimentary PME approaches that can help them to plan, monitor and learn from results that are less easy to measure.

> **A PME approach** in this paper refers to the PME methods, tools and concepts and the way they are implemented within a specific context of a programme or organisation. It is also about the underlying values, principles and agenda that come with such methods, tools and concepts. **A PME system** refers to the way that PME approaches and PME related activities are organised, interlinked and implemented within a specific context of a programme or organisation.

Thirdly, there is a growing recognition that dominant PME approaches such as the logical framework approach are not always helpful for organisations that are supporting complex processes of change (Hummelbrunner 2010; Ramalingam 2008). In such complex contexts the relation between cause (e.g. training for public health staff) and effect (e.g. improved public health) is rather unpredictable and unexpected results often happen (e.g. the trained public health staff disappearing for greener pastures or not implementing what they have learnt). More and more organisations are now facing the difficult task of following the principles of results-based management in complex contexts and are looking for PME approaches that can help them to do this.

This paper reports on the first results of an ongoing collaborative action research process (2010-12) in which 10 development organisations (nine Dutch and one Belgian), together with their Southern partners, explore if and how more 'complexity oriented' PME approaches help them to address some of these challenges.

> From 14-16 June 2011, over 170 participants from 41 countries gathered in the Netherlands for an international conference on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) convened by INTRAC, PSO and PRIA. The conference aimed to examine key elements and challenges confronting the monitoring and evaluation of international development programmes. PSO and HIVA facilitated a day-long session on the intermediate findings of the PSO action research that is reported in this paper. Some of the main lessons arising from the discussion during this conference session are included in this paper.

We first outline the methodology of the collaborative action research that was used by the participating organisations to make their PME approach more complexity oriented. We also explain the rationale for the organisations to participate in the action research. Drawing from recent literature, we elaborate on the main challenges for PME when dealing with complex processes of social change. We also highlight how some of the PME approaches that were piloted during the action research helped organisations to address these challenges. This is done by providing illustrative extracts from the various action research cases. Finally, we explain how a balanced PME approach is more than the PME tools and also involves an agenda, underlying principles and a specific way of implementation. We also describe the main lessons that we learnt and the next steps of the action research.

2. Strengthening PME practice through collaborative action research

Why action research?

In 2010, ten NGOs (nine Dutch and one Belgian) in partnership with PSO and HIVA joined to work together in a collaborative action research process. The aim was to make their PME systems more suitable for dealing with complex processes of social change and to address some of the challenges mentioned in the introduction. A collaborative action research approach was chosen in order to stimulate learning, by allowing a more systematic collection of evidence on which to base rigorous group reflection. It encouraged the organisations to be in the 'driving seat' of the research and to improve their PME practice on the basis of the lessons learnt from their experimentation with different PME approaches (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). The collaborative nature of the action research also helped to create a momentum for change, as well as to foster a process of peer learning and exchange. This collaboration was characterised by regular collective learning moments where participating organisations shared the lessons learnt from their own research processes. It also involved the development of a set of collective research questions that provided guidance for group reflection and cross-case analysis.

Figure 1 describes the steps undertaken in the action research process. It consists of data collection and reflection at individual level, at organisational level and at a collective level (i.e. during exchanges between the various NGOs that are part of the action research). It also involved clarifying the research questions both at organisational level and collective level.
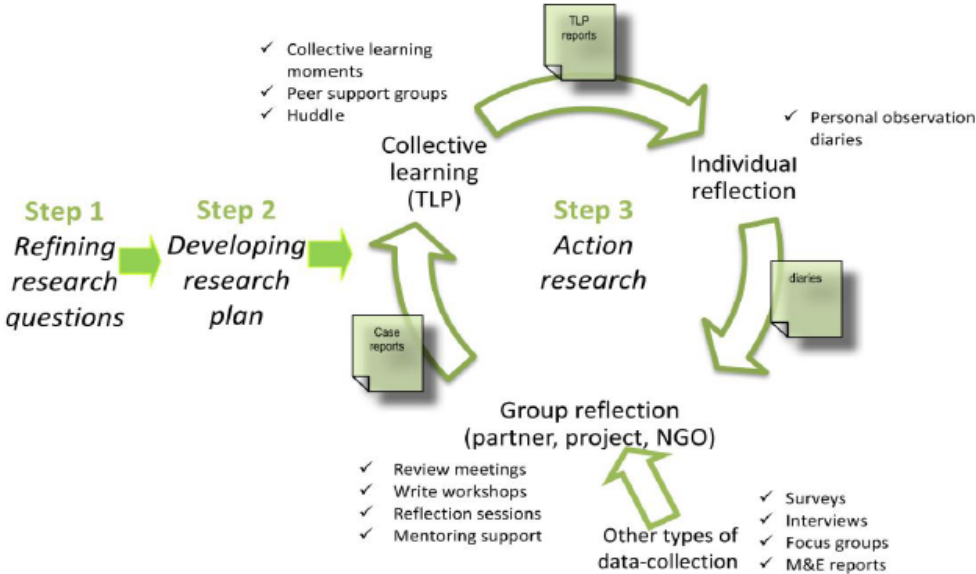

Figure 1: Overview of the collaborative action research process

Focus of the action research at the organisational level

The participating organisations saw this action research as an opportunity to address some pertinent challenges in their PME practice. Each organisation translated these challenges in specific organisational research questions which they explored during the action research. Table 1 gives an overview of the organisations that are participating in the action research and the PME challenges they are seeking to address. The various PME approaches that were piloted by the organisations to address their challenges are also highlighted.

