Complexity-Aware Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning
for Social and Behavior Change Interventions

ADVOCACY BOOKLET

coregroup

Communicating about Complexity-Aware Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning
for Social and Behavior Change Interventions

CORE Group's Social and Behavior Change (SBC) Working Group has developed a set of complexity-aware tools that are intended to help design and evaluate SBC-focused interventions. Tools in this set include:

1. **An advocacy booklet** to help guide communication with donors and to help build fluency in communicating how to monitor and evaluate SBC interventions

2. **A core set of indicators** related to adaptation, learning, and collaboration that can be used in proposals and work plans

3. **A checklist** intended to help in the consistency and completeness of documenting SBC interventions.

Depending on your role, there are various ways this <u>advocacy booklet</u> can be used:

Donors
- Invest in complexity-aware MEL approaches confidently.
- Advocate for the inclusion of complexity-aware MEL approaches within each undertaking.
- Understand what accountability sounds like within complex environments.

SBC Practitioners
- Use talking points in conversation with the donor, MEL team, or project team to help create space for complexity-aware MEL approaches.
- Hone and more deeply understand the mindset of complexity-aware MEL approaches.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Practitioners
- Advocate for resources and time to design and use complexity-aware MEL approaches
- Create a shared language of accountability within complexity with your donor, laying the groundwork for a productive working relationship.
- Increase confidence in putting time and effort toward complexity-aware MEL approaches.
- Use talking points in conversation with donor, MEL team, or project team to help create space for complexity-aware MEL approaches.

Why Invest in Complexity-Aware Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning? (MEL)

- **More efficient use of funds.** With data and ongoing reality testing, corrections can be made quickly rather than continuing to spend money on interventions and activities that are not working or even harmful.

- **Nuanced insights for future funding decisions.** Social and behavior change is often not a linear process, nor is there typically a singular cause and effect relationship between programming and change. Using traditional M&E methods in a complex and flexible programming situation is a poor match to lived reality and can lead to distortions in our understanding of results.

- **Easier innovation.** Innovation requires knowledge in the moment if something is failing or that circumstances have changed, so the new idea can be adjusted to maximize the chance for success. This process can be stifled by a more traditional approach that ties an implementation to preset goals and outcome targets.

- **Immediate return on investment.** By frequently gathering data, you can identify bottlenecks and hurdles that may be impeding programming and course correct.

- **Increased sustainability of change.** It engages audiences and other stakeholders in the learning and evidence gathering process, which has been shown to achieve sustainable change across a range of contexts.

- **Optimized results through adaptation.** Systematically and rigorously collect data to inform decisions and choices so that adaptation is made carefully and proactively with the best, most up-to-date information.

- **Social and behavior change (SBC) insights.** By regularly tracking, documenting, reflecting, and taking action, evidence is available to better answer the question of "what works, in what situations, for whom, and why?"

- **Awareness of important changes.** You don't know what you don't know. You are less likely to miss unintended results or emerging patterns when you use open-ended methods to look for them.
    - If there are negative consequences, you have a chance to take action to minimize harm.
    - If there are positive consequences, you have a chance to learn more and build on them.

- **Tested program theories.** Logic models and program theories are hypotheses of what we think will work. Using complexity-aware MEL allows for alternative explanations and results outside of a preconceived model.

How is Complexity-Aware MEL Different?

1. It watches for unintended results, alternative causes for outcomes, and multiple pathways to impact.
Pre-determined outcomes from linear logic models do not account for complexity, and we risk missing key learning about an intervention.

2. It produces data whose purpose is to support real-time decision making.
With temporal complexity, it becomes paramount to have access to up to-date information to steer and keep an intervention on track.

3. It actively tracks and looks for what is emerging and shifting.
When an intervention environment is complex, it means straight forward cause and effect relationships are uncommon. Instead, the system—with all of the contextual factors, actors' perspectives, and changes over time—shifts and moves in an interconnected way. Watching for what is emerging is the best way to document what is changing as part of your intervention.

When and How is Complexity-Aware MEL Useful?

During program formation
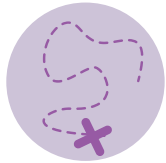
- To map and assess the context and specific moment in time to inform intervention design.
- To gather input from diverse audiences and stakeholders using different perspectives to strengthen an intervention design and increase its chances for success.
- To identify opportunities to influence change by assessing the countless factors of SBC—knowledge, motivation, current attitudes, local material conditions, social supports, social norms, etc.

