Learning about the effectiveness of public support programmes for development cooperation

Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation through reflective practice

Action Research Report
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Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I.
But where the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by
(The Wind, Chiristina Rosetti, 1830-1894)

1. Introduction

International comparisons show that Belgium invests considerably in its public support for development cooperation[1]. This is mainly done through a multitude of development education and awareness-raising activities. Little is known however about the effectiveness and impact of these activities and there is a growing need to address this gap. Both policy makers and implementing organisations and actors need tangible results to improve accountability and to learn how they can sustain and nurture the public support in the most efficient and effective way. The following developments demonstrate the increasing need for better effectiveness monitoring and evaluation (M&E):

- While recent public polls show that public support in Belgium for development cooperation remains high (Pollet, 2009), the same poll also shows that the confidence in NGOs has decreased in comparison with previous years (Pollet, 2009). While various interpretations can be given about the reason for this decrease, the ability of the NGOs to show and communicate concrete results could be one of the contributing factors.
- The challenge of demonstrating concrete effects of public support activities for development cooperation was highlighted in a 2009 study of the Dutch IOB[2]. The study

[1] Public support for development cooperation stands for ''Draagvlak voor ontwikkelingssamenwerking'' in Dutch.
[2] IOB: De Inspectie Ontwikkelingssamenwerking en Beleidsevaluatie (i.e. the inspectorate of development cooperation and policy evaluation in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

concluded that the results of public support activities with objectives that are too abstract (e.g. general development cooperation) could often not be demonstrated in a satisfactory way. The study concluded that only public support programmes with concrete objectives, like lobby campaigns, were labeled as relevant because of the measurability of its effects such as consumption behavior, level of volunteering or donating behavior. Knowing that the funding for public support activities has drastically decreased in the new subsidy round (2011-2013) in the Netherlands from approximately 60 million to 30 million Euro per year (Verduijn, 2009), this IOB study has definitely brought M&E on the radar of many organizations and donors.
- The growing focus on results based management in Belgium and internationally also higher the pressure on organizations who receive public funding to increase efforts towards monitoring and evaluating the effects of their public support programmes.

Through a participatory action research process, the PULSE research platform is seeking to explore and strengthen monitoring and evaluation practice of organizations who are involved in programmes of public support for development cooperation. In this paper we share the first insights from three organizations who have participated in the action research since early 2010. These organizations include Trias, VLIR-UOS and Vredeseilanden.

The paper consists of the following main parts:
- We first give a brief outline of the action research methodology used.
- The second part elaborates on some of the challenges related to M&E of public support activities. Some of these challenges are illustrated by the case examples from the action research.
- The third part of the paper provides some methodological options for M&E. Again we illustrate these options with practical case examples.
- As part of the conclusion we formulate some recommendations for M&E practice of public support programmes.

A word of caution
This paper has to be seen as a work in progress. At this stage the authors do not seek to provide an up to date state of affairs of planning, monitoring and evaluation of public support programmes. Instead, based on our own field experience within the action research and recent M&E insights from literature, we attempt to provide some first steps in developing a framework that can help practitioners to develop M&E systems that are suitable for their specific programmes and context. We hope that this paper will provide a basis for further discussion during the PULSE workshop of 15 March 2011 and that these discussions will contribute to the further development of the paper.

2. Exploring and strengthening M&E practice through action research

Action research (AR) in the PULSE programme is understood as a flexible spiral process which allows action (change, improvement) and research (reflection, understanding, knowledge) to be achieved at the same time. The understanding allows more informed change and at the same time is informed by that change. People affected by the change are involved in the action research. This allows the understanding to be widely shared and the change to be pursued with commitment (Dick, 2002). In practice this means that the organisations who participate in the PULSE action research are in the driving seat of the research process and are actively involved in a systematic process of reflection on their M&E practice. This way they are able to extract lessons that can inform and strengthen their M&E practice. The lessons from the individual organisations are also fed back into the collective learning process of the PULSE programme. The external researcher acted as a facilitator throughout the action research process. Figure 1 illustrates the essential steps in the action research.