Cases	PME challenges addressed in the action research	PME approach piloted
Cordaid	• How to learn about the results of working with informal networks of women movements that organise themselves in communities of change.	Most Significant Change, Outcome Mapping and Self Rated Stories
Light for the World	• Involving local partners in the development and the implementation of the PME system. • How to strengthen the capacity of local partners? • Stimulating learning about programme results at partner level and at Light for the World level.	Outcome mapping
ETC COMPAS	• Monitoring unexpected results. • Learning about project impact at beneficiary level. • Ensuring ownership of the results by the beneficiaries.	Most Significant Change
ICCO	• Strengthening downward accountability of local partners towards their clients. • Making PME more actor-oriented.	Client satisfaction instruments (CSI) Outcome Mapping
MCNV	• Making visible strengthened relationships in a multi actor setting. • Learning from unexpected results. • Strengthening ownership of PME activities by the local partners.	Most Significant Change and Outcome Mapping
Oxfam Novib	• Making visible and learning from 'behavioural and cultural' change (e.g. gender justice).	Most Significant Change
STRO	• Monitoring changes in behaviour. • Widening local participation in PME.	Outcome mapping
Vredes-eilanden	• Obtaining more meaningful information on the impact or effects of the value chain programme on the beneficiaries and farmer organisations.	Outcome mapping and sensemaker
War Child Holland	• Finding hard evidence of programme results, in a child friendly and participatory way. • Learning by War Child field staff and partners. • Making evaluations more learning centred.	Tailored M&E toolkit (evaluating participants 'satisfaction' through participant-led indicators of success).
Woord en Daad	• Strengthening ownership of PME activities by local partners.	Theory of Change, Outcome studies, Most Significant Change as part of 'PMEL' system.

Table 1: overview of action research cases

The wide range of PME challenges that motivated the organisations to take part in the action research illustrates the ambitious and varied expectations we often have of PME systems.

Focus of the action research at the collective level

At the collective level (i.e. across the individual cases of the participating organisations) the action research seeks to gain practical insights on how different PME approaches can help organisations to deal with complex processes of social change. For that purpose, a set of collective research questions was developed that were used as an analytic framework to

examine across the organisations if the different PME approaches that they were piloting were indeed helping them to deal with complex change in a specific context or situation. The collective research questions are shown in the box below. They were inspired by the research questions of the participating organisations as well as a literature review (Van Ongevalle and Huyse 2010) and two learning histories (i.e. Vredeseilanden (Kasman 2010) and ETC COMPAS (Abeyratne 2010)) on PME practice that were developed during the preparatory phase of the action research.

Collective research questions:
1) How does the PME approach help to clarify relationships, roles and expectations of the actors involved in the intervention?
2) How does the PME approach contribute to learning about the progress towards the development objectives (of the programme, partner organisations, partner networks, Northern NGOs)?
3) How does the PME approach contribute to satisfying downward, horizontal and upward accountability needs?
4) How does the PME approach contribute to strengthening the own internal adaptive capacity of the programme, partner organisations, partner networks, and/or Northern NGOs?

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3. Dealing with complexity through a variety of PME approaches

This section looks in more detail at four pertinent challenges for PME when dealing with complex processes of social change. We draw on recent literature around PME and complexity, and explain the link between these challenges and the collective research questions of our collaborative action research. In addition, we provide practical examples from the cases of our action research that illustrate the opportunities and the weaknesses of various PME approaches to deal with processes of complex social change.

3.1. The challenge of dealing with multiple actors and relationships

To explore the challenge of multiple actors and relationships for PME, we examined the following collective research question: *How does the PME approach help to clarify relationships, roles and expectations of the actors involved in the intervention?*

One of the reasons why processes of social change are complex is that they are influenced by many different actors who can relate to each other in different ways. This is unavoidable because no one single actor or organisation has the capacity to solve complex problems (Jones 2011). For example, in one of the action research cases it was shown that promoting access for disabled children to the standard school system in Cambodia needs the strong involvement of schools, local NGOs, ministry departments, teachers, parents and pupils (Light for the World case). In addition, different forms of interactions can exist between the actors involved in a social change process. Collaboration, negotiation, dialogue, influencing, lobbying and conflict are just a few examples of such interactions. Also, different actors involved in the interaction often have different understandings and perspectives regarding the same issue. What is a problem for one may not be a problem for someone else. Or the problem might be understood in different ways. This reality of multiple actors, relationships and perspectives has some direct practical consequences for PME; firstly, that the results of programmes that support social change processes can mean different things to different people. The various expectations, perspectives and roles of the different actors will need to be clarified. Secondly, programme results can also be found at different levels of a development process. And it isn't always

clear what these levels are and at which level we have to look for what kind of results. The Light for the World case illustrates how an inclusive education programme for children with disabilities in Cambodia has tried to address these challenges by utilising elements of outcome mapping.

