Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation of Complex Processes of Social Change: Towards a Diversified, Learning and Actor Oriented Approach¹

By Cristien Temmink²

to the round table « Methodological innovation: Change focus to evaluate interventions’ contribution to social change »

DRAFT-VERSION PROVISOIRE

Introduction

This paper outlines a three year long collaborative action-research process that was undertaken from 2010 till 2012 by PSO³ in the Netherlands with ten Dutch development NGOs and one Belgium development organisation. The Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA) from the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) provided methodological support. In this Action-research, the participating organisations explored, together with their Southern partners, if and how a variety of Planning,
Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) approaches\textsuperscript{4} and methods helped them deal with processes of complex social change. The methods piloted include Outcome Mapping (OM), Most Significant Change (MSC), Sense-maker, Client-Satisfaction Instruments, Personal-Goal Exercises, Outcome Studies, and Scorecards.

The reasons for starting this action-research process were twofold. First, general trends in international development contributed to raising PME on the development organisations’ agenda. Second, and connected to this, PSO members were facing some persistent challenges in their PME practice and participating organisations saw this action-research as an opportunity to address these. The programme started in a collaborative way as it was based on the “real life” challenges and questions of the participating organisations, questions which evolved and continued to shape the process over time. The challenges related to showing intangible results, learning, strengthening relationships, satisfying accountability requirements and stimulating ownership of PME activities.

The main conclusion of the action-research was that for PME of complex social change processes, organisations are best helped with a diversified, learning and actor oriented approach. We observed that most organisations combined various methods and tools, and adapted these for their specific context and needs. There is no one-size-fits-all. Also, for dealing with complex change, there is a need to refocus from results-based management towards results-based learning. While some kind of predetermined results framework can be useful to provide focus and give direction, in contexts of complex change, programme actors need to go beyond these frameworks. Concretely this meant flexibility in planning of activities as to how to get towards the results and being able to learn and adapt along the way. Related to this, efforts for constant and genuine learning about results had to be made, as well as openness to unexpected and intangible results. It was observed that diversified, learning and ‘actor-focused’ PME approaches can provide development organisations with the means to demonstrate complex change (i.e. show their results), as well as gain insight into how this change happened and how the interventions of the organisation contributed to it.

Some Background

As mentioned, the action-research was motivated both by general trends in international development that contributed to raising M&E on the development organisations’ agenda and, connected to this, challenges that organisations faced with their PME practice.

First, over the last decade, there has been a growing international call for results-based management, whereby development actors are asked to be accountable for and demonstrate achievement of “measurable” results (Paris Declaration, 2005, Accra Agenda for Action, 2008 and High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, 2011, Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness in Istanbul, 2011). Many organisations try to strengthen their PME systems in response to this call.

\textsuperscript{4} In this paper, a PME approach refers to a combination of various PME methods, tools and concepts and the way they are implemented within a specific context of a programme or organisation. A PME approach also encompasses the underlying values, principles and agenda that come with its methods, tools and concepts. A PME system refers to the way in which PME approaches and PME related activities are practically organised, interlinked and implemented within a specific context of a programme or organisation.
Second, increasing calls for local ownership and leadership and donor harmonisation have contributed to more indirect modes of aid delivery, resulting in long implementation chains, partnerships with governments and civil society, and bottom-up approaches (Stern et al, 2012). These developments, whereby local actors take responsibility for their own development and where donor organisations have less control over the achievement of results, have created specific challenges for PME that are often very context-specific.

Third, after more than two decades of implementing a results agenda, success stories remain limited. Development actors continue to face problems in implementing results-based management approaches in a way that contributes to improved analysis, planning and decision-making. Instead, they are often mechanically used for accountability and control purposes (Vāhāmāki et al, 2011). The notion that development is something that can be technically managed and controlled seems to continue to prevail in many organisations. A growing number of organisations are now looking for PME approaches that can help them to advance the analytic and responsive-to-change notions of results-based management within their programmes, however.

