GFAR

GFAR MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING APPROACH

Version for the Steering Committee, shortened from the full MEL strategy – 23/9/2022

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1. DEFINITIONS

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)	"The purpose of monitoring, evaluation and learning practices is to apply knowledge gained from evidence and analysis to improve development outcomes and ensure accountability for the resources used to achieve them. Before we plan our activities, we need to know what we are trying to do and what we need to learn to ensure that the data we collect will help us make decisions." [1]
Monitoring	"A continuing function that uses systematic collection of data on specified indicators to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing development intervention with indications of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives and progress in the use of allocated funds."[2]
Evaluation	"The systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfillment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision–making process of both recipients and donors. Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or program." Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or program."[3]
Learning	"Learning is the process through which information generated from M&E is reflected upon and intentionally used to continuously improve a project's ability to achieve results."[4] (Learning can actually use input and resources not specifically generated from or for M&E: the integration of this input and learning in the M&E makes the M&E system a real MEL system.)
Theory of Change	"A theory of change is a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, are expected to lead to a specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence"[5] "A Theory of Change is best described as a flow chart, diagram or description of why the activities you take part in will create the change you want to see in the world. It seeks to identify the resources that you will need, the main activities you will need to perform and, finally, the end products or services (outputs) which you will need to deliver. Crucially, it then identifies all of the step changes (outcomes) which will need to occur in order to deliver your long-term goal or mission."[6]

1 USAID CLA Toolkit: https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla/cla-toolkit/me-learning
2 OECD Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management: https://www.oecd.org/development/peer-reviews/2754804.pdf
3 See note 9 above.
4 NIDOS Monitoring, Evaluation And Learning (MEL) Guide: https://www.intdevalliance.scot/application/files/5715/0211/8537/MEL_Support_Package_4th_June.pdf
5 UNDG: https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/UNDG-UNDAF-Companion-Pieces-7-Theory-of-Change.pdf
6 https://analyticsinaction.co/theory-of-change-vs-logic-model

Assumptions	"Any theory of change is rooted in assumptions. Assumptions are the conditions that need to be in place to make the theory work; they explain the logic behind the overall programme and behind the causal links (for example, showing that an output will lead to an outcome, or that one outcome will lead to another) in the theory."[7]
Indicator	"Quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means to measure achievement, to reflect the changes connected to an intervention, or to help assess the performance of a development actor."[8]
Compound / composite indicator	"A composite indicator is formed when individual indicators are compiled into a single index, on the basis of an underlying model of the multi-dimensional concept that is being measured."[9] "Composite indicators are often used to measure multidimensional and in many cases abstract concepts, which cannot be captured by single indicators. Examples include composite indices of well-being or happiness or business cycle indices, summarizing a range of different indicators into one number in order to simplify interpretation."[10]
Data / input collection method	The method through which input is collected: can be in person (interview, focus group), printed (questionnaire, attendance sheet) or online (survey, activity progress form, online attendance sheet etc.)
Data / input collection tool	The full setup of an input collection exercise: a combination of a collection method, a set of questions and a set of respondents. (E.g., an "Event data form" for event organizers, an "Activity progress form" for project staff, a "Survey on inclusiveness of activity" for activity participants.)
Learning question	A broad question that helps you understand if and to what extent a certain outcome is being realized, especially in terms of perceptions and behaviors, or if your assumptions were correct. More learning questions can be needed for one outcome, and more indicators and input collection questions may be needed to answer one learning question.
Self-signification	"The process by which respondents answer predefined follow-up questions about a real-life experience they shared in the narrative, allowing additional layers of information to be collected."[11]

7 NCVO Knowhow: https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/how-to/how-to-build-a-theory-of-change

8 OECD Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management: https://www.oecd.org/development/peer-reviews/2754804.pdf

9 OECD definition (see http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/)

10 From UNECE seminar: see https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/ge.42/2017/Seminar/Chapter_3_-_Typology_of_indicators_2017.05.18_-_for_seminar.pdf

11 Guijt, I., Gottret, MA., Hanchar, A., Deprez, S., Muckenhirn, R., (2022) The Learning Power of Listening, Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing http://dx.doi.org/10.3362/9781788532006

2. RATIONALE

There are some obvious reasons for setting up a good Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) system for GFAR, like detecting / demonstrating success or failure, understanding the reasons behind either, being accountable to funders and partners, confirming or adapting the Theory of Change (ToC), verifying assumptions, and in general getting evidence on the results of what GFAR does and the changes GFAR contributes to.