Case: Light for the World
In the Light for the World case, outcome mapping provided a planning framework for active involvement of local partners to plan their own change process. This was shown to result in more realistic plans and commitment of the partners to take up their responsibility to make these plans happen. This also resulted in a better understanding about the intervention logic and the roles and responsibilities of the various intermediary actors involved in order to reach the final beneficiaries (i.e. the children with disabilities). A simplified version of the intervention logic of the Light for the World programme is shown in figure 1. Each circle represents different actors that play a specific role in the programme. Changes at each of these levels
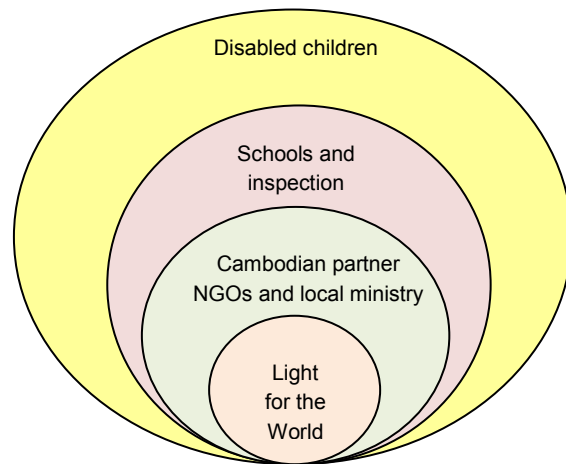
Figure 1: intervention logic showing different levels of influence within an inclusive education programme in Cambodia

constitute possible results to which the programme may contribute directly or indirectly. This approach represents a shift of focus in the monitoring system towards programme outcomes as changes in the professional practice or behaviour of the local partners. In fact, these outcomes can be seen as indicators of the partner's capacity. Hence, they provide Light for the World with a planning, monitoring and evaluation framework for capacity development of the local partners. In this capacity development framework, the role of Light for the World as an external supportive actor in the capacity development process of the local partners became clearer. Instead of an instrumental relationship with the local partners for increased service delivery towards the final beneficiaries, the strengthening of the local partners through funding and technical advice emerged as the main objective of the programme and the focus of the support activities of Light for the World.

To promote the active involvement of local partners in the design of their inclusive education programme, Light for the World adapted the outcome mapping intentional design, aligning it to the local Cambodian context by avoiding any outcome mapping jargon. In addition, a gradual process was adopted over almost one year to develop the PME system in collaboration with the Cambodian partners. This long-term planning process allowed programme stakeholders to learn more about the actual programme content of inclusive education during the planning workshops and field visits. Based on this content, richer progress markers were developed. The Light for the World case reports that defining the programme's scope together with the local partners helped to clarify relationships, but also strengthened collaborative attitudes among the various programme partners. For example, the role of the local ministry gradually changed from a rather passive actor that was mainly asked for permission to carry out programme activities, to an engaged player in the planning and follow up of the programme.

Of course, the intervention logic in figure 1 does not show the whole picture. There are a myriad of other factors and actors that are not shown, but that in real life will have an influence at various levels. Nevertheless such a mapping of the different actors involved in the intervention is still a step forward towards visualising and understanding the system you are working with. As such, the model can help programme stakeholders to specify roles,

responsibilities and expectations of various actors and open up opportunities for meaningful interaction and dialogue with the actors in the intervention.

Across the cases we also learnt that clarifying responsibilities and expectations is an important 'stepping stone' towards developing learning relationships among programme stakeholders. This is because it can foster trust. Such a trustful atmosphere is important for actors to learn from practice and to feel comfortable to speak about things that are not going well. At the same time, the cases also indicate that clarifying relationships and developing trustful relationships is not always an easy process. It can involve some deliberate investment of time and resources. This is illustrated by the case of Vredeseilanden below.

Case: Vredeseilanden
Vredeseilanden introduced outcome mapping to help them clarify the various roles and relationships of the actors involved in their agricultural chain development programme and to monitor changes in behaviour of their direct partners. Local partners didn't necessarily feel immediately comfortable with clarifying relationships, because it pushed them to recognise and take up specific responsibilities that were not as clearly described before. Through the outcome mapping approach Vredeseilanden's partners had to be more explicit about their own envisaged change process which they also had to follow up and reflect on during the monitoring cycles. Only after some time did this role clarification contribute to more understanding and trusting relationships between Vredeseilanden and its direct local partners.

"People do not always feel more comfortable with explicitly defined roles and responsibilities; having our progress monitored tends to make us feel more vulnerable. Discussions focused on 'how did you change, what did you do to make it happen; how would you need to change what you are doing to make it happen', are very different than discussions on 'what activities did you do this year.' It can be much more confrontational if it is not handled with care" (Vredeseilanden).

3.2. The challenge of learning about development results

To explore the challenge of learning about development results we asked the following collective research question: ***How does the PME approach contribute to learning about the progress towards the development objectives (of the programme, partner organisations, partner networks, Northern NGOs)?***

Complex situations are characterised by the unpredictable nature of human behaviour, a multitude of unpredictable interactions between different actors with different perspectives, and a wide variety of contextual factors beyond the control of any intervention. An essential implication for PME of this complexity is the importance of learning. Firstly, learning is essential because in processes of complex social change there is often no predictable link between cause and effect; it is often impossible to predict the effects of the activities of an external programme that supports social change processes. Possibly, you may only establish an indication of this link after the effect has materialised. Also, unexpected results often happen. The Oxfam Novib case below illustrates how Most Significant Change helped them to learn 'why' a specific gender-related effect occurred.

Case: Oxfam Novib
Within their Measuring Milestones Initiative Oxfam Novib piloted Most Significant Change to learn about behavioural and cultural change related to gender justice and gender mainstreaming. One of the Most Significant Change stories that has already been collected in their pilot, mentions how a less confrontational and aggressive attitude of one of the

female gender focal points opened doors in a gender-blind organisation to let her put gender mainstreaming issues on the organisation's agenda. The traditional set of indicators would not have allowed Oxfam Novib and its partners to learn how this change in attitude within the organisation had occurred.

