Making adaptive rigour work

Principles and practices for strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management

Ben Ramalingam, Leni Wild and Anne L. Buffardi

April 2019

Key messages

- Core development and humanitarian challenges are complex, and require processes of testing, learning and iteration to find solutions – adaptive management offers one approach for this.

- Yet large bureaucracies and development organisations can have low tolerance for experimentation and learning, and adaptive management can be viewed as an excuse for 'making things up as you go along'.

- We argue that adaptive programmes can be accountable, rigorous and high quality in how they use evidence – but this requires rethinking some key assumptions about how they are practised.

This paper sets out three key elements of an 'adaptive rigour' approach:

- Strengthening the quality of monitoring, evaluation and learning data and systems.

- Ensuring appropriate investment in monitoring, evaluation and learning across the programme cycle.

- Strengthening capacities and incentives to ensure the effective use of evidence and learning as part of decision-making, leading ultimately to improved effectiveness.

Many of today's most pressing development and humanitarian challenges are complex and dynamic (Ramalingam, 2013). Success involves changing behaviours, shifting incentives, overcoming power imbalances and catalysing anticipated changes in one part of a social, economic, political or environmental system that can have unforeseen effects elsewhere. Consider the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): there are no simple, widely replicable fixes for reducing conflict, building greater gender equality, ensuring decent work for all or improving universal education outcomes. No country has yet, or is likely to, discover the perfect 'solution'.

While there is growing recognition of the data gaps that must be filled to meet these Goals, it is also clear that the urgency facing development efforts means we cannot collectively wait to establish sufficient knowledge before acting. Instead, success in the SDGs – and in development and humanitarian efforts more generally – demands investment in ongoing, systematic and appropriately designed knowledge gathering and learning processes, so that interventions can continually adapt and respond to feedback on what is working and what is not. This will be needed to respond to those complex problems that will always demand contextual learning, and to problems where the challenges faced and/or the interventions are novel and untested, and where there is little evidence for what will work in a particular context.

While these ideas are not new, a growing number of international organisations and governments have started to adapt structures, policies and practices to better enable them. In 2018, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) established the Global Learning on Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative. GLAM aims to strengthen the use and uptake of adaptive management within DFID and USAID and across the development sector as a whole, through a focus on strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). It operates as a consortium led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) with the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the International Rescue Committee, Oxfam, Oxford Policy Management, Social Impact and ThoughtWorks. This paper sets out our emerging thinking to a core question that GLAM will explore, namely 'How can programmes be more rigorous in monitoring and learning from their work, while also being adaptive and dynamic?'

Introduction: adaptive management and the need for adaptive rigour

The emerging framework GLAM has developed through its inception and design phases to address this issue centres around 'adaptive rigour' (Wild and Ramalingam, 2018). Ideas of rigour are fundamentally about transparent, systematic methods and processes that identify and attempt to minimise potential biases and acknowledge how bias may influence findings or actions. By articulating and operationalising adaptive rigour we aim to make adaptive decisions and practices more evidence-based, improving openness and accountability.

We argue that adaptive rigour means having a documented, transparent trail of intentions, decisions and actions. Therefore, if programmes need to change, it is on the basis of MEL mechanisms that support rigorous evaluative thinking and collective decision-making, and there is scope to change what is being measured and evaluated when and if needed. For example, in a healthcare systems strengthening programme in a conflict-affected country, there may be an initial focus on training of primary care staff to better deal and cope with violent incidents, with measurement focusing on staff resilience to attacks, but over time this may shift to engaging with armed groups with behaviour change interventions, to directly address the incidence of attacks, which will require a different measurement approach. More generally, an important shift is to the move from evaluation as something that is often considered only at the design and end stages of a programme, to evaluative thinking as a capacity and process which is embedded throughout the implementation of an intervention.

We use the acronym MEL4AM – monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management – to refer to tailored packages of approaches, methods and tools, staff capacities and attributes, relationships and incentive

systems that incorporate these principles. Our core proposition, which GLAM is explicitly testing in the coming years, is that better MEL4AM, following principles of adaptive rigour, will improve:

- the relevance and usefulness of evidence being gathered for decision-makers seeking to address complex and/or novel problems;
- the ways that evidence is analysed and interpreted, including appropriate frequencies and collective mechanisms for doing so;
- wider organisational systems and incentives, to better support and encourage adaptation, and ultimately facilitate more effective development interventions.

For some readers, this may appear to describe what good MEL practices and good adaptive management should look like anyway. The reality is that, in practice, this does not happen as widely or as systematically as it should. By setting out the principles and criteria for adaptive rigour, we want to provide programme management, MEL and operational staff and teams with ways to strengthen their MEL4AM efforts, by supporting the appropriate use of evidence, evaluation methods and learning processes.

