

Knowledge Broker Support Program

Volume 1 - Foundation - MEL module

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Cover photo: Knowledge broker in action. Photo by Tom Greenwood, 2017. Photo below by Tom Greenwood.



Monitoring, evaluation and learning

In this module, you will gain an understanding of some theories, tools and approaches/processes that can help you design your projects and activities, learn what works and what doesn't, and how to develop stories of impact.

At the end of the module, you should be able to:

- 1 Understand what monitoring, evaluation and learning can do for your projects.
- 2 Have an awareness of why learning is important.
- 3 Be able to create your own Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning framework.

This module is related to further learning that you can explore in the module on Theory of Change.

Why do some projects succeed?

Have you ever wondered why some projects have more impact than others? Or watched as a successful project failed to create change that lasted beyond a year or two after completion?

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) helps us to get better at designing, implementing and learning from projects to ensure that we learn from our mistakes and get better results the next time.

Two approaches and tools that can help you to improve the success of your projects are:

- Theory of Change
- Participatory MEL



Image by Tom Greenwood

What is Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)?

Much like a Theory of Change, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning is both a set of tools and processes that allow us to design better, implement, learn from and showcase the impact of our projects.

MONITORING

Tracking actions and their consequences.

- What is happening?
- What has changed?

M

EVALUATION

What actions/outcomes were of worth/value, for who and why?

- Did things go as planned?
- Why is this change or lack of change important?

E

LEARNING

A process and an outcome.

- **Process** – something experienced, for example an insight that could be used to inform a decision.
- **Outcome** – can be both individual or collective, such as new knowledge, an understanding, a new ability, etc

L

Why is MEL undertaken?

MEL is a valuable tool that can be a light touch or all-consuming. Before embarking on designing and implementing a MEL framework, it is worth thinking about why you are doing it, and what resources are necessary for what you hope to achieve.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning is undertaken by many groups for multiple reasons including:

- **Learning to do better** in your activities, projects, programs and policies, etc.
- **Accountability and transparency** in financial, social, ethical, regulatory and other aspects.
- **Impact assessments** demonstrating value, sharing success stories and other lessons for scaling.

Who is interested in MEL?

When designing your MEL framework it is important to consider why you are doing it and who will benefit, including:

- Project team
- Funding agencies
- Community
- Stakeholders

Benefits of doing MEL

Implementing effective MEL can be time and resource intensive. However, in a rapidly changing world, we will only learn to make better decisions and help others make better decisions by implementing strategies to learn and share that learning.

When done in collaboration with communities and stakeholders, MEL can increase efficacy, enable critical, strategic and future thinking and be empowering even when things don't go to plan. It helps to build resilience by showing how problems are solved.

MEL can also be used to remember and celebrate the good things that happen, which is important for knowledge brokering.

“Stories are a powerful way of learning and sharing as they help people make sense of events and predictions and turn facts into meaning. Project learning stories can enable people to see new opportunities, create new connections and new questions for further investigation which can trigger new ways of operating. Stories help people understand how the world is changing, why that change is occurring and what they can do in response.” — Fincher et al 2014

Pacific ways of learning and sharing

People from the Pacific have a long history of storytelling and already appreciate how valuable it is for learning and sharing.



Image by Tom Greenwood

Tok stori

- is a Melanesian term for what Solomon Islanders do everyday – telling stories, creating a joint narrative, and making sense of life. But that’s not the whole story.
- helps create and maintain relationships, it comes in multiple forms, and is helpful for an ever-increasing range of purposes.
- makes claims to ontology, methodology and method. Storying takes place in space and time. It reveals people as experts in their own lives.

Source: <https://www.dlprog.org/opinions/talking-about-tok-stori>

More on Tok Stori in leadership education can be found in:

Sanga, K., Reynolds, M., Houma, S., & Maebuta, J. (2021). Tok stori as pedagogy: An approach to school leadership education in Solomon Islands. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(2), 377-384. doi:10.1017/jie.2020.31

Talanoa

Tongans, Samoans and Fijians share the term Talanoa.

“Talanoa is a process of inclusive, participatory and transparent dialogue. The purpose of Talanoa is to share stories, build empathy and make wise decisions for the collective good.

The process of Talanoa involves the sharing of ideas, skills and experience through storytelling.

During the process, participants build trust and advance knowledge through empathy and understanding. Blaming others and making critical observations are inconsistent with building mutual trust and respect, and therefore inconsistent with the Talanoa concept. Talanoa fosters stability and inclusiveness in dialogue, by creating a safe space that embraces mutual respect for a platform for decision making for a greater good.”