Secondly, learning is essential because in contexts of unpredictability, detailed long-term planning before implementation (with programme plans based on a linear link between activities-outputs-outcomes-impact, with inflexible SMART indicators) is rather difficult. It seems more suitable to plan as best as you can, as for a journey, with a good idea of where you want to go and how you want to get there, but without being completely sure of the exact outcomes that may happen along the way (Barefoot Collective 2011). So as the journey starts, we need to learn as fast as possible if we are going in the right direction and how our co-travellers are doing. That way, we can adjust quickly when needed, and reinforce what is working and discard what is not working. The predetermined outcomes or indicators during the planning phase of a programme therefore should not work as targets to measure success or failure, but instead provide us with pointers that can help us to learn how we are doing in our programmes or projects and to change course if necessary (Ortiz 2003). Our challenge is to organise our PME approaches in such a way that they can help these learning processes.

The cases of War Child Holland and ETC Compass illustrate how different PME approaches helped them to monitor and learn from programme results that were difficult to measure.

Case: War Child Holland
War Child Holland faced challenges in monitoring changes in psychosocial wellbeing of children through Western survey tools. Young people would feel tested and insecure with such tools and therefore not empowered by them. To address this challenge War Child Holland introduced participatory M&E tools into their PME system. These tools, such as the personal goal exercise and the impact map, provided space for the children's perspectives to be heard. This resulted in two concrete lessons for programme facilitators. Firstly, the facilitators became more aware of the individual differences between the children and of the need to take their views seriously. As a result, programme facilitators started to organise meetings with parents to raise awareness about the different needs of children and on how to deal with these. Secondly, the personal goal exercise not only helped to clarify the expectations of the children, but also allowed the facilitator to help the children to set more realistic goals for their participation in the intervention (instead of becoming president or professional soccer player).

Case: ETC COMPAS
ETC COMPAS sought to complement their logframe-based PME approach with other PME methods to be able to measure social change and spirituality within their organic farming programme. They used elements of the Most Significant Change technique, which involves the collection of stories of significant change by NGO staff from community members.

From the ETC Compass case we learnt how the information generated by the change stories helped ETC Compass staff to gain insights in the Buddhist worldviews of the farmers they work with. This constituted a crucial learning that also informed the approach of ETC Compass to promote organic farming as illustrated by the following quote:

"…organic farming is a technical system which does not need any rituals. But when explained in terms of traditional farming with spirituality being an essential part of it, farmers are more inclined to accept it. That is how COMPAS Sri Lanka partners have modified their strategies to now promoting traditional farming, whereas they were earlier promoting organic farming"
(ETC COMPAS)

3.3. The challenge of satisfying accountability needs

To explore the challenge of balancing accountability and learning needs we examined the following collective research question: *How does the PME approach contribute to satisfying downward, horizontal and upward accountability needs?*

Because of the involvement of many different actors in complex processes of social change, there might be different and not always compatible information needs (James 2009). Often, donors want the PME system to provide information on the changes at the level of ultimate beneficiaries for accountability purposes. It is not surprising that this kind of upward accountability is therefore made a priority as it is directly linked with the condition for receiving funding. The survival of many organisations depends on this type of accountability. On the other hand, implementing partners or NGOs might want the PME system to provide information that helps them to learn about what works and what does not work, in order to inform future planning and implementation. Furthermore, final beneficiaries might have an interest in PME information to make and keep the programme or project accountable to their needs. Some trade off will be needed between these various information needs (*ibid*.) and will have to be considered when developing a PME system. The information needed, and its projected use, will determine which approaches and tools are most suitable within a PME system for planning, data collection, data analysis and honest reporting (Simister and Smith 2010).

The cases of ICCO and Woord en Daad illustrate how different PME approaches were used to satisfy downward and horizontal accountability needs.

Case: ICCO
ICCO implemented Client Satisfaction instruments to promote downward accountabilty of the civil society organisations (CSOs) that ICCO supports and which provide health services to the public. This approach was already bearing fruit as illustrated by the following quote from the ICCO case report:

''it was reported at the review and learning workshops that the management of the various organisations had already initiated some reform measures on their own, even before the review workshops. This readiness of attitude to accept voices of the clients and learn from them is a major score for the project at this stage as it has overcome one of the potential hurdles anticipated''
(ICCO)

Case: Woord en Daad
In their new Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL) system for their programmes with regional alliances in the field of education, economic development and service provision, Woord en Daad wanted to strengthen downward accountability towards their beneficiaries. Score cards have been developed that assess a range of aspects relevant to quality of service providers. Furthermore, Woord en Daad is also trying to strengthen horizontal accountability among the partners of its alliance through participatory peer assessments of their progress towards result indicators. Peer assessments of partner's organisational capacity has also been proposed and will be implemented in a later stage during the action research.