We are working in a range of ways to develop and apply these principles. We envisage that they can be employed at a variety of stages of a programme cycle:

- at the early design stage when they can be used as a guide to action;
- at key reflection points, to consider how to improve the existing MEL system and ensure continual iterative monitoring and learning, and to measure whether the theory of change or causal assumptions/mechanisms are as expected or whether adjustments are needed; and
- at the outcome and impact evaluation stage, to assess how well an adaptive programme performed, including whether and how MEL data and systems supported adaptive management ambitions in practice.

GLAM aims to use these indicators to provide a roadmap to determine where a programme or intervention is at a particular moment,

and to identify priorities for change to improve effectiveness; this includes helping to generate a series of indicators to assess the comprehensiveness of MEL4AM efforts. We also aim to use them to frame and support further research into the use of MEL for adaptive management, and the impact this has on wider development effectiveness.

Given the early stage of our work, we present these ideas for consideration, debate, critique and improvement. In Section 1 we summarise some of the main challenges for MEL for adaptive management, while Section 2 looks at how principles and practices for adaptive rigour can help address these challenges. Section 3 then identifies the capacities and incentives needed to enable adaptive rigour and better functioning MEL4AM in ways that can contribute to strengthened development programmes and, ultimately, better outcomes.

What are the challenges facing MEL for adaptive management?

In large bureaucracies such as bilateral donors, development organisations, and governments, there is often low tolerance for experimentation and learning, and strong preferences to follow a clear plan or blueprint that is known to 'work'. Adaptive management can become viewed as an excuse for 'making things up as you go along' and for being insufficiently accountable.

Moreover, adaptive programmes have historically tended to operate below the radar, working to meet procedural obligations and requirements through existing formal accountability mechanisms, while enabling adaptive learning through a mix of informal and formal approaches (Eyben, 2010). Adaptive programmes often rely on more informal monitoring and learning, tacit knowledge and judgement to inform their decision-making. This means that, despite the increased application of adaptive approaches, many organisations still face challenges in documenting and sharing lessons about what adaptive management looks like, and how to do it effectively.

A central focus of such work is to show that adaptive programmes *can* demonstrate forms of accountability, rigour and use of quality

evidence as core parts of the approach. Doing so requires a careful balancing act and transparency in the trade-offs that will always need to be made. Mainstream approaches to MEL and accountability in development organisations work on the basis of minimising risk and maximising predictability. Work on operational learning has shown that, despite good intentions, efforts to integrate these with formal MEL systems have focused on tools, methods and products, which have proved to be mismatched to the social, human and tacit dimensions of adaptive learning (ALNAP, 2004). So, while quality, rigour and accountability are vital to adaptive programmes, they must be practised differently.

Work on real-time evaluation in complex contexts highlights several key factors to consider (Krueger and Sagmeister, 2014), which can guide the process for developing and implementing effective MEL4AM information and systems:[1]

- **Usefulness:** How can we facilitate regular flow of data, and appropriate capacities to work with theories of change? How to determine relevant and appropriate data sources, and the relevance and limitations of different types and sources of information? What and whose information needs will the proposed approach address? To what extent will context and monitoring data, evaluation findings, and learning processes be used and useful? How can we ensure MEL4AM generates evidence that is verified and valuable?
- **Practicality:** How can formal and informal approaches for monitoring, evaluation and learning be bridged? Specifically, how can formal approaches be made more dynamic and attuned to context, while informal approaches are made more systematic and high quality? Given data availability and quality and the need to combine formal data with tacit experiential learning processes, and taking into account logistical considerations including staff time and capacity, what data

collection, analysis and learning systems are possible and practical?
- **Timeliness:** How can trade-offs between differing time pressures for a MEL4AM system be managed? What decisions need to be made and when? When is it plausible to observe changes? How are the MEL components and sequencing expected to contribute to decision-making and increase the likelihood of intended outcomes?

These factors reflect the three core elements of an evaluability assessment: utility, feasibility and plausibility (Peersman et al., 2015). MEL4AM builds on this established understanding of evaluability, adding a heightened focus on usefulness throughout the life of a project, practical considerations related to tacit knowledge and ongoing data collection and analysis, and balancing short and longer-term timeframes. As such, it has the potential to substantially improve evidence-informed decision-making, particularly during implementation, and to strengthen understanding of assumptions and possible causal pathways.

Usefulness: how best to facilitate evidence-based decision-making through MEL4AM

MEL systems are often critiqued for gathering volumes of information that are not analysed or used, are drawn upon selectively to justify decisions that have already been made, or that only portray the programme in a favourable light. Adaptive programmes have the potential to increase the likelihood that evidence will be used because they are explicitly oriented around detecting and responding to changes. These programmes often aim to include additional sources and multi-disciplinary teams, which by nature increase the scope and potentially raise a host of additional monitoring questions. While recognising the value in comprehensive sets of information and inclusive processes, operational concerns push for a lighter and a more focused MEL approach.