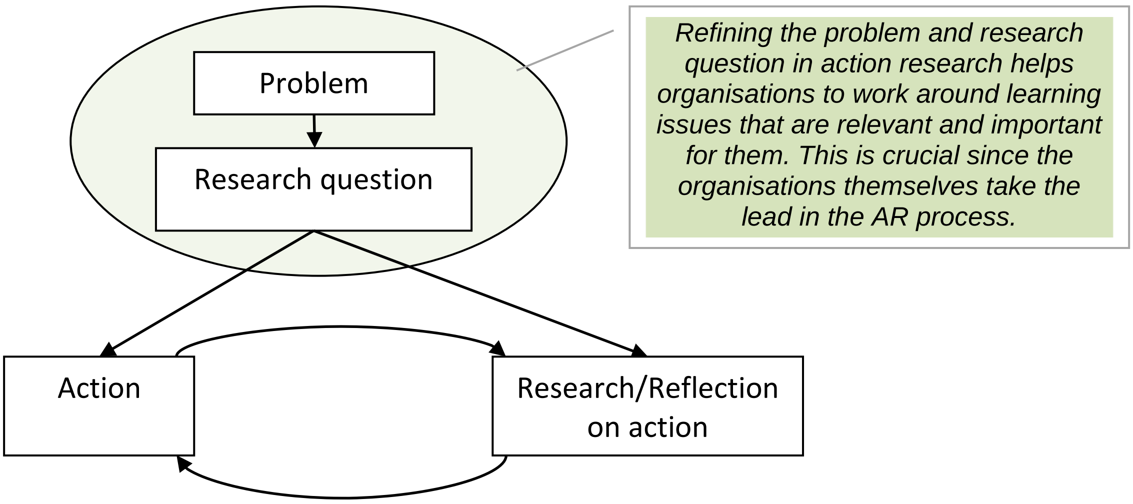


Figure 1: Main steps of the action research process (Adapted from the Bamenda model of practical action research)

The 'action' in figure 1 refers to the implementation of M&E activities by the participating organisations. The 'research' refers to the reflection process about the implementation of the M&E activities. Both processes inform each other throughout the action research process. Various reflection methods were used by the different cases. These include reflection workshops, journaling[3] and diaries, personal observation, focus group discussions, document reviews and face to face unstructured interviews.

3. Challenges to consider when developing an M&E system for programmes that seek to strengthen public support for development cooperation

3.1. Clarifying the objective or the purpose of your public support activities.

A good understanding of what we mean by public support for development cooperation may be a minimum requirement to be able to monitor the effects of activities that seek to strengthen this public support. A recent study (Verduijn, 2009) shows how people often refer to the definition of Develtere (2003) when asked about the 'what' of public support for

[3] Trias used the 'outside-inside story' journaling technique developed by Doug Reeler at CDRA (http://www.cdra.org.za)

development cooperation: ''the attitudes and behaviour, whether arising from knowledge or otherwise, regarding a specific object (i.e. development cooperation).'' This definition has definitely helped to understand and operationalise the concept of public support, but Verduijn (ibid) also points towards an ongoing confusion about the object for which we seek public support and the effect of this public support on that object. Verduijn identified the following objects for public support:

- Development cooperation in general: this is a common but very broad and unspecific object which can constitute many different things such as public support for an integrated concept of development (i.e. development is not only an issue in the South but also in the North), public support for world citizenship (i.e. wereldburgerschap), public support for a sustainable world, public support for the principles of development cooperation, ….
- specific objectives related to development cooperation such as specific themes (e.g. MDGs, gender programmes, …) or specific projects for which support can be sought.
- Public relations of the own organization (e.g. fundraising, own publicity, …)
- Policy (e.g. 0.8% budget spending on development cooperation)

It is not uncommon that the object of public support activities is not fully clarified during the planning stage. Such instances will unsurprisingly contribute to confusion about the intervention logic or result areas of programmes that seek to strengthen public support (IOB, 2009). And if you are not clear about the purpose of your intervention it will be very difficult to monitor the effects of your intervention.

3.2. knowledge, attitude or behaviour? Where do we focus our M&E?