Source: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement/2018-talanoa-dialogue-platform>

Creating a MEL framework

A MEL framework is created and used in order to learn from the implementation of your adaptation program activities. A MEL framework often includes:

1. An articulation of the project Theory of Change (picture, narrative or both).
2. The questions the project is hoping to answer (what works, what doesn't and why).
3. A set of tools and processes for capturing qualitative and quantitative data associated with the monitoring process (e.g. surveys, interviews, biophysical indicators, number of outputs, participants, gender aspects etc.).
4. A timeline for collection, synthesis and reporting (to whom and for what).
5. Process for feeding lessons learnt back into the project.

Implementation of a MEL framework would ideally be aligned to other evaluation activities within your organisation or for funders' requirements for efficiency and also to share lessons.

Prior to implementing a MEL framework, consider:

- **DATA COLLECTION**
 - How and when will the MEL data be gathered?
- **LEADERSHIP**
 - Whose role will it be to undertake the suggested evaluation activities including data collection, synthesis and reporting?
- **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**
 - What can you do to address any power imbalances and ensure you capture diverse perspectives?
- **GATHERING / SORTING DATA**
 - How will data and subsequent information/materials generated be stored?
- **AUDIENCE**
 - Who are the intended audience(s)?
- **USE OF MATERIALS**
 - How do you anticipate the materials generated will be used?
- **DISSEMINATION**
 - How will the materials generated be disseminated?
- **ANALYSIS**
 - Who will be responsible for linking any lessons into the project?

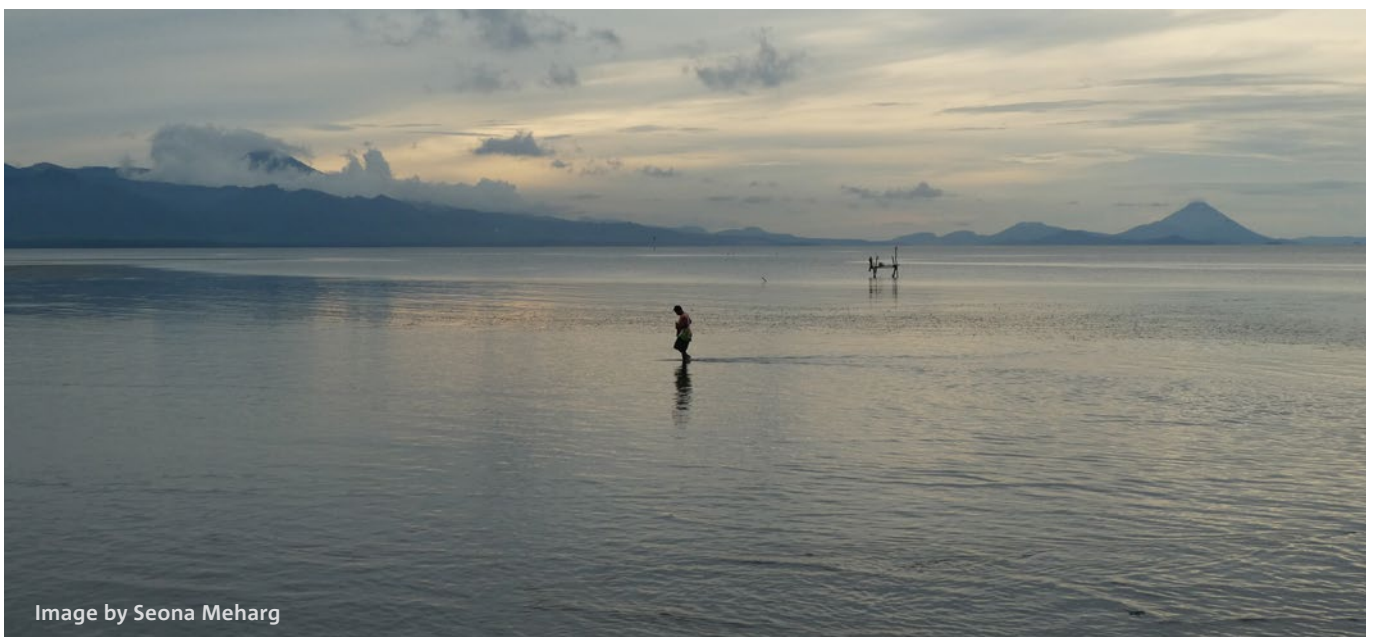


Image by Seona Meharg

MEL and Theory of Change

Theory of Change and MEL are part of an interactive project cycle where each informs the other. The Theory of Change enables the design or re-design of a project and the associated learning framework. As the project is implemented, the learning framework helps us understand what is working and what is not working, allowing adjustments to the project and the Theory of Change. This is an adaptive management cycle.