---

1   Many of these factors apply to MEL systems more broadly; particular aspects of adaptive programming enhance and complicate the ability to address them. Moreover, there are underlying measurement challenges related to the complex nature of the issues, contexts and change pathways that many adaptive programmes aim to address, which have contributed to critiques of insufficient rigour and that can heighten these challenges.

An important first step is to strengthen and be transparent about the types and quality of evidence used for adaptive decision-making. These programmes can be weak in terms of how they capture and share the underlying rationale for decisions, raising inevitable quality control concerns. The challenge is that one singular kind of information is seldom sufficient to justify programmatic adaptations. A focus on a range of data types and information sources, how they will be captured, verified and integrated is essential (Ramalingam et al., 2017: 12). At a minimum, investment is needed to:

- ensure appropriate capacities to work with the theory of change to determine relevant and appropriate data sources and to articulate the relevance and limitations of different data;
- facilitate the flow of necessary data in timely ways, including where to collect appropriate data in line with the theory of change;
- manage data verification, storage and sharing processes, including gathering data for different uses;
- ensure different sources of data are integrated and synthesised in meaningful ways.

Above all, there is a need not simply to assume that data can be generated and used in a mechanical fashion, but to build awareness and space to carefully interrogate and explore data, and to collectively determine its potential implications for programme implementation. This is perhaps the biggest distinction between MEL4AM and how MEL is currently practised in many programmes: with the latter often showing a dominant focus on monitoring for upward accountability and reporting, external evaluations conducted at the end of a programme that may or may not be read or used in future design, and limited space for reflection and learning.

To set priorities, programmes could match existing evidence to the theory of change to uncover gaps and information needs. The middle part of theories of change are typically the most underspecified, and assumptions frequently not assessed; long lists of performance indicators could be reduced by linking indicators to a selected set of key questions or needs. Determining

a realistic scope of MEL4AM is needed to improve the completeness and consistency of monitoring data (i.e. data quality), make it more feasible to analyse, and enable meaningful participation. These prioritisation processes are inherently political, elevating some needs and perspectives and minimising others, and there is a need to be explicit about these choices and trade-offs. The design phase of adaptive programmes should begin with an assessment of the strengths of the evidence across different causal pathways and assumptions in the chain. Subsequent data collection, analysis and iteration should focus on areas that are less well evidenced, which can help guide this prioritisation process and mitigate some of these risks.

Practicality: how to bridge the formal and informal approaches to MEL4AM

In the past, successful adaptive programmes have tended to use a mix of informal and formal monitoring and learning mechanisms. These have not always been well documented and are often viewed as subjective because, by nature, relationship-driven interventions are only observable to those directly involved, and the presence of an outsider will likely affect what is said and done. For example, adaptive programmes that aim to build new reform coalitions or alliances might draw heavily on feedback from informal meetings with key stakeholders who are close to the reform process and sense trends and shifts in alliances. These conversations can be documented, and stakeholder positions mapped to track shifts over time, for example using an alignment, interest and influence matrix (Mendizabal, 2010). Being transparent about whose perspectives are represented and, to the extent possible, triangulating among diverse viewpoints will make these assessments more robust (Buffardi et al., 2017). Such efforts are vital in areas such as governance reform, behaviour change and lobby and advocacy that are reliant on stakeholder engagement and behaviour changes. For example, in an Oxfam US-ODI study on MEL in advocacy programmes (Coe and Majot, 2013), it was found that "MEL involves a combination of informal and formal processes and MEL systems are often purposefully aimed at bridging the

formal-informal gap. Successful systems build organically on what is already in place, and operate in rhythm with existing organizational processes. Without this, 'invisible' informal processes can be undervalued and important tacit knowledge and innovation may be lost as a result." Such approaches are becoming more generally appropriate because of the growing awareness that few if any development and humanitarian challenges can be viewed as purely technical and dissociated from their social and political context (Wild et al., 2015).

Recognition of these criticisms, and addressing them by paying attention to improving transparency, including the strengths and limitations of specific approaches, and using a mix of complementary approaches that offer a balanced perspective, is therefore likely to be important (see Box 1).

Given the nature of evidence used by adaptive programmes, effective judgement and interpretation are key. Again, this can be perceived as a weakness given that it is subjective. One common way of balancing this is to build in processes for collective review and interpretation (such as forms of strategy testing) and to ensure these are similarly transparent and well documented.

Timeliness: how to manage trade-offs between differing time pressures

Adaptive programming is typically characterised by multiple decision points at different frequencies. This involves combining more rapid feedback mechanisms with those that measure longer timeframes. Monitoring, review and learning processes, process evaluation, developmental evaluation and real-time evaluation methods must be considered and combined in intelligent ways to meet these diverse needs. The potentially higher frequency and pace of change means there is an increased documentation burden and less time in which to do it, particularly if the situation changes quickly. Decisions and processes can be retrospectively documented and analysed, but the time required to do so needs to be factored into staff responsibilities. For adaptive programmes, a balance is often needed between identifying appropriate timescales for more timely data collection and ensuring accompanying processes for reviewing and acting upon that data. Forms of real-time data may be particularly useful, although recent research suggests this does not necessarily always need to be collected in real-time but rather at the right time to

---

Box 1   Strengths and weaknesses of common approaches for MEL4AM

In many ways, adaptive programmes epitomise the 'hard to measure' in development – often trying to address complex multifaceted issues, where change pathways and outcomes are unclear, uncertain and/or can take longer to observe, pursuing interventions that may be heavily relational, and operating in unpredictable contexts (Buffardi et al., 2019).

