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On Think Tanks

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Monitoring, evaluation, and learning of policy influence

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Session 1 - Wednesday

- Welcome, introductions, etc. *(20 minutes)*
- MEL concepts and terminology (*presentation, 10 minutes)*
- Common MEL strengths and challenges *(individual and group work, 30 minutes)*
- Feedback *(15 minutes)*
- Break *(10 minutes)*
- MEL for management (MEL-M) *(presentation, 20 minutes)*
- Ideas for strengthening MEL-M *(plenary, 10 minutes)*
- Introduction to the case study *(presentation, 5 minutes)*
- Close *(5 minutes)*

Session 2 - Thursday

- Welcome and introduction *(10 minutes)*
- Participants' experiences with MEL-I *(brainstorming, 5 minutes)*
- MEL for policy influence (MEL-I) *(presentation, 20 minutes)*
- Indicators and data sources *(brainstorming, 10 minutes)*
- Planning for MEL-I *(presentation, 15 minutes)*
- Constructing an MEL matrix for the case study *(group work, 30 minutes)*
- Feedback on group work *(plenary, 15 minutes)*
- Q&A *(plenary, 10 minutes)*
- Close *(5 minutes)*

MEL Concepts and Terminology

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Monitoring, evaluation and learning

- Monitoring
  - Monitoring versus evaluation – what is the difference?
- Evaluation
  - Summative versus formative evaluations
- Learning
  - M&E is now called MEL
  - What is the reason for adding the "L"?
    - Interventions in complex and uncertain environments create a need for adaptive management, and this requires learning in "real time"

Outputs, Outcomes, Impacts and Context

- Outputs
  - Also called Activities
- Outcomes
  - Changes brought about directly as a result of Outputs or Activities
- Impacts
  - Longer term changes that you expect / hope will take place as result of achieving the Outcomes
- Context
  - The socio-economic and institutional environment within which the your activities take place, and which have an effect on the impact of your activities

Results Chains (RCs)

- Combine outputs, outcomes, impacts … and assumptions
  - If we do X then result Y will occur – provided assumptions Z are correct
- 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 typically linear and unidirectional
  - There are few if any feedback loops

MEL: Three flavours

- Management and operations (MEL-M)
  - Good references – Mendizabal (2014), Struyk (2007) and (2015)
- 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)
- Policy influence (MEL-I)
  - Dealt with in the second session (tomorrow)

MEL-M versus MEL-I

- In these sessions we 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
- This distinction is useful for teaching purposes, but in practice, there isn't a sharp divide between MEL-M and MEL-I

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MEL for Management (MEL-M)

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Monitoring: How to develop a 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 that you are already doing
- 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 (if you have them!)

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)

Monitoring Inputs and Outputs

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

References: Struyk (2015) and Struyk (2007)

Monitoring Time

- No one likes time sheets, but they are important

Reference – Chapter 11 in Struyk (2015)

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
- Much better to update this as you go along
    - Don't wait until the time of the evaluation

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
  - Mainstream approaches to measure this – Bibliometrics, Peer review
  - Now often supplemented by newer approaches such as "Alt-Metrics"
- Alternative definitions of "quality"
  - "RQ+" from 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 budget has been spent, but not whether this is a good or bad
  - 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

Struyk's Performance Indicators

- Struyk presents a set of tables in Chapter 12 of his 2015 handbook
  - 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 to Struyk's indicators, it helps to understand the Balanced Scorecard approach to strategy (on which his indicators are based)
  - Good reference: Niven (2003)

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