More specifically, for GFAR at this stage:

- The Independent Evaluation[12] conducted in 2018 recommended:
    - o Improving the capitalization of, and learning from, results of GFAR collective actions.
    - o Defining practical participatory learning trajectories and the systematic use of innovative, creative and nonconventional ways of documenting, sharing and learning.
    - o One of the recommended learning trajectories is around *"GFAR Strategy, Focus and Visualization: to specify GFAR's operational strategy, theory of change, design a monitoring, outcome harvesting and sharing and reporting system."*
- GFAR needs a MEL system that is flexible enough to accommodate its multiple learning levels (at the GFAR level, at regional level, at the level of Collective Actions) and potentially multiple reporting lines (in case of parallel projects with different funding partners). The new GFAR ToC will be the main framework against which to learn and evaluate, based on GFAR's organizational and societal objectives and values, but GFAR may also have time-bound projects agreed with funders that may be based on different logical frameworks, and may need / want to also learn and report against those. And the MEL system should be extensible to learn and report at the level of sub-projects like Collective Actions led by partners.

MEL is not only a means for our organizational accountability and learning, but for mutual accountability and collective learning among stakeholders, which is one of the four outcomes of the GFAR Theory of Change: *Outcome 4 - Mutual accountability and collective learning between stakeholders in agri-food R&I systems are enhanced, contributing to their effectiveness, and to the transparency and trust between partners.*

[12] Paul G.H. Engel, Patricia Biermayr-Jenzano, Nathalie Doré. Global Forum for Agricultural Research and Innovation: An independent forward-looking learning review. GFAR, 2018.
https://www.gfar.net/documents/independent-forward-looking-learning-review-global-forum-agricultural-research-and

3. MEL REQUIREMENTS AND APPROACH

Although the monitoring comes logically before the evaluation, a good monitoring system cannot be designed without having in mind the evaluation objectives and overall approach. The discourse on evaluation is often a discourse on the whole MEL and it includes and determines the approach to monitoring and to learning. This is why the description of the MEL system starts with the evaluation approach.

3.1 Evaluation

As conceptual reference, the "**Developmental Evaluation**" (DE) approach seems the most appropriate for GFAR. Complex environments, like the agricultural innovation arena in which GFAR wants to make a difference, require adaptive M&E approaches, which support continuous capture of changes, continuous learning, fast participatory feedback loops and flexible logical frameworks that can accommodate change. The participatory dimension is especially important for GFAR, given its nature of multi-stakeholder network and the fact that a good part of the work is conducted and should be evaluated in partnership.

"*Developmental Evaluation supports innovation development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments*"[13]. The purpose of DE is to inform and to support innovative and adaptive development in complex dynamic environments.
From the general features of DE[14] stem some practical directions for the GFAR MEL:

- The MEL system will be built mainly **around our (living) ToC**, which represents GFAR's values and commitment. It will be used to learn against the ToC as well as to report to funders, trying to ensure coherence and establish a mapping between the logframe agreed upon with a funder and the GFAR ToC.
  - One important aspect of the GFAR ToC is that there is an element of **theory-within-the-theory,** a meta-level that is represented by the Partnership Principles, which set the requirements for inclusive, equitable and transformative partnerships, and therefore provide additional evaluation criteria and additional learning questions for the Collective Actions and any work done with/by partners.
- The MEL system will cater for change and be **adaptive**. Our indicator / input collection system should be flexible: our program indicators can evolve (including baselines and targets) and our data collection should capture both what happens against our predetermined outcomes (or "outcome areas") and the actual perhaps unexpected outcomes. Therefore, the MEL will always be work in progress. MEL should be planned, but learning and evolving should be prioritized over rigid planning.
- This approach requires **quick feedback loops** to learn: continuous evaluation (evaluation while monitoring), with timely (as frequent as needed) input collection and checkpoints, and real-time dashboards. The learning and participatory dimensions also call for periodic facilitated reflection,

[13] Patton, M (2010). Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use. New York, NY: Guilford Press

[14] See Patton, M (2010) above, table on pages 23-26.

as highlighted by recommendations under point n. 2 in the Independent Evaluation.

- The MEL system has to support **stakeholder participation** and ensure diversity of inputs. It has to allow for suitable participatory input collection methods and tools, as well as collaborative MEL design.

3.2 Monitoring

- **What to monitor**

  The specific learning questions and indicators will be identified in the MEL plan. The general approach is that learning questions and indicators will be designed against the Theory of Change and logframes. Considering GFAR's sphere of control and sphere of influence, the system will monitor progress against activities and outputs (in our control) and change against outcomes (up to the limits of our sphere of influence).

  The system will also monitor behaviors against the above-mentioned theory-within-the-theory represented by the Partnership Principles.