Greater openness about underlying measurement challenges and their implications, and the strengths and weaknesses of specific tools and methods, including sources of information, gaps, how information is analysed and interpreted to reach the conclusions presented, and the direction and magnitude of potential biases, is one way of helping counter these criticisms. For example:

- For approaches that aim to monitor assumptions (such as strategy testing), quality control can be difficult due to reliance on narrative viewpoints and more informal reporting, requiring attention to transparency and triangulation such that individual anecdotes are not aggregated in ways that may be unrepresentative.
- Outcome mapping requires training and time investment to develop the right outcome descriptions. Who determines appropriate outcomes can really affect the relevance of the process for specific development challenges.
- Context and stakeholder analyses and forms of user or beneficiary feedback can provide powerful, more nuanced perspectives, but by nature do not lend themselves to aggregation, comparison across different contexts, and are not widely generalisable.

support ongoing tests and iterations as part of programme delivery (Box 2).

At the same time, adaptive programming is most appropriate when change pathways to longer-term outcomes are unclear. Observing substantive shifts for some entrenched problems may take decades. This requires more longitudinal analysis, where possible identifying and measuring interim outcomes or sentinel indicators. This must be considered when determining feasible scope, and one of the biggest challenges for adaptive programming is determining how long an intervention should be trialled, or how many iterations should take place before changing course.[2] Ultimately, deciding when to stop or change an intervention component based on imperfect information is a judgement call. Assessment can be guided by expected change trajectories and matching measurement and decisions to these time points. Woolcock (2009), for example, illustrates potential impact trajectories for different types of development interventions, the tipping points and slope of which vary across different timeframes. For example, he postulates that conditional cash transfers programmes may exhibit more of an upward linear impact trend, infrastructure programmes an initial marked impact that then plateaus, AIDS awareness campaigns a lagged impact, and governance programmes a stepped impact trajectory with periods of equilibrium or lack of change and points of punctuation where more dramatic shifts are observable. Related MEL4AM systems would need to be designed accordingly, and judgement should be guided by these expected change trajectories or the wider theory of change.

How can adaptive rigour be practised?

GLAM is in the early stages of testing and developing principles and standards for adaptive rigour. The aim is to avoid producing a checklist, and instead to identify core processes and

---

Box 2   Real-time data and adaptive programming

Four case studies on real-time data (RTD) systems, and a broader process of mapping research and practitioner experience, assessed how and whether RTD could contribute to adaptive management, on behalf of USAID (Ramalingam et al., 2017). The overall findings echo the challenges around bridging MEL and adaptive management more broadly: those designing RTD systems must ensure that any data generated are acted upon, and those designing adaptive management efforts must ensure that adaptations are systematic and evidence-based, rather than opinion-based and arbitrary.

This study found that RTD systems should not be perceived as a quick or easy fix to the problems of adaptive management, but instead require careful consideration of enabling environments, and integrated design of programmatic approaches and MEL systems. Programme designers and RTD specialists need to come together to:

- decide what type of data is collected and at what frequency, and that this is appropriate for the issue and context (which may be more like 'right time data', rather than in real-time, depending on the particular programme/intervention);
- determine how real-time data can be better integrated into existing programme processes, including re-design processes and adaptive decision mechanisms; and
- ensure the quality of real-time data matches different stakeholder needs and interests.
- design real-time data initiatives to be consistently agile and iterative to meet the needs of adaptive programmes.

---

2   This question is also relevant for traditional outcome and impact evaluations, which by default are conducted at the end of the programme period regardless of the expected impact trajectory.

behaviours, and how these can be measured, to support principles being put into practice. We will be testing these through operational support to DFID, USAID and their partners and by convening learning networks to generate ideas on the most appropriate approaches.

We have identified three dimensions to adaptive rigour, explored in more detail below:

1. **Quality** of MEL4AM data and systems.
2. **Role and function** of MEL4AM processes and tools across the programme cycle.

3. **Capacities and incentives** that enable MEL4AM and its links to improved decision-making.

Ensuring quality MEL4AM systems through timeliness, practicality and timeliness

For each of the dimensions of quality described above (usefulness, practicality and timeliness), it is possible to identify a set of considerations to inform the development of such systems from scratch, and to assess existing systems to make them more attuned to the demands and requirements of adaptive management (see Table 1[3]).