Related to upward accountability, Light for the World did some 'technical tweaking' to align the outcome challenges of their outcome mapping framework with the result areas from their logical framework in order to satisfy their donor requirements. Vredeseilanden is using result indicators to monitor impact at the level of their final beneficiaries (i.e. the farmers) in addition to their outcome mapping framework that is more oriented towards behaviour changes at the

level of the intermediate partner organisations (farmer associations and local NGOs). And ETC Compass integrated Most Significant Change stories in their reports to their donors. However, at this stage in the action research we do not have enough data yet to analyse if upward accountability needs have indeed been met. What we have observed across some cases is the challenge to analyse and synthesise the qualitative information that is generated by certain PME approaches that have been piloted. This is illustrated by the following quote from the ETC COMPAS case report:

> ''one constraint with Most Significant Change stories will be in terms of reporting and accountability: how to present them to donors who have little time for reading/listening? The strength of the change story is the story itself. Making them concise or quantifying them would kill its spirit ''
> (ETC COMPAS)

3.4. The challenge of strengthening the adaptive capacity of programme stakeholders

To explore the challenge of strengthening the adaptive capacity of programme stakeholders we examined the following collective research question: *How does the PME approach contribute to strengthening the adaptive capacity of programme stakeholders?*

Supporting complex change is a two-way process; any organisation that is supporting social change processes, will also change (Earl et al. 2011). Being able to adapt to the changing context is crucial for organisations or programmes to remain effective and relevant and to survive. The core capability 'to adapt and self-renew' from the ECDPM five core capability framework helps to explain what is meant by adaptive capacity: 1) to improve individual and organisational learning; 2) to foster internal dialogue; 3) to reposition and reconfigure the organisation; 4) to incorporate new ideas; and 5) to map out a growth path (Baser and Morgan 2008). While many organisations are looking towards PME for strengthening their adaptive capacity, reality suggests that our PME practice often doesn't live up to that task. And even for organisations that are able to attain the results they set out to achieve, there is a risk that their adaptive capacity is neglected in the process of being busy. A study around organisational learning in Dutch NGOs revealed that lack of time was the factor most frequently mentioned by NGO staff as obstructing learning (Smit 2007). In that study, monitoring and evaluation were hardly mentioned as an enabling factor for learning. The lack of time for reflection applied to project-related reflection, but even more so to wider organisational reflection. It emerged that only a few members consciously took the 'profits' of their learning with them in order to experiment and develop new practice. A similar study with international organisations showed that the lack of time for learning is actually the result of the way time is prioritised and that this is determined by both internal dynamics and external pressures and demands (Ramalingam 2005). Investing in joint reflection at various levels on our own learning, both implicitly and explicitly is key (Smit 2007). The mistake we often make is to keep these concepts about learning too vague and not translate them into concrete actions. In such cases it is difficult to change deeply engrained behavioural patterns in organisations, such as a lack of time for reflection. It is therefore essential to create the space to actually get together with the relevant actors and make collective sense of the concrete significant observations we have made, or insights we have gained during our daily activities and interactions.

The exploration of different PME approaches in our collaborative action research contributed in various action research cases towards more explicit reflection processes about their internal organisational practices including PME practice. In certain cases these reflection

processes were triggered by specific challenges that were experienced during the PME pilot and which needed to be addressed. This is illustrated by the case of War Child Holland.

Case: War Child Holland
The various M&E tools introduced to the partners of War Child Holland to monitor changes in psychological wellbeing of children turned out to be too time consuming. This resulted in field staff putting M&E exercises in a separate session instead of integrating them into the normal intervention modules as planned. Also, the need to adapt the tools to the local context was highlighted after it was observed that the questions from the 'quiz' tool were too difficult for children in Uganda, but too easy when implemented in the Middle East. This resulted in War Child Holland recognising the need to involve the partners more in the design of the M&E tools and to provide more training in their effective use, and in the analysis and use of the information that they generate.

Across the cases we also learnt that that spaces for reflection may not occur automatically, as people are or too busy or don't see it as a priority. In most cases specific time and space for such reflection was deliberately planned. The importance of setting aside time and space for reflection is illustrated by the Cordaid case.

Case: Cordaid
Cordaid combines elements of Most Significant Change, outcome mapping and self-rated stories to monitor outcomes in their work with networks of women movements in Colombia that organise themselves in communities of change to address instances of violence. Representatives from the networks of women groups meet twice a year to reflect on their achievements in the programme, using a process of structured dialogue. The importance of this learning space is illustrated by the following extract of Cordaid's case report:

''Further than the M&E findings, the process of being engaged in the M&E process and actively participating in the spaces designed for data collection, analysis, reflection and decision making, helped the women of the pilot regions to reinforce their sense of belonging to the program. They managed to reflect and identify the added value of networking for being more effective in their policy work (individually and collectively), as well as for being recognised as legitimate stakeholders on the women rights field.''
(Cordaid)

An important lesson across the cases is the fact that introducing and adapting different PME approaches can be a drawn out and unpredictable process that needs engagement both at partner level and at the level of the supporting donor NGO. However, in the long run it can set in motion processes of organisational change. Currently, most organisations participating in the action research are still in the middle of implementing the pilot and do not yet have clear examples of organisational change. However, there are signs that changes are set in motion, as illustrated by the cases of Woord en Daad and Vredeseilanden.

