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On Think Tanks

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in Think Tanks

Session 1

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Stephen Yeo and Dena Lomofsky

jsyeo@outlook.com

dena@southernhemisphere.co.za

Session 1: Thursday

- Welcome and motivation *(5 minutes)*
- Basic concepts in MEL and MEL for management and operations *(presentation, 30 minutes)*
- Participants' experience with MEL *(group work, 40 minutes)*
  - Individuals prepare their experiences in advance
  - Groups discuss in breakout rooms (20 of the 40 minutes)
  - Each group reports back to plenary, identifying common strengths and challenges across their experiences (reports and discussion, 20 of the 40 minutes)
- Tackling these challenges: a systematic approach using the MEL matrix *(presentation, 5 minutes)*

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Session 2: Friday

- Introduction to policy influence (presentation, 15 minutes)
  - What is it?
  - Why is it hard to measure?
- Developing a results matrix for policy influence (30 minutes)
- What strategies and tools do you have to measure policy change? (10 minutes)
- The MEL system and plan (5 minutes)
- Now what do I do? Q&A (20 minutes)

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Presentation

MEL: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

- Monitoring
  - Monitoring versus evaluation – what is the difference?
- Evaluation
  - Summative versus formative evaluations
  - Formative evaluations highlight learning
- Learning
  - Used to be called M&E, now called MEL
  - What is the reason for the change?
    - Interventions in complex and uncertain environments
      - This is particularly relevant for policy influencing
        - New issues arise on the policymakers agenda suddenly and unpredictably
        - Think tanks must respond by adapting their activities
    - Complexity and adaptive management
      - How do organizations learn and adapt?
      - How do you evaluate adaptive management?

Outputs, Outcomes, Impact and Context

- Outputs
  - Also called Activities
- Outcomes
  - Changes brought about directly as a result of Outputs or Activities
  - These changes are often in what are called “Boundary Partners” with whom you work and whose behaviour you can directly influence
- Impacts
  - Longer term changes that you expect / hope will take place as result of achieving the Outcomes
- Context
  - The social, political and intellectual environment in which your think tank operates

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Results Chains (RCs)

- RCs combine Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts
  - If we do X and our assumptions Y are true, then result Z will occur
    - X = Activities or Outputs (things you do)
    - Y = Assumptions you have made about the environment or context in which you operate (i.e. the Context)
    - Z = Outcomes or Impact
- RCs are used almost everywhere in MEL
  - Results Frameworks
  - Logframes – along with Indicators and Means of Verification
  - Theories of Change (ToCs)
  - Strategic Plans (SPs)
- RCs are often criticized as “too linear”
  - Actions and results flow in one direction with few (if any) feedback loops
  - No space for learning and adaptative management

MEL: Three possible focuses

- Policy influence (MEL-I)
  - Dealt with in the second session
- Communications (MEL-C)
  - Often equated with policy influence, but not the same
  - Won't deal with this since there is a separate Communications module
  - Good reference is Cassidy and Ball (2018)
- Management and operations (MEL-M)
  - Good references – Mendizabal (2014), Struyk (2007) and (2015)
  - Will focus on this for the next 20 minutes

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MEL for Think Tanks ≠ MEL for companies

- Achievement of “mission” is more important than financial performance for think tanks (and for NGOs in general)
  - The “Balanced scorecard” approach brings in additional perspectives beyond financial performance

  Reference Niven (2003)
  - Think tanks often use this approach to develop their strategy and MEL system
  - Struyk’s 2015 handbook sets this out in detail
- But think tanks often run projects based on contracts, and so are similar to consulting firms
  - The more a think tank resembles a consulting firm, the closer will be their strategy and MEL to those of a private sector company

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MEL for Think Tanks ≠ MEL for NGOs