Table 1   How to ensure MEL4AM data and system quality?

MEL4AM data and system quality	Key considerations
Usefulness	Purpose and utility: • Is there question- and problem-driven method and indicator selection? • Is there effort to match existing data and information to the theory of change, and attention paid to areas where there are gaps? • Is there effort to reflect on the potential plausible changes that might be observed at different points, and links created to analytical and decision-making processes? • Is there investment in human capacity to assess, verify, and synthesise data across a range of sources? Interpretation: • Is there evidence of periodic review of progress and scope to change future - plans (e.g. strategy testing or similar)? • Is the profile of people involved in interpretation diverse and inclusive? • Are collective reviews appropriately timed, involve enough time, and in relevant formats? • Is the interpretation process documented, including specific decisions and the rationale (e.g. we observe x which means y and we will respond by z)?
Practicality	Transparency about methods and data: • Is there ongoing identification of sources of information, gaps, and data quality, including the level of confidence/uncertainty, direction and magnitude of potential biases? • Are interventions, and portfolios of interventions, explicit about which aspects are most uncertain, where there is least evidence, and which may be higher risk as a result? Triangulation and integration: • Are there a range of data types and sources? • To the extent possible, are objective indicators used to assess effects, perceptions used more for interpretation? • Is there identification of potential biases and gaps in data sources?
Timeliness	Responsiveness of MEL approach: • Do reporting frameworks take into account different timeframes and related decision-making processes? • Are there indicators of different kinds adaptation scenarios and situations? • Are there appropriate MEL reflection mechanisms, enabling MEL systems to be adjusted and refined as part of implementation? • Are clear reasons provided for iteration cycles? • Is there a mix of appropriate short-, medium- and longer-term indicators, with clear reasons for their use and links to the envisaged change pathways or outcomes to be achieved?

3   For a quick diagnostic, many of these questions are phrased in a concise, close-ended manner. In practice, responses to these questions will likely examine the extent to which, in what ways, how, why (not), who and when.
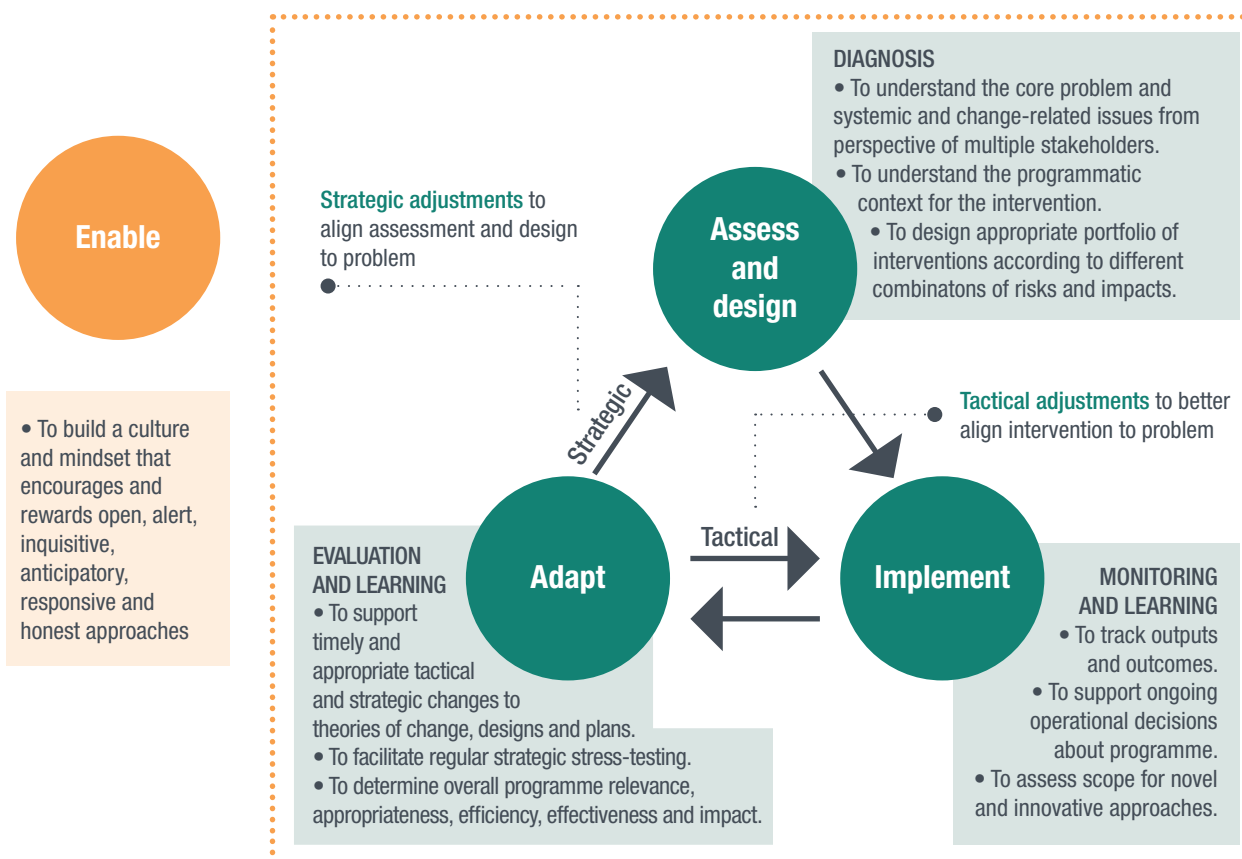
MEL processes across the programme cycle