Knowledge, attitude and behaviour are widely recognised as important dimensions of public support for development cooperation. They also remain important indicators to measure public support. At the same time, there is a growing realisation that the relationship between these three dimensions is complex and multi directional. That means that any one dimension can have an effect, both positive and negative, on any other dimension. And each dimension can be affected by many other factors and actors outside the education continuum.

For example, Kinsbergen & Schulpen (2009) illustrated that the relationship between attitude and behaviour is not necessarily positive. Based on the results of a 2008 public poll carried out by the NCDO[4] in collaboration with motivaction in Holland, the researchers demonstrated that people who believe in development cooperation donate less or engage themselves less. The same applies to people who have a positive attitude towards the way the ministry of foreign affairs spends money for development cooperation. In contrast, another public poll carried out by HIVA in Belgium (Pollet, 2010) shows a strong positive relationship between attitude about development cooperation and donating funds and somehow contradicts the interpretation by the Dutch researchers that the public may engage themselves less because they feel that government is already doing enough. This is also referred to as the 'crowding out effect' (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2009).

[4] NCDO, Nationale Commissie voor Internationale Samenwerking en Duurzame Ontwikkeling

Also an increased knowledge about development cooperation will not necessarily guarantee a more positive attitude. While several studies have shown that increased knowledge does not lead to a more negative attitude or less engagement (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2009; Pollet, 2010), the link between knowledge and a positive attitude and stronger engagement has shown to be rather weak (pollet, 2010). The public seems to be able to form its own attitude about a specific issue of development cooperation without necessarily having adequate knowledge about the issue (Develtere 2003). This has resulted in some policy makers to question the need to focus on public support activities that seek to strengthen knowledge (IOB, 2009). On the other hand, knowledge about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was found to be positively linked with the willingness to donate more money or to be involved more actively in one way or another (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2009). Also, an impact study about global education in Flemish schools by the centre of experiential learning (Daems et al, 2010) showed a strong positive link between knowledge about NGOs and competencies related to global citizenship by 12 to 18 year olds. The same study, however, showed that pupils often keep a stereotypical image of the South whereby it remains difficult to apply the acquired knowledge through global education activities in concrete cases.

Besides the question if it's important to focus on knowledge or not, also the process of acquiring knowledge can present us with some methodological challenges for our public support activities. Research has for example shown that, on average, only 10 % of the information that is told can be recalled by people three months later. If the information is told, shown and experienced then 65% of the information can be recalled (Whitmore, 1994).

And finally, the influence of different dimensions of public support such as knowledge, attitude and behaviour can shift between each other over time. This is illustrated by the 'wearing of seatbelts' campaign in text box 1. Drawing from this example we could represent the possible influence of knowledge, attitude, behaviour and possibly other factors, on the public support for a certain issue, in the form of a spiral instead of a linear continuum (see figure 2). A spiral represents better how knowledge, attitude and behaviour may play a role at various times in shaping the 'public support' of any individual or actor (organisations, institution, ...) for a certain object (e.g. development cooperation) and how these elements can influence each other over time. The spiral also helps to visualise that other factors can play a role such as people's sense whether they personally are in a position to do something about the issue, their view about what is a socially acceptable response within the community and amongst groups that they belong to or aspire to belong to, public policy, etc. (Coe & Mayne, 2008).

> **Box 1. Wearing seat belts:** It took public policy to require that seat belts be included in vehicles. Then campaigns were conducted to inform and educate the public about using seat belts. But communications campaigns that asked people to buckle-up had only limited success. Refinements lead to a deeper understanding of the problem that links individual behavior to the broader policy environment. Seat belt use increased dramatically only after primary enforcement laws were in place. The issue moved from policy to personal behavior back to policy. (Dorfman et al. 2002, p15)