Fourth, the need to demonstrate results can lead to risk-averse behaviour and focus on results that are more tangible and easy to measure. Consequently, organisations that work towards less tangible change, such as gender equality, governance, empowerment, and civil society capacity development, find themselves struggling to measure results using established monitoring and evaluation tools (Stern et al. 2012). This challenge 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.” In response, organisations dealing with more complex transformational change are looking for complimentary PME approaches that can help them to plan, monitor, and learn from results that are less easy to measure.

Fifth, results-based management can be approached from different theoretical perspectives. The most dominant is often referred to as a scientific or positivist worldview, which assumes that change occurs in a linear fashion, with causal relations between inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts that can be known. Associated PME approaches rely on solid theories of change that are ideally developed through empirically testing hypotheses for change. Examples include logical frameworks, monitoring through SMART indicators, theory-based evaluations, and impact evaluations with experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Influential proponents of experimental designs for impact evaluation include the poverty action lab J-PAL, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3IE), and the Evaluation Gap Working Group, who authored the “When Will We Ever Learn” report.

However, result-based management can also be approached from a more complexity-oriented theoretical perspective. Such a perspective is rather critical of the scientific approach, especially when confronted with complex processes of social change (Stern et al, 2012; Mowles, 2010; Batliwala & Pitman, 2010; Ramalingam, 2008; Eyben, 2006). A complexity perspective accepts that in complex change processes, the relation between cause and effect is rather unpredictable, and unexpected results often occur. Such PME approaches take into account perceptions as much as they do objectively observed and measured changes in state. Examples include OM (Earl et al, 2001)
which focuses on assessing behaviour change, MSC (MSC) (Davies et al, 2005) and utilisation-focused and developmental evaluation as proposed by Michael Quinn Patton (2008, 2011).

The action-research underscored the importance of working towards results, and more widely, of strengthening results-based thinking. However, the findings do confirm the problems with results-based management approaches that follow a logic of linearity, predictability and control when dealing with complex social-change processes. Linear planning models with detailed operational plans over several years and uniform indicators are less useful in complex change contexts. Instead, we sought to explore if and how PME approaches that draw on a complexity perspective can help organisations and programmes dealing better with complex processes of social change, to strengthen learning about the results they obtain, and to improve planning and decision-making.

Unpacking Complex Social Change

The action-research focused on two characteristics of complex change that we identified from the literature and our practices as having important implications for PME. These were “emergence” and the occurrence of “multiple actors, perspectives and relationships”. Emergence is an important feature of complex change. Change is emergent when the relationship between cause and effect within the change process is not linear (an effect is not necessarily proportional to the cause) or predictable. It is an unplanned, uncontrollable and unpredictable process, whereby results emerge out of the complex interactions among all actors in the system.

The emergent character of complex change is often compounded by the influence of many different actors attempting to deal with social issues. This is unavoidable: no single actor or organisation has the capacity to solve complex problems (Jones, 2011). In addition, these actors often have different understandings of and perspectives on the same issue. What is a problem for one may not be a problem for someone else; or the problem might be understood and experienced in different ways. Also, 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.

The complexity of social change processes means that these cannot be easily managed by certain results-based management tools that follow a logic of linearity, predictability, and control. Instead, PME approaches need to support learning from unexpected and intangible results, while learning towards the expected development results is also taking place, it has to support the adaptive capacity of the programme or organisations in order to increase effectiveness, and be able to deal with multiple actors, perspectives and relationships (be “actor-focused”), as well as take into account different accountability needs.

The Action-Research Questions and Methodology

The above implications related to the complexity of social change processes for PME were identified through an extensive literature research, as well as analysis of the challenges that participating organisations expressed. On this basis we designed a theoretical framework for the action-research
process. It is worth mentioning that defining this framework was not a clear cut process, but instead a rather messy one. The collective research questions were reframed several times during the course of the action-research based on insights emerging from the study and negotiations between the participating organisations and the research coordinators. Eventually, one overall research question and four research sub-questions were formulated. The sub-questions are directly related to the four implications of complex change for PME.

The overall purpose of the action-research was to find out if and how the various PME approaches piloted in the cases helped the organisations and their partners to deal with complex change processes.

The collective research framework was as follows:

**Central question:** How can PME contribute to the capacity of organisations and their partners to deal with complex processes of social change?