The principles described above necessarily sit at a general level but how they are implemented across the life cycle of an adaptive intervention can vary considerably. Figure 1 shows the three stages of 'assess and design', 'implement' and 'adapt', generic to any adaptive management endeavour, and the specific roles and functions of the MEL system. Much of the attention and many of the MEL tools identified as relevant for adaptive programming often focus on the early design stage. Indeed, a recent landscape analysis indicated that evidence was used most substantially by DFID staff at the design phase (Powell et al., 2019). Adaptive rigour principles should help redress this imbalance and facilitate greater focus on the 'implement' and 'adapt' stages too. It is key to recognise the shift from the initial diagnostic phase, to a focus on ongoing monitoring and learning, with periodic opportunities for evaluation and learning as part of programme delivery.

At each of these stages, another set of questions can be asked, to indicate whether adaptive rigour is happening or to guide the development of appropriate adaptive rigour standards (see Table 2).

Each programme must consider how best to answer these questions; this should guide choices for the most appropriate tools and methods for MEL4AM. This will likely include a mix of narrative reporting (measuring value/viewpoints of different users and stakeholders); visualisation methods (mapping relationships, networks and how the project intervenes in them) and methods that can capture change, tipping points, and shifts in behaviour as much as is feasible, in both quantitative and/or qualitative ways (USAID, 2016). A combination of tools that can provide real-time data and evidence and those that can monitor and evaluate longer-term change processes, with an appropriate mix of short-, medium- and long-term indicators will also be desirable. Most adaptive programmes will need to ensure regular review points (i.e. some form of strategy testing) that appraise all data collected up to that stage, emerging insights and lessons,

Figure 1   The role of MEL in adaptive programmes

DIAGNOSIS
• To understand the core problem and systemic and change-related issues from perspective of multiple stakeholders.
• To understand the programmatic context for the intervention.
• To design appropriate portfolio of interventions according to different combinatons of risks and impacts.

Strategic adjustments to align assessment and design to problem

Assess and design

Enable

• To build a culture and mindset that encourages and rewards open, alert, inquisitive, anticipatory, responsive and honest approaches

Tactical adjustments to better align intervention to problem

Strategic

Adapt

EVALUATION AND LEARNING
• To support timely and appropriate tactical and strategic changes to theories of change, designs and plans.
• To facilitate regular strategic stress-testing.
• To determine overall programme relevance, appropriateness, efficiency, effectiveness and impact.

Tactical

Implement

MONITORING AND LEARNING
• To track outputs and outcomes.
• To support ongoing operational decisions about programme.
• To assess scope for novel and innovative approaches.

Table 2   How to establish MEL processes across an adaptive programme cycle?

MEL processes	Key considerations
Assess and design	To understand the core problem: • Does problem analysis take account of and analyse the pace and nature of change? • Does problem analysis recognise what is known/unknown about how the problem and the wider system operates, and the key relationships, behaviours and incentives within it? To understand the programmatic context: • What kinds of theories of change have been employed in the past, and with what implications for current programme? Is the necessary contextual information available in a timely fashion? • How can this be incorporated into ongoing monitoring and learning efforts? To design appropriate portfolio of interventions: • Are different interventions based on available evidence, lessons, and understanding of risks? • Does the reporting and monitoring plan focus on testing assumptions? • Are there mechanisms and triggers for regularly revisiting design principles and approaches? • Have different adaptation scenarios been considered around core assumptions? • Does the chosen combination of MEL methods and tools support all of the above?
Implement	To ensure targeted collection of data and evidence on outputs and outcomes: • Is data collection grounded in testing assumptions? • Is there use of data/perspectives from end-users/target beneficiaries? • Is the data verified and triangulated, and if so, how? To support ongoing operational decision-making: • Are the processes by which data and evidence are expected to be used in decision-making transparent and accessible? • Does decision-making involve collective processes of synthesis, interpretation and sensemaking? • Are decision-makers able to establish a regular and overall picture of the benefits, costs, strengths and weakness of the intervention? To enable assessment of scope for novel or innovative approaches: • Does the system involve real-time methods, including new technologies if appropriate? • Do decision-makers have scope to adapt the MEL approach based on its utility and value?
Adapt	To support timely and appropriate tactical and strategic changes: • Are there explicit considerations of strategic and tactical changes in response to evidence-based needs and opportunities? • Is there information on the process by which programme plans, theories and designs can be reformed?

and identify any changes. Crucially, this should be clearly documented, including follow-up actions and changes in strategy or action. In practice, this is akin to embedding a robust process evaluation and making adjustments based on this information – evidence that will be essential to conduct and interpret longer-term impact evaluations.