Woord en Daad
Woord en Daad decided that each of the partner organisations would appoint a Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (PMEL) coordinator in their organisation. At the regional partner meetings held in the spring of 2011, it turned out that all partners had a PMEL coordinator appointed and that the discussions on the tasks, role, responsibilities and the place in the organisation of the PMEL coordinator both between Woord en Daad and partners and within the partner organisations, had stimulated internal discussions and had shaped partners' ideas on a division of tasks and responsibilities with regard to PMEL. The following quote is illustrative of these changes:

"The profile of PMEL within our organisation has been raised significantly, which can be seen from the fact that in the recently adapted organogram the PMEL coordinator has been placed at the senior management level.''
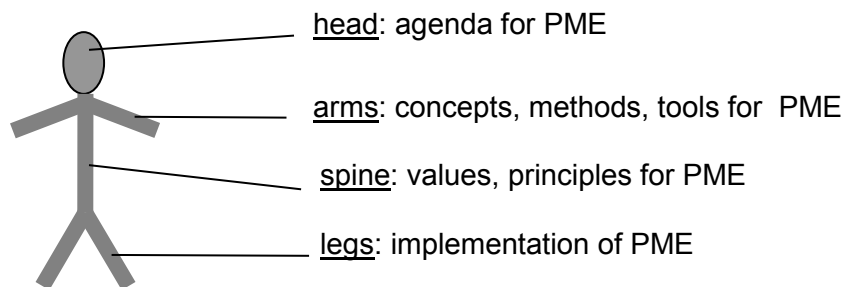
Case: Vredeseilanden
In the Vredeseilanden programme, the development of a sound planning, learning and accountability system that included elements of outcome mapping led to some initial confusion. The resulting discussions that came from this confusion eventually proved to be an invaluable source of learning, and contributed to the capacity of Vredeseilanden to be able to adjust plans. This is illustrated by the following quote:

''If there is one element that has contributed to an increase in the learning capacity of Vredeseilanden as an organisation, it is this flexibility. The notion of being able to change plans along the way is more present now compared to the time when I started."
(programme officer)

4. Towards a balanced PME approach

The various experiences that emerged in this collective action research provide insight in the exploratory journey of organisations that, together with their partners, tried to improve their PME practice in order to get more control on interventions carried out in complex situations. From the various case stories we learnt that it takes more than just the right PME tool or method to improve one's PME practice. While the implementation of the appropriate tools remains an important aspect of PME, there are also other important dimensions of a complexity oriented PME approach that emerged from the cross case analysis (Van Ongevalle and Maarse 2011). We use INTRAC's metaphor of the human body for capacity development (Lipson and Hunt 2009) to describe the different dimensions of such complexity oriented PME approach.

head: agenda for PME

arms: concepts, methods, tools for PME

spine: values, principles for PME

legs: implementation of PME

The spine

The spine relates to the values or principles for PME. We adopt the definition of Lipson and Hunt for values: "*Values are ideas and qualities that are informed by, and in turn inform, beliefs, principles and aspirations that are important to the actors involved in PME activities*" (Lipson and Hunt 2009, p39).

Across the cases we observed two important values for complexity oriented PME practice. A first value is the strong commitment towards **active participation** of multiple programme stakeholders during the design and implementation of the PME system. This value manifests itself in the following ways across the cases:
- An explicit attempt towards an 'actor focused' PME approach is visible across all the cases, involving programme stakeholders to reflect on their own change process and

roles or expectations within the programme. At the same time it was observed that the participatory design is very time and resource-intensive.

- Various cases also demonstrate a strong commitment towards fostering ownership of the PME approach among the various programme stakeholders. This is evidenced in some cases by understanding that developing ownership can take time and by being prepared to support this process over a longer period (i.e. not just the one shot training workshop in a certain PME method or tool). At the same time, while the new PME approaches were introduced to address specific needs of both Northern NGOs and partner organisations, the initial initiative for introducing these new approaches came in the majority of the cases from the Northern NGOs. It will be a point of interest during the further course of the action research how this situation may affect future ownership of the PME approach at partner level.
- Empowerment of final beneficiaries emerged as an important underlying value of ICCO's PME system. By being actively involved in the monitoring of the quality of services provided to them, beneficiaries became valued as 'right holders' instead of mere receivers of services.

A second value pertains to the commitment towards **collaborative learning** among various programme stakeholders during PME activities.

Across the cases we see that reflection often takes place through processes of dialogue between different stakeholders. This contributed to collaborative learning processes within the PME activities. We notice a deliberate attempt in the cases to facilitate such dialogue and collaborative learning processes and to provide the necessary means and space for them. Participatory design of PME systems, with a focus on changes aimed for versus changes observed, leads to extensive dialogues between stakeholders at the different levels of the intervention logic. These discussions lead to a common language (Cordaid, Light for the World), shared visions on what is aimed for (STRO, Light for the World, MCNV, Cordaid, War Child Holland), and a stronger identity of the network (Cordaid, ICCO). In the different cases we also see an explicit commitment towards a continuous process of capacity development of the Northern NGO and the Southern partners.

This means that the relationship between Northern NGOs and Southern partners is not merely instrumental to achieve improved service delivery towards the final beneficiaries. While improved service delivery is an important part of the agenda for PME, the strengthening of the Southern partners and the Northern NGOs remains an important value and principle that informs overall PME practice. We see this evidenced through Northern NGOs being adaptive towards the needs and the rhythm of the Southern partners. This was illustrated by the long-term customised coaching support for partner organisations in the cases of STRO, Cordaid, Woord en Daad and Oxfam Novib. Judging from the considerable time and resources that have been invested in some of the cases to accommodate these needs and rhythms we can conclude that this value can be a strong guide in PME practice.

