Breaking the Mould: Alternative approaches to monitoring and evaluation

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Many humanitarian agencies struggle to use the information generated by monitoring and evaluation systems for much beyond donor reporting. Using that same information for ongoing decision-making and learning at project-level remains a challenge that few have truly cracked.

The ALNAP Secretariat has conducted background research into the options for changing the way project-level M&E is done, with a view to maximising its usefulness for the sorts of ongoing decision-making and informal learning processes that often characterise humanitarian work. The Secretariat would now like to encourage open discussion of challenges and opportunities ahead and share learning from other organisations in this area.

Background:

Traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems have often been criticised for focusing too heavily on donor accountability at the expense of the types of reflection and learning that can improve project-level decision-making. This echoes longstanding concerns about the limited use of evaluation systems both inside and outside the humanitarian sector and mirrors wider questions about when and how evidence is actually used in decision-making.

In truth, the question of how M&E is or can be used is not straightforward. Just as learning and decision-making systems can be formal and informal; evidence-use can be direct or indirect, explicit or implicit. 'Use' can be thought of in terms of mechanistic impact – a report read leading to a decision made – or as wider learning and long-term knowledge building over time, which may impact future decisions in quite complex and subtle ways. This point is all the more forceful in the humanitarian sector, where tacit knowledge – the hard-won lessons of experience filtered through the beliefs, instincts and value structures of individual aid workers – plays a big role.

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Doing M&E differently

Nevertheless, there are mounting calls to improve our understanding of the ways M&E systems can feed into this tacit knowledge-base, and influence project-level decision-making and learning over time. This is, in part, a result of the growing interest in new, more flexible approaches to programme design and implementation. 'Adaptive management' is an approach to humanitarian action which accepts that no amount of information during project design will ever be good enough, so we must rely on continuous analysis and adaptation to allow a project to respond to local context, changing needs and evolving knowledge as the project unfolds.

To better mesh with adaptive management approaches, M&E systems need more flexibility so they can cope with intentional project changes during implementation. These also need to support continuous programme change by fitting into rapid cycles of planning, monitoring, evaluating and learning. Arguably, this will require fully embedding M&E within planning and implementation teams, and providing information that encourages continuous experimentation, testing and re-testing of approaches as programme activities are implemented and situations evolve.

Some organisations have begun to look at options to meet this need. The Global Learning for Adaptive Management programme is currently identifying innovative evidence-based approaches to adaptive management and The Response Innovation Lab has developed a toolkit that includes tailored monitoring and evaluation guidance for innovation. USAID has also published work on complexity-aware monitoring and evaluation as part of its Collaborating, Learning and Adapting programme approach. It will be interesting to see how these approaches move forward in the next five years, and the extent to which they are picked up and applied across the humanitarian sector.

To better mesh with adaptive management approaches, M&E systems need more flexibility so they can cope with intentional project changes during implementation. Photo credit: Andrea Contenta

Learning from M&E in other sectors

In truth, M&E specialists in sectors as diverse as health, education and social innovation, have been tackling similar issues for some time. Approaches such as realist evaluation, outcome harvesting, developmental evaluation, soft systems methodology and others have been trialled and used in a range of different contexts since the late 1990s. This paper makes clear that bringing similar innovations to humanitarian M&E will not happen without overcoming a range of challenges in the way things are currently done. It will therefore be important to think in terms of what can be done, not what cannot. But the cost of continuing with 'traditional' M&E is equally problematic. The quantity of project-level evaluation has risen significantly over the past 20 years but its impact on decision-making has repeatedly been questioned. The *status quo* raises questions, therefore, about the value for money of evaluation at the level of individual project analysis.

The ALNAP Secretariat's hypothesis is that by sharing learning from some of the more innovative M&E approaches on the market, the potential use of M&E systems for ongoing project-level decision-making and learning will be enhanced. In some ways, the call for adaptation-ready M&E reflects common concerns about what good M&E should have been doing all along.

Yet this doesn't happen anywhere near enough for the calls for innovation to be unwarranted. So, by sharing examples of success in 'adaptation-ready M&E', The Secretariat hopes to encourage improvements in M&E practice across the board.

Questions for discussion

The ALNAP Secretariat wants to stimulate a conversation around broadening the range of M&E approaches used in the humanitarian sector, by sharing examples of innovative approaches that can mesh with problem-driven iterative adaptation and real-time learning. We want to learn lessons from previous attempts to fit M&E into the humanitarian decision-making cycle (e.g. real-time evaluation and participatory M&E) whilst considering the challenges and opportunities presented by newer innovations (e.g. developmental evaluation, embedded evaluation, and systems-thinking approaches). We want to discuss how innovations in M&E systems can enhance the bridge between formal and informal knowledge systems at play in the humanitarian sector and whether improving the way we do M&E can change the use of the information generated.

ALNAP's new paper *Breaking the Mould* and other M&E research is available at **alnap.org/me**.

Notes

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