**Sub-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 help programme stakeholders to learn about the progress towards the development objectives?
3. How does the PME approach help to strengthen the own internal adaptive capacity of the programme, partner organisations, partner networks, and/or Northern NGOs?
4. To what extend does the PME approach help to strengthen upward, downward and horizontal accountability needs?

We chose to use a collaborative action-research design as a methodological framework for exploring the different PME approaches piloted by the participating organisations involved. During the action-research cycle, data collection and reflection on the data occurred at two interconnected levels. At an organisational level, individual organisations engaged in their own action-research processes in order to address their organisation-specific PME challenges engaging members of staff and partners. Each organisation translated these challenges into specific organisational research questions which they later explored during the action research. At a collective level, collective learning too place among representatives of the various organisations at learning meetings facilitated by PSO and HIVA to exchange experiences from the different action-research cases, reflect on organisational and collective research questions and draw lessons from across the individual cases. The action-research was collaborative in the sense that it was based and guided by the challenges and related questions of the participating organisations.

**Findings**

The action-research process led to three main insights. First, for dealing adequately with complex social change processes, there is a need to refocus from results-based **management** towards results-based **learning**. While some kind of predetermined results framework can be useful to provide focus and give direction, in contexts of complex change, programme actors need to go beyond these frameworks. This means that some flexibility in planning is needed of how to get those results. Also,
genuine learning about results can be stimulated if an effort is made to look for unexpected and intangible results (in addition to expected results) and if opportunities for collaborative learning are purposefully organised and skilfully facilitated.

Second, most organisations developed a diversified approach, combining different methods and tools in order to address their specific challenges and fit their own and their partners needs. In doing so, it became important to address the assumptions, underlying values and (political) agenda underlying methods, tools and concepts, which often led to different kind of conversations within organisations and with partners that could be experienced as difficult and unusual, but helpful.

Third, a common characteristic of the PME approaches piloted in this action research was their focus on specific actors whom the programmes were trying to influence, directly or indirectly: what we call an actor-focused5 PME approach. It was observed that if done well and followed through with the necessary leadership, actor-focused PME approaches can provide development organisations working towards complex change with the means to demonstrate this complex change (i.e. show their results). On top they can also learn how this change happened and how the interventions of the organisation contributed to it. This can help organisations adjust their strategies in accordance with lessons learned, making the impact more effective and adaptive. Actor-focused PME practice is therefore not only an interesting complement to more mainstream linear planning logic; we consider it an essential component of learning-centred programme management, particularly in contexts of complex change.

From the 10 case studies we observed the following advantages of applying actor-focused approaches in dealing with complex processes of social change:

Dealing with multiple actors, roles, expectations, perspectives and relationships:

- Stimulates social interactions between different actors by bringing them together and giving them insights into others' roles, perspectives and expectations.
- Triggers deeper conversations and dialogue.
- Leads to shared theories of change that are more flexible.

Learning about progress towards development results:

- Helps to gain insight in intangible, unexpected and less measurable results.
- Inspires and motivates learning processes.

Strengthening adaptive capacity:

- PME itself became part of a capacity development process.
- Increased self-reflection.
- Focused field staff and partners more on the effects of the programme instead of merely execution.
- Creates wider involvement of staff in reflection and learning processes.

5 We chose to call the piloted PME approaches “actor-focused” for two main reasons. First, because they direct the focus of PME towards changes in what people do or perceive instead of changes in state (e.g., increased income or production). Second, because the direct or indirect target groups are actively involved in the collection and/or use of the monitoring information.
Strengthening accountability:

- Shows a wider variety of results
- Contributes to more transparency, trust and empowerment
- Biased selection of positive stories becomes less of an issue as monitoring is primarily used for critical reflection.

We also identified challenges in implementing diversified, actor and learning oriented PME approaches. For example, it was observed that it requires very strong leadership to introduce these approaches and promote open and learning oriented attitudes. As actor-focused approaches are not common, it requires ‘unlearning’ previous habits and unhelpful attitudes. Also, it was noted that it requires considerable skills, time investment and management by-in to pull it through. In terms of learning about results, organisations found it challenging to sustain the collaborative learning process due to limited resources necessary for collection and analysis of information and the promotion of critical reflection on results. Reflective practice for strengthening the adaptive capacity was experienced as vulnerable when it was limited to a pilot project, instead of mainstream PME practice. Also, anchoring reflection and learning in the organisational day-to-day work was a recurrent challenge.