There are many tools and approaches that you can use to undertake monitoring, evaluation and learning. **Using multiple tools and approaches in the same project or activities is often a good idea to ensure you have captured all the intended and unintended insights, lessons and impact stories.**

A good place to start is with your Theory of Change, what were the outputs, outcomes and challenges you identified, and what would be a good way to identify and assess these.

One participatory evaluation tool and process that you can use to capture insights and lessons with your stakeholders can be found in the module on **Participatory MEL.**

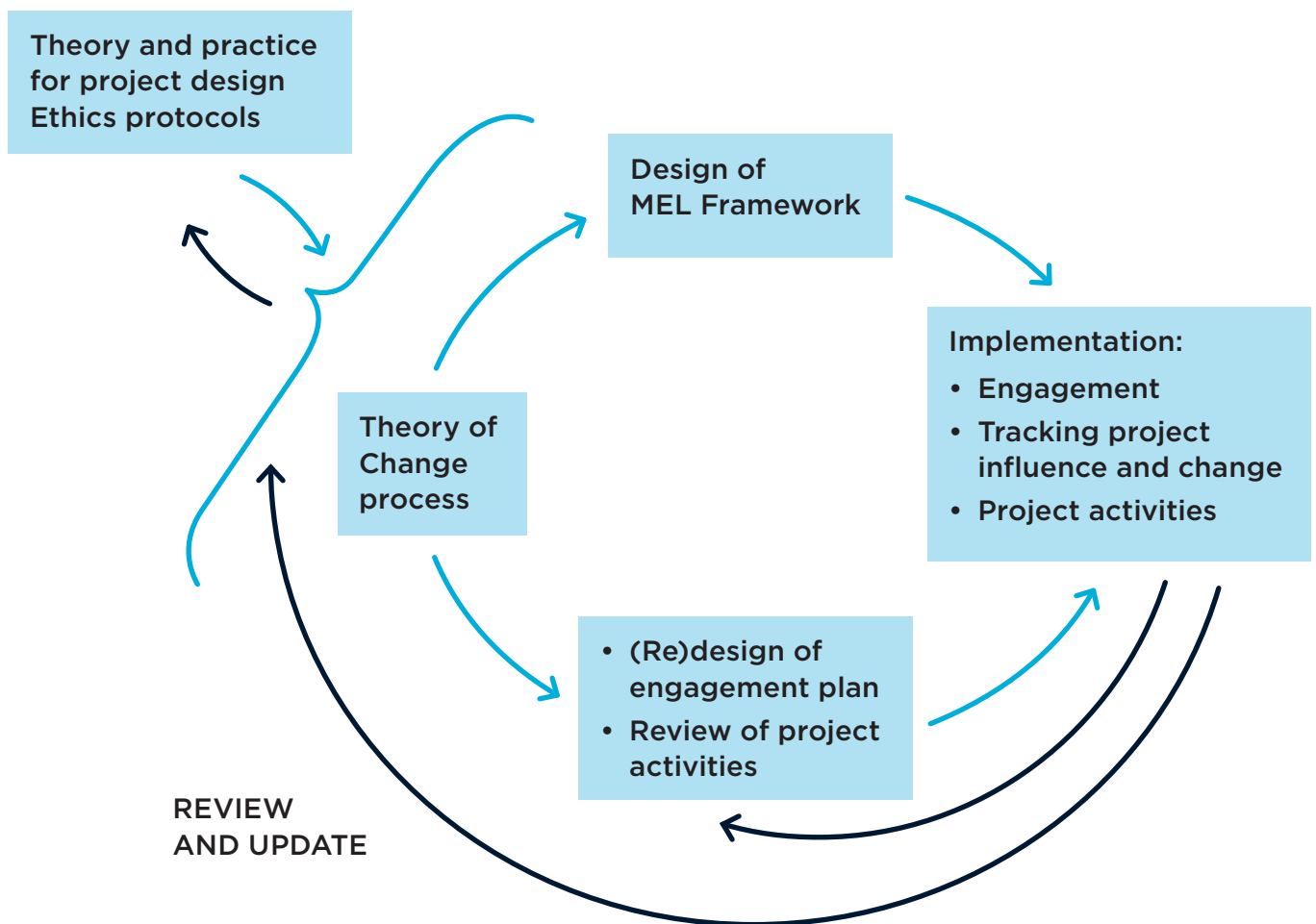


Figure 28 Connections between Theory of Change, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, and the project cycle

Adapted from image created by Dr Rachel Williams (CSIRO)

References and additional resources



If you would like to watch a YouTube video on this module, please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beIXYMueFtk&t=799s>

Resources

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