- **How to monitor**

  Monitoring has to be adaptive, continuous / timely, and consistent.

  The core of the monitoring system will be data/input collection tools (event sheets, event/activity surveys, focus groups, interviews…) designed both for feeding the indicators and for learning (see Learning below).

  The types of indicators, calculations, analyses and aggregations set up in the system will support both traditional quantitative summative reporting and innovative ways of reporting on qualitative change. Qualitative data collection and analysis for learning can be performed independently from indicators, but the new MEL will also support as much as possible the reporting of qualitative findings as indicators for monitoring progress (finding ways of translating qualitative analysis into numeric values for easy progress reporting, and ways of using qualitative visualizations in reports).

  The system will support the calculation of derived and compound / composite indicators.

  Since our approach does not focus on summative evaluation, baselines and targets will not be given high importance[15], while the focus will be on perception of improvement or stories of change. Existing relevant studies can be used as baseline scenarios, or it is possible to collect baseline data on a rolling basis as implementation proceeds[16].

  Contextual indicators will be used sparingly (e.g. some related to small-scale farmers, women and youth); some standard indicators (e.g. SGD/OECD/WB ones,) can be considered when applicable at the outcome level or for Collective Actions, for the sake of comparability.

- **Levels of monitoring**

  GFAR has a general Theory of Change (ToC) at the organizational / program level, which reflects our

[15] *"Baselines can range from largely informal exercises – sometimes as simple as writing down what is already known – through to large-scale surveys or studies... A formal baseline study is most useful when … the benefits of conducting a baseline study, and measuring the same variables later in order to assess change, outweigh the costs"* (https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Monitoring-and-Evaluation-Series-Baselines-10.pdf).

[16] https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadw108.pdf

values and mission, and positions GFAR in the landscape of agricultural research and innovation actors. GFAR also has agreements with funding partners which may be based on dedicated logframes, and facilitates Collective Actions led by partners which may also need dedicated MEL. The new MEL system will have to support this multi-level logic (program / projects), and indicators used across levels, like Partnership Principles indicators. Monitoring at levels beyond GFAR, under DeSIRA or in coordination with and support of other partners, is also something that could be explored, in a multiple-level or multi-program system.

3.3 Learning

In the DE approach, "*evaluation aims to nurture hunger for learning*"[17].
Learning is not an additional step after monitoring: MEL managers must know what they want to learn, or at least around which outcome areas they want to learn, and they have to design the monitoring system around this. A **learning agenda** goes from the design of the Theory of Change to the design of the learning questions stemming from the ToC to the design of the monitoring system with related data collection tools, to the selection of the type of analysis and sense-making. Some indicators, the ones that help answer the learning questions, are also part of the learning dimension. Therefore, the learning dimension cuts across all steps of a MEL plan.

Collective Actions are conducted with / by partners, so there is a strong component of collective learning.

Learning in the specific context of Collective Actions has additional dimensions:
1. GFAR needs to build or strengthen among and across their Collective Actions' partners a "culture" of monitoring, evaluation and learning. They need to agree collectively on a logical framework for each CA (based on the GFAR Theory of Change as well as on the specificity of the CA itself), but also on the essence of what they are looking for together.
2. Ultimately, besides documenting results, what GFAR seeks at a higher level is the understanding of the type of collaborative arrangements, innovation partnerships, multi-stakeholder governance, co-research participatory processes etc. that work and can be proposed as models to the international community for contributing to the transformation of agri-food research and innovation systems in a pro-poor way.
   Cross-cutting learning questions and indicators based on the Partnership Principles theory-within-the-theory will be developed for this.
3. GFAR also wants to learn if results confirm or not its theory of change and assumptions.

Learning questions and qualitative input collection and analysis
What GFAR wants to learn can be formulated as learning questions, which are the starting point for building the monitoring system. Learning questions are normally complex, at the outcome level, and are of qualitative nature.

The learning questions stem from the ToC, especially at the outcome level, and from the mentioned theory-within-the-theory represented by the Partnership Principles.

[17] See Patton, M (2010) above.

They are primarily **about change**.
A learning question can hardly be addressed through one direct survey / interview question or one indicator, but a combination of questions asked to the right respondents can be designed in the monitoring system to capture elements of the full answer. All in all, the data collection questions all combined will have to allow us to answer the learning questions.

A frequent practice in recent approaches to learning about change in complex systems is to **capture stories**. This is done through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and it focuses on open questions inviting respondents to tell about moments, experiences, perceptions, examples, which results in collecting narratives.

However, narratives alone are difficult to analyze, and give room to interpretation on the part of those doing the analysis. More recent approaches, making use also of suitable software tools, combine stories with additional control questions, or accompanying metadata, or "self-signification"[18] questions to add meaning and context to the narrative, and therefore support sense-making better[19].

