Making adaptive rigour work

The adaptive rigour inventory – version 1.0

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Abstract

Many development and humanitarian problems are complex and uncertain, and demand responses that are underpinned by systematic processes for gathering data and information, interpreting and learning, and making decisions that enable adaptation, flexibility and innovation. How to do this in ways that ensure both learning and accountability has been a longstanding challenge. The Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative is working to define and strengthen 'adaptive rigour' within development and humanitarian programmes. Our work to date suggests that working with adaptive rigour is about taking purposeful and clear steps in three interlinked areas:

- Addressing quality challenges for monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management (MEL4AM) data and systems by ensuring usefulness, practicality and timeliness.
- Designing and implementing relevant MEL4AM processes and tools across the programme cycle.
- Strengthening capacities and incentives to facilitate effective use of MEL4AM.

This inventory is an annex and should be used in conjunction with the **'Making adaptive rigour work'** briefing. It sets out our current understanding of the key features of programmes that exhibit adaptive rigour, organised in these three areas. It presents these features in the form of a series of questions to be asked by those used in designing, developing, implementing and improving monitoring, evaluation and learning systems for adaptive programmes. This inventory will be regularly updated and revised by the GLAM team as our understanding develops and expands.

Table 1   How to ensure MEL4AM data and system quality?

MEL4AM data and system quality	Key considerations
Usefulness: How to ensure appropriate quality of data and that any data and evidence generated is actually acted upon	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: How to ensure diverse monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches, which are transparent about biases and gaps	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: How to manage trade-offs and balance between different timeframes, ensuring right time data to inform decision making	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?

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

MEL stages of the programme cycle	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?

Note: 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.

Table 3 How to ensure appropriate MEL4AM capacities and incentives?

MEL4AM capacities and incentives	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?

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