MEL for Complex Programs in Complex Contexts: three facility case studies

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Outline

- Research topic
- Relevance and scope
- Method and Limitations
- Discussion (data analysis)
- Key findings
- Conclusions
Research topic

- Based on Abt’s unique experience to date, what does it take to develop MELFs (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Frameworks) for large, multi-sector facilities?

- How and why did this experience deviate from international MEL theory and practice?
Relevance to Literature

Two-fold

1. MEL theory & practice: most MEL issued guidance suited for programs working in ‘simple’ change contexts

2. Thinking and Working Politically theory and practice: good on MEL for complex change contexts, but largely drawn from single sector, single modality case studies
Three case studies

- All high-profile, high-value multi-sector facilities managed by Abt and funded by DFAT
- PNG Governance Partnership; KOMPAK in Indonesia; ATLPHD in Timor Leste.
- Combined value of over A$500m over four years, representing approx. 20% of Australia’s bilateral aid budget to these countries.

At a glance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>KOMPAK</th>
<th>PHD / ALTPHD</th>
<th>Governance Partnership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timeline</strong></td>
<td>Commenced January 2015; End</td>
<td>Commenced June 2016</td>
<td>Commenced December 2015; End (phase 1) November 2020</td>
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<td><strong>Geographic scope</strong></td>
<td>seven provinces, across 26</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>national, sub-national (up to 12 provinces and districts) and community levels, including the Autonomous Region of Bougainville</td>
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<td></td>
<td>districts.</td>
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<td><strong>Value</strong></td>
<td>AUD 177 million over 7.5 years</td>
<td>AUD 120 million over five years</td>
<td>AUD 450 million over five years</td>
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<td><strong>SECTORAL FOCUS</strong></td>
<td>Local level service delivery,</td>
<td>Human development (health, water</td>
<td>Governance including community development decentralisation, economic growth and reform, public sector leadership, gender and inclusion.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>governance and economic</td>
<td>and sanitation, education,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>development, governance</td>
<td>nutrition, gender equality,</td>
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<td>disability and social</td>
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<td>protection)</td>
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Method

1. Key document review

2. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis
   - 6 interviews, 3 MEL teams

3. Triangulation and ‘sense-checking’
   - 5 of 6 program responses and 7 from the executive
Limitations

- Small sample size (Abt only manages three facilities in the Indo-Pacific)
- Focus on facility-wide MELFs (not project or activity level MEL)
- Focus on MELF design and conceptualization (and less so on implementation)
# Common Donor expectations

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<th>Donors reviewed</th>
<th>Common features</th>
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| DFAT, USAID, OECD-DAC | 1. Accountability is primary focus for MEL efforts  
2. MEL is based off an investment design and associated project logic  
3. MEL approaches reflect a simple, linear change model (input → goal) vs emergent strategies  
4. Performance indicators key mechanism for measuring performance  
5. Baselines preferred for tracking progress  
6. Generally an *ex post* focus for evaluation |
Discussion (ii) KOMPAK Indonesia

Dated 2018
## Key findings (i) Strategy

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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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| (i) strategic intent         | • One of the most challenging objectives - to clarify the Facility’s strategic intent, macro theory-of-change and an agreed strategic plan which would guide the development of the MELF  
• Related to this: distinguishing between Theories of Change and Theories of Action, and ensuring the former is given sufficient attention in ‘M’ and ‘L’. |
| (ii) purpose of MELF         | • Expectations of MELFs were far more complicated than anticipated.  
• MELFs had to serve multiple purposes - accountability, public diplomacy/communication, evaluation and internal learning. |
# Key findings (ii) MEL Structure

## Issue

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<th>(iii) program logics and theories of change</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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|                                            | • Nested frameworks and aggregation of results generally do not suit Facilities - mixed methods are required.  
• Have to ‘measure’ both development impact of Facility and the validity of the modality itself |

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<th>(iv) indicators and defining ‘success’</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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|                                       | • The higher up the program hierarchy we went - the harder it became to understand and measure change  
• Relatively good at setting and tracking output level change - but much harder to understand and set indicators at the outcome and goal level?  
  ○ Success is hard to measure (i.e. complex institutional change)  
  ○ Attribution impossible at outcome level but contribution possible |

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<th>(v) baselines and data quality</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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|                              | • Traditional approaches to baselining and quantitative regression analysis very hard to apply to constantly changing portfolio  
• Qualitative, mixed methods (e.g. strategy testing) combined with external review/ verification much easier to apply at Facility-wide level  
• The quality of the country’s own data institutions and capacity impacts ability to set baselines and undertake contribution analysis |
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| (vi) learning, reflection and program adaptation | • The second most challenging objective - to actually use information, learning and MELF data to change/adapt programming (budgets, activities etc) in real time  
• MELF teams and systems usually separate to implementation  
• Incentives meant output level reporting often trumped program learning, reflection and adaptation activities - at least in the early stages of implementation |
| (vii) resourcing and legacy investments    | • Very difficult to find staff who are both technically strong on MEL and understand adaptive programming  
• Tendency to rely on international experts which reduces capacity in-house  
• Donor’s move away from aid specialist to policy generalist skills  
• Funding for MEL activities generally not programmed for at design and often lower priority come implementation |
Conclusions

- Found seven areas where deviation from more ‘traditionally’ designed and implemented MELF was required.

- Overall take-away: traditional forms of MEL do not lend themselves to the facility model (complex projects working in complex change contexts)

- If we are serious about transforming how complex programs and complex change are measured – the start with the logic of the project framework itself, not MEL methods.
Thank you

Hard copies of our paper and other Abt publications are available at the front lectern. Online version available in March on Governance Soapbox website.

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The Governance Soapbox website

https://abtassocgovernancesoapbox.wordpress.com/working-paper-series/

Governance Soapbox
What is this ‘Governance’ Thing Anyway?

Working Paper Series


This paper, the fifth in Abt Associates Governance Working Paper Series, examines two critical questions: where and how can external actors be useful in the process of state building and capacity development, and what is the relationship (if any) between them? The paper is relevant to Abt Associates experience of implementing three large Australian Government funded facilities in Timor Leste, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. In each case Abt Associates worked closely with local counterparts as well as the Australian Government to tackle the most critical governance challenges each country is facing. From this experience, we know that the process of building is one which must – first and foremost – be led by a public management team and culture. Without the management capacity, the investment in infrastructure and capacity development will be lost.