

Participation,  
power and politics  
in evaluation –  
'Upside down MEL'

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# Acknowledgements



*ALL IDEAS ARE THOSE OF THE PRESENTERS*

# Framing the issue

**MEL is political: despite common perceptions.**

- Commissioning, use, interpretation and transparency of data is shaped by those with power; and MEL specialists
- Evidence and research defined through a Western academic lens: tacit, relational, story-telling local knowledge not always seen as “sufficient” evidence

**Those “at the top” prefer unambiguous, aggregable, succinct evidence; focusing on data for public accountability or policy and political ends.**

- Has a place but not useful for in-depth analysis and understanding of overall change – two factors which are critical in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of aid programs
- A fixation on program performance information has devalued needs of those at the ‘front line’ (communities, leaders, CSOs and staff)

# Indigenous Australia

**What is valued in MEL depends on who holds the power and resources**

## **Deviance from “traditional MEL”**

- Focus on understanding value of projects in supporting increased Aboriginal control and well being as defined by them
- M&E looks to understand overall value of the work, rather than the results of any one project.
- Strong focus on the quality of relationships between stakeholders

## **Application / caveats**

- Aboriginal people fund these projects out of their own royalty money (which they choose to spend collectively for wider benefit).

## **Power, participation and politics**

- Aboriginal people fund these projects from royalty money (choosing to spend collectively for wider benefit).
- Aboriginal peoples voice and analysis is valued above others.
- Impossible to generate comparable measures due to the complexity of the locations. History and story of each place is much more useful in understanding why change happens (or not).

## **Methods**

- Primary focus on views and experiences of Aboriginal people, through interviews, focus groups and story telling.
- Multiple analysis processes.

# Strategy Testing – The Asia Foundation

Meeting accountability needs for those “at the top” can be in tension with learning needs of those “at the bottom”

## Deviance from “traditional MEL”

- Method designed specifically for politically-informed, iterative programs.
- Primary evidence source tacit knowledge, privileged political insights, relationship-based information.
- Based on complex non-linear change model.

## Application / caveats

- 10+ countries across Asia.
- Has been adapted and replicated by other projects with varying success.
- May only be possible in this form given special operating and institutional context in TAF at the time.
- Focuses on those with power, can be exclusionary in its diagnosis .

## Power, participation and politics

- Project teams (primarily national staff) direct process, discussion and findings – external “trusted” facilitator.
- National staff and consultants (reliant on their networks) are the sources of knowledge.
- Team responsible for reaching judgments on action – AND have delegated authority to act

## Methods

- Quarterly R&R sessions.
- Theories of change, timelines and adjustment sheets.
- Complements daily, hourly weekly team adjustments

# Framing the issue

If a program wants to tackle a complex problem in a complex context, then a typical log-frame/ pre-planned approach to MEL wont work.

- Focus must be on learning, analysis and adaptation because the problem and solution are not understood at design
- MEL needs to be embedded in programming and resourced to enable teams to constantly adjust and search for the most likely path to change
- Good methodologies exist to support such MEL but require M&E practitioners with comprehensive research, evaluation, political insights and other skills to design these in context.

**To understand power and structure – and to enable people to change these structures – the voice and experience of people should be part of the MEL.**

- Provides contextual, tailored data reflecting political and social complexity (gender)
- Opportunity for people to influence, engage with and create knowledge themselves and thus contribute to solutions
- Well established approaches and methods, but not always valued...Ignorance? Power? Racism?

# Solomon Islands

**MEL as a programming strategy in its own right**

## **Deviance from “traditional MEL”**

- Includes a focus on what has changed for the GoSI departments. In line with intent of the programs to shift the relationship to one of mutual development with shared accountability for change.
- Includes resources for in-depth inquiry (using good research methods) to understand wicked and complex aspects of the changes sought.

## **Application / caveats**

- Utilised in two major programs in Solomon Islands.
- More resource intensive than traditional MEL and provides more information that is not of direct value to the funders.
- Requires a wide range of research and evaluative skills not present in one person or place.

## **Power, participation and politics**

- GoSI departments create their own baseline and ongoing assessments. Sharing progress annually.
- Use this to identify action for the Government and recommendations to the donor.
- Complemented by research and inquiry into service provision and experience of people.
- Uses local MEL staff working with external support.

## **Methods**

- Organisational Capacity Assessments adapted to local use.
- Annual strategy testing
- Annual review and report session
- Various research and inquiry processes
- Considerable analysis and review of multiple data sources.

# Papua New Guinea

## Valuing context and local participation in MEL processes

### **Deviance from “traditional MEL”**

- Primary evidence source: relationship-based local tacit knowledge and insight.
- Supporting local stakeholders to collectively monitor changes in behavior and relationships
- Draws on outcome mapping and strategy testing methodologies
- Based on complex non-linear change model

### **Application / caveats**

- Sub-national governance programming, multiple actors single agreed problem or vision.
- Authorising environment for immediate decisions on support a work in progress.

### **Power, participation and politics**

- Facilitated by program teams.
- Key local actors are the source of the knowledge
- Program teams and local actors collectively agree support actions

### **Methods**

- 6-monthly review and reflection sessions.
- Change Maker Summaries, Progress Updates, Strategy & Performance Journals
- Compliments traditional activity and adviser reporting