There should be an initial assumption that measurement indicators and methods may need to change as the intervention is delivered, or as it learns more about the underlying problems to be addressed, and therefore what outcomes need to be measured. This should be factored into the evaluation design; thus, more embedded models such as developmental evaluation are likely to be most appropriate (Patton, 2010). In the implementation phase, four types of changes may occur, which have different implications for measurement. The context, beneficiary profile, intervention design and/or the intended (and therefore measured) outcomes may shift. Additional measurement points may be required immediately after changes take place and may reduce the number of comparable measurements over time. Changes in context may reduce the feasibility of comparing outcomes across sites. This has the potential to increase data collection burden and complicate the analysis.

That said, documenting deviations from the intended design and having fewer points of comparison is far more rigorous than falsely assuming an intervention was implemented in a consistent way across sites, over time and with the original design.[4] Characterising changes in context, beneficiary profile and the intervention will further enhance understanding of programme effects by specifying potential explanatory factors and more accurately characterising the intervention as implemented in practice.

Establish the right capacities and incentives for MEL4AM

As noted earlier, adaptive rigour is not just about selecting the right tools and methods. It needs a supportive culture and incentives to be properly operationalised, including both wider accountability and reporting processes that reinforce the MEL design, and a supportive culture and way of working.

As much as possible, programme managers must align their reporting and accountability requirements to these MEL processes. This means avoiding the temptation to simply 'add in' additional indicators of learning and adaptation alongside conventional reporting on deliverables, and instead changing the reporting frameworks themselves. For instance, for adaptive programmes, it is often key to identify core outcome indicators and how these can be tracked, and then to report on the ways in which the programme is learning how to achieve these, and whether it is on track to do so. This should be the basis for an accountability framework, rather than narrow reporting against expected deliverables (see Box 3). To reinforce this, contracts should allow for activities and approaches to change in response to the results of experimentation. This should mean funders holding their partners to account for how well they have learnt, tested and validated their approach, rather than for how well they have stuck to a plan or achieved a narrow set of pre-planned deliverables (see Bryan and Carter, 2016).

Within the delivery of a given programme, senior leaders and managers should foster an enabling working environment and mindset for how to approach change. This means building what others have called positive error cultures

Table 3   How to ensure appropriate MEL4AM capacities and incentives?

MEL4AM data and system quality	Key considerations
Capacities	• Do senior leaders and managers foster an enabling working environment and shared mindsets around adaptive change? • Are there safe spaces to recognise uncertainty, identify early failures/what is not working, and to ensure that action is taken to address it? • Is MEL4AM clearly positioned as an internal team function? • Is value placed on, and investments made in, staff capacities of curiosity and creativity, critical thinking, openness to risk, comfort with uncertainty? Does recruitment, reward, training promotion systems enable these attributes and behaviours?
Incentives	• Are reporting and accountability mechanisms aligned with MEL4AM processes? Do they incentivise learning and adaptations? • Are contracts, financial and human resource arrangements supportive of the need for adaptations through the implementation process?

4   Intervention fidelity is of greatest concern when trying to establish proof of concept and when aiming to compare a standardised approach across many groups. Variation in how an intervention has been implemented risks misattributing outcomes to the intervention as designed, rather than how it has been implemented in practice. Process evaluations, which measure how an intervention was implemented, would detect this variation, but are not standard practice. In this sense, if adaptive programming is accompanied with more frequent documentation of practices and changes, it has the potential to improve this neglected aspect of MEL.

(well recognised in aviation safety, where an expectation is created that staff at all levels can admit to their own errors or highlight the errors of others) (Syed, 2016). Emphasis is placed on facilitating safe spaces to recognise uncertainty, identify early failures or what is not working, and – crucially – to ensure that action is taken; errors are 'positive' when they are identified and then corrected, rather than just identified for the sake of it. Therefore, roles and responsibilities for MEL4AM should be clearly positioned as an internal team function integrated into the process of gathering and interpreting data, framing issues and testing assumptions, rather than as an external function to assure independence and objectivity. Staff capacities and individual attributes conducive to this way of working include curiosity and creativity, critical thinking, openness to risk and comfort with uncertainty (see USAID, 2018). Not all staff will have this disposition; it is about getting the right people in the right roles. Recruitment, reward and promotion systems should enable rather than disincentive these attributes and behaviours as much as is possible. Table 3 summarises these key considerations to build MEL4AM capacities and incentives.

Final reflections: operationalising rigour

We argue that working with adaptive rigour is about taking purposeful and clear steps in three interlinked areas:

- Address quality challenges for MEL4AM data and systems by ensuring usefulness, practicality and timeliness.