The head

The head refers to the agenda for PME. The agenda provides the underlying reason why one is involved in PME. In other words, the agenda gives the answer to the following question: "PME for what?" From the different cases, the following answers emerged:

- All cases seek to **learn from the effects of their programmes**. Effects can mean different things among the different cases but one common denominator is the recognition that effects are changes (both positive and negative) at the level of programme stakeholders that are outside the sphere of control of the Northern NGO and to which the programme has contributed (directly or indirectly). The action research of Oxfam Novib, MCNV and ETC COMPAS highlight the importance of a

PME approach to give insight in both, planned and unplanned effects in order to learn about the effectiveness of their support strategies. This is especially relevant in complex programs that have emergence as a key feature, and where support strategies might be developed by a trial and error approach. Most Significant Change was potentially useful to give insight in unplanned changes and failures, but this is highly dependent on the way the most significant change process is facilitated and designed. Both War Child Holland and MCNV report that it is one thing to gather additional information on changes, but that resources and expertise have to be allocated to analyse the data and there is need to carefully discuss who will be responsible to do that, at what level and for whom.

- **Improved programming by using the lessons generated by the PME system** is another aspect of the PME agenda. The cases show that using the lessons learnt to improve practice does not happen automatically. In several instances stakeholders had to be actively involved in making sense of monitoring information during reflection sessions. This requires a learning culture and sufficient space for learning. The cases of Vredeseilanden, Cordaid, ICCO, War Child Holland and ETC COMPAS show evidence of how learning and reflection is organised and integrated in working practices and how this contributed to making adjustments in the programme. This drive for programme improvement also implies that different PME approaches have to cater for the information needs of different actors. The case of ICCO, for example, shows that client satisfaction instruments, when used in culturally appropriate ways, provide valuable monitoring information about client satisfaction, allowing service providers to improve their services.

- **Satisfying upward and downward accountability needs** is a third important aspect of the PME agenda across the cases. In several instances (e.g. Oxfam Novib, Cordaid and War Child Holland), an important reason to step into the action research was the fact that their programmes were facing challenges to demonstrate results and therefore became concerned about possible questions from their management or back donors. This aspect of the PME agenda is possibly not always that explicit in the communication between Northern NGOs and Southern partners, but it did partly motivate the PME exploration process in the action research. As mentioned in the 'spine' section, in most cases this exploration process is actually initiated by the Northern donor organisation.

This aspect of the PME agenda can sometimes lead to a balancing act with the values of PME, such as active participation and ownership. The PME agenda of MCNV, for example, of dealing with complexity includes an openness for unplanned results and involved village health workers in the collection of Most Significant Change stories. Their case report records that this approach mainly led to 'desired' answers and stories. This was one of the factors that made them decide to have MCNV staff to collect the stories. The case of STRO is another example which shows that their partner was so enthusiastic about using the Outcome Mapping framework in their strategic planning process, that after one outcome mapping training they said that they did not need further coaching and involvement of the consultant. This resulted in confusion about individual responsibilities of partners and a delay in the PME process. Again a balancing act…where to let go and where to steer when accountability needs are to be met?

The arms

The arms refer to the concepts, methods and tools involved in the PME approach. Here we deal with the nuts and bolts of PME. When we look at the 'nuts and bolts' across the cases we observe a striking methodological diversity. From the cases we learn that when dealing with complex contexts it helps to plan and monitor such changes from an actor-oriented perspective. This involves looking for change within actors involved in or affected by the

programme. Unsurprisingly, this often leads to diverse information needs of different actors at different levels in the programme (e.g. donor organisation, local partners, beneficiaries). Addressing these diverse needs also requires different PME approaches and sometimes a combination of different PME approaches (e.g. Cordaid, MCNV, Vredeseilanden) that involve various PME methods. Table 2 below illustrates the main PME methods that are being applied in the action research cases. The table also specifies at which stakeholder level the PME methods are used to monitor programme effects.

Northern NGO level	Partner level	Final beneficiary level
-Reflection meetings/workshops internal and with partners.	-Outcome mapping -Most significant change -reflection meetings -PMEL outcome level indicators -consumer panels	-Most significant change -Log frame -Client satisfactory instruments (client satisfaction surveys, citizen reporting cards) -Tailored M&E toolkit consisting of participatory PME methods such as impact maps, quiz, personal goal exercise -Impact level indicators

Table 2: overview of the main PME methods according to stakeholder level

The table shows that the piloted PME methods are mainly directed towards changes at the level of the partner organisations and the final beneficiaries. It will be a point of interest in the further course of the action research to explore how a changed PME practice at these levels will also affect and strengthen PME at the level of the Northern NGOs.

The legs

The legs relate to the actual implementation of the PME approach or how the PME approach is put into practice. The cases indicate that making an organisation's PME challenges and expectations explicit and having the motivation to do something about them often lies in the hands of an individual or a small group of people taking the lead. We also see across the cases that taking action to explore different PME approaches and strengthen an organisation's PME practice is not always easy. Several organisational and contextual factors can hinder such action. The cases provide us with concrete examples of factors that can contribute to an enabling or disabling environment for reflective action around PME.

Enabling factors:
- The availability of an actual request for alternative PME methods by the Southern partner organisations. In the STRO case, for example, the local partner organisation requested to explore outcome mapping in its strategic planning exercise after it was introduced to the methodology during a formative evaluation process. This contributed to the local partner's ownership of the PME pilot.
- Explicit support from higher management by providing financial resources or time for staff involved in the PME pilot.
- An environment of trust that allows dialogue and the presence of a group of people with a strong desire to learn from practice in order to improve it. Such an enabling environment has supported programme teams across the cases to look for different PME approaches that could support them in their learning process.