These sets of questions designed for specific groups of respondents, which can be administered using different methods (surveys, interviews, focus groups…) are the "data collection tools" or "**input collection tools**" of the MEL system.

The same input / data collection tool can be used for learning and for M&E. GFAR will use a variety of input collection tools to both answer the learning questions underlying the ToC and feed the indicators for the M&E.

3.4 Participation and reflection

The DE approach highlights the **participatory learning dimension** of the evaluation process. The participatory dimension is especially important for GFAR, given its nature of multi-stakeholder network and the fact that a good part of the work is conducted in partnership.

This means that
- The stakeholders will have to be involved not only in answering the questions, but in co-designing or validating the learning questions, especially for Collective Actions
- The input collection tools will have to allow for collection from different groups of users with different permissions, from the project managers to the event facilitators to the interviewers/ enumerators to the actual final respondents (in the case of open surveys)
- The MEL will have to allow for multi-level logframes where the CA partners can set outcomes and outputs and monitor aspects that are specific to the individual CAs
- Insights from the MEL will have to be shareable both openly and with selected stakeholders.

[18] This is a term used in the design of the Sensemaker tool (see Guijt et al. below, and https://thecynefin.co/sensemaker-2/): see definition of "self-signification" in the table in chapter 4.
[19] Guijt, I., Gottret, MA., Hanchar, A., Deprez, S., Muckenhirn, R., (2022) The Learning Power of Listening, Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing <http://dx.doi.org/10.3362/9781788532006.

The DE approach also recommends scheduling **reflection (and self-reflection) exercises** where assumptions are checked against monitored changes and adjustments can be made. GFAR will try to conduct such exercises, which would require facilitation by participatory learning experts and would need to be designed in a way that allows for monitoring over time.

One mechanism identified in the Independent Evaluation to nurture reflection and learning (included as an output in the new ToC) are the **knowledge and learning hubs** (KLH). "*Knowledge hub is where joint reflection is organized and facilitated and lessons learnt and synthesized, documented and communicated.*" (GFAR Independent Evaluation 2018)

Learning from these hubs will be captured in the MEL.

3.5 An integrated MEL system

The new GFAR integrated MEL system will combine the more traditional summative aspects of M&E with more qualitative data collection and analysis, in an efficient and consistent way, as everything is linked on the one hand to the same ToC / logframe and on the other hand to the same input collection tools. The core of this integration are the input collection tools, which will be designed to serve the purposes of summative evaluation, progress monitoring and learning.

4. SOFTWARE PLATFORMS

All the requirements above, especially the input collection, the sense-making, and the calculations behind composite or aggregated indicators, call for the use of dedicated software platforms.

Following some research and assessment of several IT platforms that serve at least some of the M&E and learning purposes illustrated above, the results showed that **no one tool / platform supports all the necessary functionalities**. The assessment showed that platforms that are good at logframe-based M&E (program/project level ToC / logframe design, indicator design, data collection question design, logframe-based analysis, dashboards and reports) are not very good at qualitative capture and analysis, and *vice versa*.

The best option is a combination of:

- a **good M&E tool** (the two scoring the highest in our tests are Kinaki[20] and Delta[21]) for all the core functionalities (portfolio/program > project hierarchy, maintenance of ToC and logframes, indicators and related calculations, reference lists including disaggregation classes, basic input collection, mainly quantitative analysis, logframe-based reporting and dashboards; multi-user granular permission access; selective public reports); and
- a g**ood story collection and sense-making tool** (e.g. Sensemaker[22] or Sprockler[23]) for collection of qualitative input, primarily narratives with contextual qualitative input, and subsequent advanced analysis. Analyses from the sense-making tool will have to be copied / imported in the main M&E platform.

[20] https://kinaki.ca
[21] https://delta-monitoring.com/
[22] https://thecynefin.co/sensemaker-2/
[23] https://www.sprockler.com/

5. RESOURCES

The setup and maintenance of the MEL system will require:

- Initial consultancy with a MEL expert for assessing the approach outlined in this document, advising on the platform setup and the MEL plan, and more importantly developing capacities in the secretariat, especially in participatory learning exercises.
- A part-time consultant for the day-to-day management of the platform, for ensuring that the MEL plan is implemented, that input collection is timely, that the required information is provided, that the participatory exercises, qualitative inquiries and analyses are conducted.
- A contract, including maintenance and support, with the company(ies) providing the cloud platform(s).
- Input from all staff (on indicators, collection tools, learning questions, and actual collection) and from partners in Collective Actions.

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