- Design and implement relevant MEL4AM processes and tools across the programme cycle.
- Strengthen capacities and incentives to facilitate effective use of MEL4AM.

We have identified some of the key features of MEL4AM tools, systems, processes and enabling environments, and framed these in a way to enable those involved in such work to use them as in design of new MEL4AM efforts and to assess and improve ongoing efforts.

It is clear that MEL4AM is not – and is unlikely to ever be – a simple matter of identifying and applying specific tools and methods. Rather, it is about a establishing a series of heuristics, frameworks and processes for thinking more systematically about complex and evolving development problems and how best to address them. GLAM is embarked on a journey to deepen collective understanding about what these look like, and how best to apply them, within and across development organisations, and this paper is an initial exploration of that terrain. There is a need to improve knowledge of, and capabilities for, appropriate methods, data collection and analysis, building on advances over the last decade and a half in applying core social science techniques to international development. This must be accompanied by strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning systems as the engines for relevant and timely evidence, reflection and decision-making, efforts which have been relatively neglected amidst heated methodological debates. This is itself an ambitious endeavour: done right, we believe that such engines can drive the effective and adaptive development endeavours that are needed ever more urgently around the world.

References

ALNAP (2004) *Learning by field level workers. Review of humanitarian action 2003* (37–84). London: ODI

Bryan, K. and Carter, P. (2016) *Contracts for adaptive programming*. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/10575-contracts-adaptive-programming)

Buffardi, A.L., Hearn, S. and Tilley, H. (2017) *Refining advocacy assessment: reflections from practice*. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/10731-refining-advocacy-assessment-reflections-practice)

Buffardi, A.L. and Pasanen, T. with Hearn, S. (2019) 'Measuring the hard to measure in development: dimensions, measurement challenges and responses' in P. Dobrescu (ed.) *Measuring Development in Turbulent Times*. Springer

Coe, J. and Majot, J. (2013) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in NGO advocacy: Findings from Comparative Policy Advocacy MEL Review Project, Oxfam America and ODI (www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/mel-in-ngo-advocacy-full-report.pdf)

Eyben, R. (2010) 'Hiding relations: the irony of "effective aid"' *European Journal of Development Research* 22(3): 382–397

Krueger, S. and Sagmeister, E. (2014) 'Real-time evaluation of humanitarian assistance revisited: lessons learned and the way forward' *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation* 10(23): 59–72 (http://journals.sfu.ca/jmde/index.php/jmde_1/article/view/380)

Mendizabal, E. (2010) *The Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix (AIIM) guidance note*. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/5288-alignment-interest-and-influence-matrix-aiim-guidance-note)

Patton, M.Q. (2010) *Developmental evaluation: applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. Guilford Press

Peersman, G., Guijt, I. and Pasanen, T. (2015) *Evaluability assessment for impact evaluation*, Methods Lab publication. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/9442-evaluability-assessment-impact-evaluation-guidance-checklists-and-decision-support)

Powell, J., Orton-Vipond, S., Bhatia, V. and Kilroy, A. (2018) *DFID decision-making and data use landscaping*. Washington DC: Development Gateway

Ramalingam, B. (2013) *Aid on the edge of chaos: rethinking international cooperation in a complex world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Ramalingam, B., Barnett, I., Levy, A., Oppenheimer, C. and Valters, C. with Hernandez, K., Lee, P., Whittle, D. and Wild, L. (2017) *Bridging real-time data and adaptive management: ten lessons for policy-makers and practitioners*. mSTAR/United States Agency for International Development (www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/15396/RTD4AM_Policy_Design_Lessons.pdf)

Syed, M. (2016) *Black box thinking: marginal gains and the secrets of high performance: the surprising truth about success*. London: John Murray

Wild, L. and Ramalingam, R. (2018) *Building a global learning alliance on adaptive management*. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/11167-building-global-learning-alliance-adaptive-management)

Wild, L., Booth, D., Cummings, C., Foresti, M. and Wales, J. (2015). Adapting Development: Improving Services to the Poor. London: Overseas Development Institute (www.odi.org/publications/8125-adapting-development-improving-services-poor)

Woolcock, M. (2009) 'Toward a plurality of methods in project evaluation: a contextualised approach to understanding impact trajectories and efficacy' *Journal of Development Effectiveness* 1(1): 1–14

USAID – United States Agency for International Development (2016) *SPACES MERL: systems and complexity white paper*. United States Agency for International Development (https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00m7qz.pdf)

USAID (2018) *Adaptive management – discussion note*. United States Agency for International Development (https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/discussion-note-adaptive-management)

Acknowledgements

Evidence.
Ideas.
Change.

ODI is an independent, global think tank, working for a sustainable and peaceful world in which every person thrives. We harness the power of evidence and ideas through research and partnership to confront challenges, develop solutions, and create change.