Disabling factors:
- Shortage of time for reflection and for trying out new PME methods emerged as a critical limiting factor across the cases. Time shortage actually resulted in a number of cases not taking part in the action research. It remains to be seen in the further

course of the action research if it is indeed time shortage, or rather the way time is prioritised, which is at play here.

- The absence of PME capacity, such as the lack of specific competencies needed to be able to apply new PME methods and work on a diversified approach. For example, in some of the cases using Most Significant Change, stories (MCNV, ETC, Oxfam Novib) gathering stories of sufficient quality was seen as an important challenge.
- One might also face resistance resulting from previous or ongoing innovation initiatives, as illustrated by the following quotes from the Vredeseilanden and ICCO cases:

"Vredeseilanden has already invested quite some energy in improving its M&E system (adopting parts of Outcome Mapping, a new chain intervention logic) and a new rather complex method might make the Planning, Learning and Accountability system more heavy and would absorb too much energy."
(Vredeseilanden advisor)

"I wonder what the added value of Client Satisfaction Instruments can be; actually, it appears to me as just another "nice" method that partners apparently need to follow"
(PME consultant).

5. So have we learnt anything yet about dealing with complexity through PME?

There is an old saying that 'happiness lays at a small place close to home'. Looking at the insights from the first phase of our action research it appears that the key for dealing with complex processes of social change lies within our reach, and within our own organisations and programmes. The various dimensions of this key represent the concrete lessons that we have learnt during our action research.

1. It takes a **learning culture** within an organisation or programme to take up the challenge of customising and implementing different PME approaches that are relevant for a specific context. In all the cases we observed that a crucial element of a learning culture is the presence of a group of people who have the motivation, the courage, and the mandate to address PME challenges in their organisations or programmes by introducing PME approaches that are new to their organisation. The cases further show how support from higher management and trustful relationships can nurture such learning culture.

2. **Actor-focused PME approaches** that are being explored in the cases seem to have the potential for enabling dialogue and collaborative learning. As such, they can contribute towards more trustful relationships and active participation of various stakeholders in the PME activities. But it also takes a lot of effort. Several cases misjudged the amount of resources that were needed to support and coach stakeholders to use actor-focused PME approaches. One requisite is organisations that strongly value the need for collaborative learning and active participation, to be able to sustain such efforts.

3. One central hypothesis of the action research is that the ability to **regularly learn** about what works and what does not, and adjusting the programme accordingly, can help organisations to deal with complex unpredictable change. This implies a PME approach that facilitates cyclical relations between the P, M and E. At this stage in the action research we learnt that the PME approaches that were explored helped the organisations to gain to specific insights about the programme's results that wouldn't have been learnt otherwise (e.g. the importance of the Buddhist world view in the ETC

compass case or the gender related changes in the Oxfam Novib case). However, the examples of such insights are still few and limited to a small number of cases. We hope to get more examples in the next phase of the action research in order to make more robust claims about this hypothesis.

4. In all the cases we see how a **methodologically varied PME approach** has the potential to help organisations to deal with complex contexts. The various levels in the programme where change can happen and the various information needs from different stakeholders ask for a diverse 'PME toolbox' as well as skills and resources to apply a mixed approach that aligns with the different levels of complexity in a specific programme.

5. Across the cases we observed how exploring different PME approaches has contributed towards increased **internal adaptive capacity** of the

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Main conclusions from the presentation of the action research at the INTRAC conference

Key learning points
- PME in such complex contexts requires short learning and feedback cycles.
- Using the right PME methods in itself is no guarantee for dealing with complexity. Spaces for sense making are crucial.
- How to avoid falling back in a reporting mode?
  - o Stick to the routine of organising sense-making sessions
  - o Using the sense-making session to develop monitoring reports.

Question to explore
- How to ensure that PME methods such as sense maker and Most Significant Change are not merely extracting information but also empower beneficiaries?

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organisations involved in this exploration process. This was evidenced by a stronger reflective practice and a deliberate investment in learning practices (e.g. reflection meetings, peer assessments). That these effects are not merely the result of an initial enthusiasm generated by the PME exploration process is illustrated by the changes in organisational culture and practice that we started to observe in some cases (e.g. the hiring of PME staff in the Woord en Daad case or the more systematic adjustment of programme plans according to lessons learnt from PME in the Vredeseilanden case). It remains to be seen during the next phase of the action research if these changes in internal adaptive capacity will be sustained throughout and beyond the PME exploration process.

6. The way forward in the action research

This paper shares the insights from the first stage of an on-going action research. Some of the cases were still in the process of setting up their new PME systems, while others only went through a first monitoring cycle of their new PME systems. It is therefore too early to make strong conclusions or evaluative statements about how the various PME approaches helped organisations to deal with complex processes of change. The action research is currently in its second phase and we will be able to report more results towards mid-2012. Below we list some points of attention or questions that emerged during the first phase of the action research and which will be further explored during the second phase:
- Across the cases we will be looking for more specific examples and illustrations of instances that provide us with evidence of how the piloted PME approach or combination of PME approaches helped organisations 1) to strengthen relationships; 2) to learn about programme results; 3) to satisfy accountability needs; and 4) to strengthen adaptive capacity at various levels.

- Also during the second phase we will explore to what extent the PME pilots lead toward sustained organisation-wide change in PME practice. At this stage in the action research there is still a concern that the interest in the new PME approach may fade after the action research.
- Another point of interest will be the balance between learning and accountability across the cases. We will be on the lookout for instances where a stronger focus on learning can indeed help to satisfy accountability requirements.

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