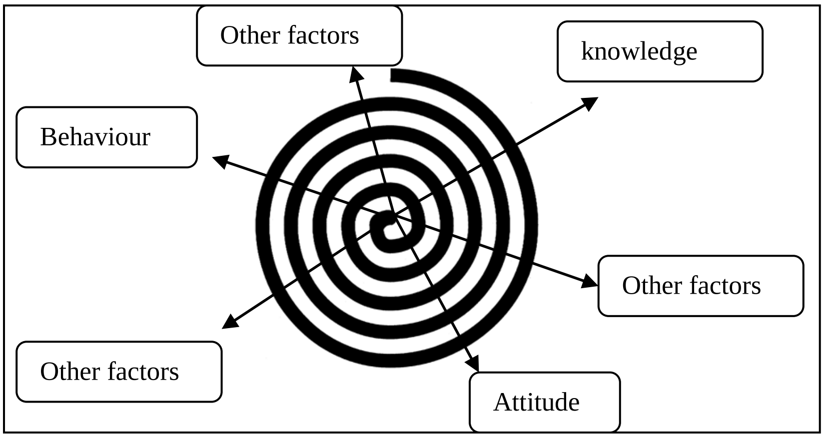


Fig. 2: spiral model of influencing public support (based on Dorfman, 2002)

The implication of this for M&E is that ''it makes sense to have – and therefore to monitor – objectives across a range of outcomes (e.g. knowledge, attitude, behavior, …) and to be on the lookout for a range of possible effects your activities are likely to generate, and possibly the connections between them. Another implication is that objectives of public support activities may shift over time (Coe & Mayne, 2008, p32).. In the 'wearing seatbelts' example focus shifted from a focus on behavior to policy, and back to behavior once the policy was in place.
As we will see later in this paper, establishing a 'plausible' change pathway or theory of change can help you to clarify which changes in knowledge, attitude or behavior or other factors you are hoping to contribute to and as such gives you a guide for the various dimensions that you can monitor.

3.3. Clarifying what we mean with effects or results of public support activities

Effects or results of public support activities can mean different things to different people. These effects can also be situated at different levels of the change process. The metaphor of the ripples formed by a stone thrown into a pond of still water helps us to explain this concept of different results at different levels. If the intervention or the public support activity is the stone thrown into the water, the ripples moving outward are the changes that the intervention is contributing to (Crawford and Perryman, 2004). Each ripple therefore represents a potential place for our M&E system to look for effects of our public support activities.

This ripple model applied to the context of public support activities is shown in figure 3.

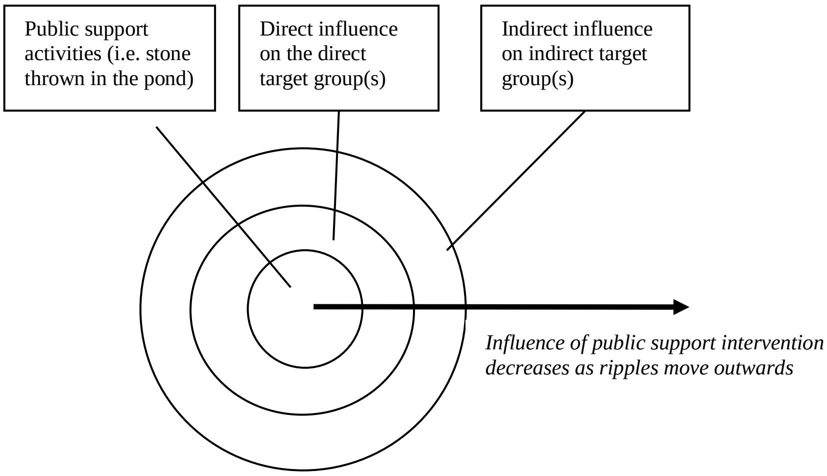


Figure 3: the ripple model, illustrating speheres of influence

The model illustrates the three main levels at which you can monitor and evaluate the effects of public support activities (Figure 3). Results or effects can be found at the level of the direct target group of the intervention (e.g. students in a 'travel bursary' programme). Effects can also be found in the second ripple which represent the indirect target groups who are influenced by the direct target groups of the intervention (e.g. the family and friends of the students that took part in a 'travel bursary' programme). In reality there are often many more ripples as indirect target groups may influence other actors whom they may interact with. Monitoring can also happen in the central circle at the level of the public support activities themselves (e.g. reflection on the activities of the implementing organisation and monitoring inputs and outputs).

The emerging ripples in the water are a useful metaphore for the inputs of public support interventions and the effects of these interventions since it shows both the time taken for change to take place within a social system as well as the decrease of magnitude of influence the further it moves from the source (Crawford, 2005, p. 7).