In terms of upward accountability, it remained difficult to prove causal links between activities and effects. For downward accountability it was a challenge to obtain honest and critical feedback, as well as reacting adequately on this feedback. Horizontal accountability was faced with the need to create time and space for this, and to acknowledge and work with power issues.

Conclusions and Some Recommendations

The overall aim of this action-research process was to find out if and how the piloted PME approaches helped organisations and their partners to deal with complex change processes. The findings of the research affirm the importance of demonstrating a programme’s results in order to learn if it is moving in the right direction and to adjust the programme if necessary. However, it does question the notion that results can be technically managed in contexts of complex change. Result areas that are too rigidly managed and made uniform across various contexts risks making PME a reporting exercise. This may be comfortable for programme implementers and donors, but it does not contribute to better and effective programmes (and thus development cooperation), as it does not stimulate a learning culture.

Throughout the action-research, we learned that focusing PME towards the actors involved at different levels in the programme can help the programme to become more learning-oriented, and better able to deal with the unpredictability of complex change. Genuine learning about results can be stimulated if an effort is made to look for unexpected and intangible results (in addition to expected results) and if opportunities for collaborative learning are purposefully organised and skilfully facilitated. Some recommendations for programme implementers and donors to help making “learning from results” a reality are:

Using actor-focused PME approaches can help to broaden a programme’s results “radar”. In other words, tracking changes in behaviour, relationships, and direct and indirect target groups’ actions
and/or perceptions at different levels in the results chain can bring to light unexpected effects that may remain hidden by monitoring according to predetermined results frameworks.

1. **Regular monitoring of programme results** that inform programme adjustments is key for dealing with complex change processes. This may require shifting perceptions of the meaning and value of regular monitoring practice.

2. **Strong leadership that motivates and mandates regular learning-centred monitoring of programme effects.** Actor-focused PME approaches can help, but will not by themselves guarantee that a programme becomes better able to deal with processes of complex change. Regular monitoring and learning about a programme’s results requires a considerable effort in terms of time and financial and logistical resources.

3. **Do not hide behind the strategic planning and reporting formats required by a donor to avoid actor-focused PME approaches to operationalise strategic planning.** Most organisations participating in this action research already had a strategic plan in place, with associated budgets approved by their respective donors. Nevertheless, all cases were able to experiment with actor-focused PME approaches that were complementary to their strategic planning framework and based on a planning logic that was fundamentally different from the predetermined results-based logical framework. It is a matter of deciding what is most important for the organisation and engaging in a dialogue about this with management and with donors.

Some for policy makers and donors to stimulate "results-based learning":

Ask funded programmes how they use PME systems that are learning-centred and that stimulate formal and informal learning at individual and collective level to increase effectiveness.

1. **Use a wider notion of what ‘results’ and ‘PME’ can entail.** Very useful programme results can be harvested in terms of changed behaviours, relations or perceptions among social actors directly or indirectly influenced by a programme. While such changes may not provide objective measurements of changes in state, which may be the specific objective of a programme (e.g., increased production or income, improved health, etc.), they are crucial to making these changes in state sustainable.

2. **Request that programmes submit proposals that are clear and explicit about the various actors in a programme’s sphere of control (i.e., who is responsible for inputs, activities, and outputs), spheres of direct influence (direct target groups), and spheres of indirect influence (indirect target groups or/and final beneficiaries).**

3. **Allow programmes to use part of the operational budget to fine-tune their actor-focused programme design** in collaboration with local programme stakeholders and accept adjustments that are informed by lessons learned from programme effects.

4. **Develop the donor staff’s knowledge** about the basic characteristics of actor-focused PME approaches, their suitability for specific contexts, and their potential to complement (but not necessary replace) other, more established, approaches.
References


http://www.awid.org/Media/Files/Capturing_Change.


