

Learning and reflection rounds: an empowerment approach to strengthening national evaluation capacities

Key words: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Empowerment, Institutionalization of learning culture, adaptive management, Utilized evaluations, inclusion

While the evaluation community agrees on the importance of strengthening National Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL), important questions arise on how to sustain and institutionalize learning practices to reinforce evidence-based decision making and results-based management. MEL systems led by public sector value a bottom-up approach, putting developing countries in the driver's seat. Why is then MEL not playing its role to its full potential to improve government performance?

Many argue that the increased complexity of the administrative structure of governmental entities, the overlap of mandates of different departments, the presence of different strategies, and indicators, the lack of experience with regard to applying MEL in governmental organizations and weak capacities of responsible staff, make it a real challenge to apply a sound system in limited time.

This presentation, however **argues** based on experience, that the the most common reason for failure or underachievement of MEL systems in the public sector is because management focuses resources on public **accountability as part of good governance at the cost of learning**. Due to tight money disbursement plans and the overwhelming planned activities, people involved in operational activities are rarely given the time and space for knowledge sharing and structured learning loops.

The main **objective of the proposed presentation** is to present an unconventional empowerment approach to institutionalizing learning and reflection that was tested and used in several context. It builds on Michael Patton's work on Empowerment Evaluation Theory, fostering peer learning and collaboration to strengthen national MEL systems. The concept carries the hope that evaluation systems will be nationally owned. The presentation **contributes** to Stream 1 by focusing on challenges, best practices and lessons learnt to results-based management at the country level.

The main **advantage** of an empowerment versus a participatory or a traditional approach to setting national MEL system is that it blends an off the job and on the job approach to designing and managing MEL system reinforcing adaptive management. It offers an unconventional approach to what can be done to enhance the interest and involvement of stakeholders in the reflection and evaluation process. A dialogue is initiated to apply the main cornerstones of MEL system, generating value for any team by fostering a sense of **ownership, inclusion and empowerment**. If it is institutionalized in organizations, it can serve as a great knowledge sharing hub and team building activity. As it stresses dialogue, it might even contribute to enhancing relationship between different stakeholders. This approach, however necessitates that the role of M&E responsible(s) shift from an expert to coach, facilitator, trainer and advisor. In addition, it stresses the role of management as key driver for sustainability of process and utilization of evaluation.

Finally, the presentation will highlight several outstanding issues, including: the challenge of balancing the evaluation needs of the donor and beneficiary and the role of donors in supporting partner ownership of systems.

Sources:

<https://usaidelearninglab.org/qrg/understanding-cla-0>

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