- NGOs are often based on a large membership base and advocate for “causes” instead of doing policy analysis
  - In NGOs members are often the funders and sometimes provide volunteer / unpaid labour
  - Think Tanks rely on highly skilled labour to analyse policy issues
    - Usually have advanced research training (MA or PhD)
    - Staff recruitment motivation, progression and retention are very important
  - Large international NGOs such as Oxfam often carry out many of the activities of think tanks
- Providing policy advice is not the same as doing advocacy
  - Quality of the underlying analysis is a key issue for think tanks because it affects their credibility
  - Successful policy advising often takes place behind closed doors, not in public, so there is less evidence of influence available in the public domain
  - The relationship between the policymaker and the advisor is very important, often more important than the policy analysis that is actually published

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“MEL-M” versus “MEL-I”

- Distinguish between MEL for Management and MEL for Impact
  - MEL-M focuses on the day-to-day operations of the think tank
  - MEL-I focuses on think tank’s “impact”
    - This is much harder
    - Assessing a think tank’s influence on policy is more complicated than most funders realize
- There isn’t a sharp divide between MEL-M and MEL-I
- We are devoting Session 2 to MEL-I because it is important and challenging

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MEL for Management (MEL-M)

MEL for Management (MEL-M)

- Human resources
  - Staff recruitment, retention and motivation
- Finance
  - management of the think tank's resources
  - new business development / fundraising
- Internal operations
  - Research and analysis, communications and general management

Reference: Mendizabal (2014)

Start with the M

- The first step is developing your "Monitoring" system
- You probably already have a monitoring system but don't realize it
- You are already monitoring some aspects of your performance – but are they the right ones?
- So the first step involves taking stock of the Monitoring already taking place
- Then improve on what you are already doing by
  - Improving the quality and comprehensiveness of the information already being collected
  - Identifying what else needs to be monitored so that your monitoring system is aligned with your Strategy and/or your Theory of Change

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Monitoring Inputs and Outputs

- People (human resources management)
  - Inputs - time - timesheets
  - Outputs - quantity, quality
- Money (funding, financial management)
  - Struyk is very thorough, though perhaps too "US" oriented
  - but very good on MEL-M

References: Struyk (2015) and Struyk (2007)

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Monitoring Time

- No one likes time sheets, but they are important
  - Why?
    - Funders often insist on them, especially for projects
    - Management needs to have some idea of
      - What projects / tasks research staff are working on now
        - How much of the budget has been consumed versus how much of the work has been done
      - How much time research projects "really" take
        - Allows more realistic bids for projects
        - Can justify requests for "overheads" from project funders
    - This is more of a management issue than an MEL issue, but very important nevertheless

Reference – Chapter 11 in Struyk (2015)

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Monitoring Outputs - Quantity

- Easy if you only have a few of one kind of output (e.g. research reports)
- Can be problematic if you have many different outputs (different kinds of publications, events, etc.)
- You need to create and maintain **from the beginning** a good database of outputs
  - Can be Word, Excel or something more sophisticated
- You must keep this up to date as you go along
  - Don't wait until the time of the evaluation! You will be sorry

Reference – Struyk (2015) but doesn't go into enough detail

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Monitoring Outputs - Quality

- Unlike quantity, this is not so easy
- Endless debates around the issue of how you define quality
- “Scientific quality” is the traditional measure
  - Three ways to measure this
    - Bibliometrics
    - Peer review
    - “Altmetrics”
- IDRC’s RQ+ adopts a broader perspective on quality

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Bibliometrics

- Publications and citations (adjusted for journal impact factors)
  - Sounds like a good solution, but often doesn't work well in practice
    - Citations are not useful
      - Policymakers seldom cite academic research!
    - Many good think tanks will have few if any publications in peer reviewed journals – they publish but in other places
      - Criteria for journal publication are not the same as for good policy analysis
      - Researchers outside North America and Europe and working in languages other than English find it very difficult to publish in leading international journals
    - Three- to five-year publication lags in top journals

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Peer Review

- Easy in principle, hard in practice
  - Reviewing research is hard work
  - You need to find people willing to do it, who have the time, and you often need to pay them
- Big Problem
  - You will often manage to find / afford to pay only one or two reviewers
  - If you have only one or two views, how much can you rely on them?
- Not a perfect solution