During program monitoring

- To respond, in a timely manner, to significant shifts in context for better performance and behavior change outcomes.
- To engage audiences and other stakeholders in the learning and evidence gathering process to increase the uptake and sustainability of desired behaviors.
- To track, document, and evaluate the process of social and behavior change, not just the results of efforts.
- To shape advocacy strategy and systems change efforts through up-to-date data on immediate results and responses.
- To strengthen SBC practitioners' capacity to implement integrated programming across silos.

During outcome assessment

- To unpack why and how something worked, not just if it worked.
- To build new frameworks for future program design based on learning for unintended outcomes and chosen adaptations.
- To plan for supporting sustained behavior change, building on successes.
- To leverage on-the-ground learning for larger systems change and policy work.

A Donor's Role in Driving Complexity-Aware MEL

The tools and practices for monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) are vital to responding to complexity. MEL has something to offer during the formative stages of program design, throughout program implementation, and for capturing and reporting on outcomes. Donors, together with implementers, can work to make the use of MEL more complexity-aware.

The procurement process—soliciting and choosing what gets funded—will drive the industry's capacity for and prioritization of responding to complexity. Through their expectations of implementing partners and in providing financial and relationship support, donors can play a critical role in advancing the increased use of complexity-aware MEL in social and behavior change.

Donor Expectations

Donors can request and communicate clear expectations of program theory, methods, and indicators that are both complexity-aware and help monitor a program's responsiveness to complexity.

The MEL toolkit is vital to responding to complexity.

Here are a few ideas of what you could request. (See the SBC Complexity Illustrative Indicator Matrix for more ideas).

Formative

- Meaningful audience and stakeholder input on the proposed program design.
- Non-linear theories of change.
- Context analysis; community social cohesion assessments, political and economic environment vis-à-vis desired behavior changes, policy analysis, landscape map of previous interventions and related sectors, etc.

Monitoring

- Plan for and tracking of reflective practices; time for making meaning from and using collected data.
- Evidence of adaptive decision-making and course correction.
- Updated theories of change midway through implementation.
- Stakeholder feedback on program responsiveness.

Outcome

- Stakeholder perceptions of program adaptations and their results.
- Analysis of contextual factors and their interplay with behavior change outcomes.
- Level of stakeholder consensus on program success and factors of that success.
- Description of processes that were successful, not services or activities.

Donor Support

Complexity-aware MEL is distinctive from traditional M&E. However, it is not necessarily more expensive than traditional M&E! To fund and support its implementation, consider the following:

- **Include a funded period of program design** that makes it clear that adjustments from the proposal stage are expected and welcomed, as well as full formative assessments while a team is being built.

- **Integrate, build off of, and/or replace performance monitoring**, M&E impact indicators, and Collaboration, Learning, and Accountability (CLA) mechanisms —they should all work together as an integrated whole, not side by side.[1]

- Complexity-aware MEL serves both an accountability purpose and an adaptive management purpose. **Consider distributing the costs beyond the traditional M&E line item**.[2]

- **Invest in the training and capacity strengthening necessary to involve all program staff** in complexity-aware MEL. MEL should not be completed solely by MEL staff. Capacity strengthening takes time and intentional effort and resources upfront, but staff can transfer knowledge and skills beyond the program environment.

- **Seek management structures that empower people** throughout the hierarchy **to make responsive, data-based decisions** on behalf of project effectiveness—even if those decisions deviate from an original plan. Using the complexity-aware MEL generated information must be possible if it is to be a good investment.

- **Be in a relationship** beyond the contractual language. With a complexity-aware MEL approach **mutual trust and transparency strengthen practice** and questions of accountability shift to sound more like:
  - What is changing?
  - How are you responding?
  - What is new and unexpected that needs our support?
  - How did you make such-and-such decision?
  - What are you learning?

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[1] Shifting projects to employ complexity-aware MEL methods to match their complex environments is, similarly, a budget shift—not a budget increase (complexity-aware methods are not in addition to more traditional methods).

[2] Complexity-aware MEL methods cross fluidly between adaptive management and evaluation activities making funding such activities more flexible and comprehensive than a singular MEL budget item.

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