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Other ways of measuring Quality

- There are several you should be aware of, though they are not yet in mainstream use
  - "Alt-Metrics"
    - Use social media mentions
    - Problems
      - Lies and fake news often attract more attention in social media
      - Tracking social media can be difficult and expensive, approaches include
      - Altmetric https://www.altmetric.com/audience/publishers/
      - PlumX https://plumanalytics.com/learn/about-metrics/
  - Research Quality Plus (RQ+)
    - Takes into account aspects of research beyond "scientific" quality
    - Takes a very different approach
      - Research Integrity
      - Research Legitimacy
      - Research Importance
      - Positioning for Use

Reference: IDRC (2018)

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Funding & Financial Management

- General Financial performance
  - You can usually rely on your finance department to produce lots of useful information
  - They are typically accustomed to monthly / quarterly / annual reporting cycles, plus an external audit
- Project and Contract Management
  - Finance departments typically don't link their reporting to progress made in producing the outputs of the project or contract
    - They can tell you that 34% of the project budget has been spent, but not whether this is a good or bad thing
  - You need to supplement expenditure information with information from research teams
    - You can see how this is done when we look at the indicator tables in Struyk, which are very thorough

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Struyk's Performance Indicators

- Struyk presents a set of tables in Chapter 12 of his 2015 handbook (you should buy this book!)
  - They are based on the "Balanced Scorecard" approach to strategy, which Struyk has adapted for Think Tanks
- There's nothing else out there like them but
  - Indicators were compiled in 2012-3 and could usefully be updated, especially with respect to communications, which is a very fast changing field
- To get the most out of these indicators, it helps to understand the Balanced Scorecard approach to strategy

Good references: Struyk (2015) and Niven (2003)

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Group Work

What are the strengths and challenges of MEL in your think tank?

- Instructions
  - Move to the google slide for group work (link in the chat)
  - Appoint
    - a scribe to capture your points, and you can each write in the slide directly
    - someone to report back
- Brainstorm strengths and challenges of MEL in your organisation
- Identify which are common challenges
- Add them to the slide for your group

Questions for Reflection by Individual Participants

1. What monitoring systems are in place in your organization?
2. Are these monitoring systems
   i. informative? (Is enough information collected?)
   ii. effective? (Do people maintain them?)
   iii. comprehensive? (Are there any important areas of work not covered by the system?)
3. Who does MEL in your organisation? What is their role in the organisation and how does MEL fit in? Do they have the necessary skills to carry out MEL?
4. What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of your MEL system?
5. What steps would you take to improve your MEL system?

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Question for the Group (to be completed in the Slides and reported to the plenary)

1. Do the organizations represented in your Group share any common challenges with respect to MEL?

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Presentation

FINDINGS	Solutions
The organisation collects a lot of information and doesn't know what to do with it?	Be clear about what policy influence questions you want answered, be selective with what you gather
Can't tell the whole story because we don't have all the data	Organise your objectives into a results chain/ process of transformation and collect data on all steps. Check what you do have already – maybe it can be useful
We don't have the information when we need it	Develop an MEL matrix so that you can plan when data will be collected and reported, and by whom
Too much ME and not enough L	Find out what matters to people (e.g. knowing if their work is improving people's lives), and encourage learning

Example of a simple MEL matrix

Objective /Outcomes & outputs	Indicator	Data source	Who is responsible	How will it be used

Homework

Homework

- Identify a few policy objectives / outcomes relevant to your organisation.
- Use #16 in the list of references as a starting point: it has lots of examples of different kinds of policy outcomes.
  - Stachowiak, S., 2013. Pathways for Change: 10 Theories to Inform Advocacy and Policy Change Efforts. [online] Washington DC: Centre for Evaluation Innovation. Available at:

    https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/pathways-for-change-10-theories-to-inform-advocacy-and-policy-change-efforts/

    or

    https://www.orsimpact.com/DirectoryAttachments/132018_13248_359_Center_Pathways_FINAL.pdf

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