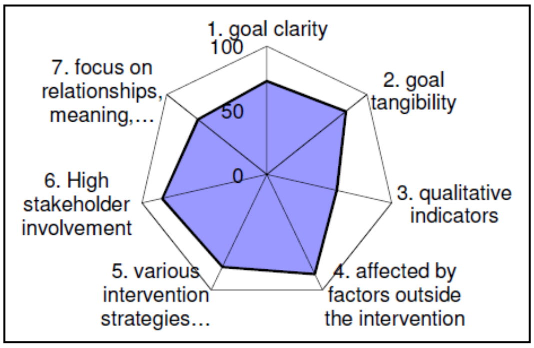
The model is of course a simplification of reality. There are so many other factors and actors that are not shown that, in real life, will have an influence at various levels. In reality the ripple model often does not represent a still water surface but rather a flowing river with lots of unexpected corners and turns and 'rocks, logs and wind affecting its flow' (James, 2009: 4). The heavier the flow of the river, which is often the case with complex social change contexts, the more difficult it will be to see the ripples. Not surprisingly, the further you are from the source the more difficult it will be to find effects of your programme and to figure out how these effects have been contributed to by your programme because of the multitude of other factors that may have played a role.

Nevertheless, clarifying the ripple model of your programme, can be a big step forward towards establishing the system you are working with and can therefore help you to develop a practical planning and monitoring framework as we will see later in this paper.

3.4. Dealing with complex change processes

More and more we realise that social change involves complex processes. We say they are complex because they are often unpredictable and affected by multiple actors and factors beyond any development intervention that is being carried out (Verkoren, 2008). The unpredictable nature of human behaviour, linked as it is with the multitude of interacting relationships between various actors, makes social systems and therefore social development processes complex (Woodhill, 2008). This realisation has important implications for planning, monitoring and evaluation as it questions the relevance of results based planning models that assume linear cause-and-effect relationships and predictable outcomes when dealing with complex situations.

Public support for development cooperation can be considered as a complex concept that is determined by a multitude of factors such as knowledge, attitude, behavior and context which are not related to each other in a linear way. As a result, unexpected and unpredictable factors can have an important effect on the effectiveness of well planned public support activities (see text box 2).



Box 2. In one M&E workshop we made use of the typology of Crawford and Pollack (2004) to visualize the complex reality of public support activities through 7 characteristic dimensions (see caption). Based on the answers of the workshop participants, we got the following typology of interventions that seek to strengthen public support (see caption): 1) less goal/objective clarity, 2) less tangible objectives, 3) less quantifiable indicators, 4) more easily affected by factors outside the project control, 5) higher number of possible intervention strategies, 6) more need for active engagement of stakeholders and 7) more focus on relationships, culture and meaning instead of technical performance and efficiency.

While public support for development cooperation is a complex concept, not all aspects of our public support programmes will have the same level of complexity.

The Cynefin framework (see Figure 4) developed by David Snowden and Cynthia Kurtz (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003) is a ‘sense making or decision making’ framework which helps organisations to differentiate between situations or processes that are ‘simple’, ‘complicated’, ‘complex’ or ‘chaotic’ and make decisions accordingly.

Figure 4: Cynefin framework
(Developed by David Snowden, www.cognitive-edge.com)

It is important to make this differentiation when developing planning, monitoring and evaluation systems because different action responses will apply for different levels of complexity. Below we explain briefly each dimension of the Cynefin framework and try to illustrate each with an example. We have adapted some of the examples that were given by Van Der Velden (2010).

Simple refers to situations where cause and effect are obvious, repeatable and predictable. The approach is sense – categorise – respond.
Example: organising a petition on the street around a specific theme for which you tell people the background story and then ask them to sign the petition. Getting the petition organized could be simple. Whether people will sign and whether the petition will have an influence on their attitude about the issue or on their behavior would not be part of the 'simple' domain. Simple quality standards and following a protocol of best practices could be enough to ensure the petition is properly organised.

Complicated refers to situations where cause and effect are detectable but separated over time and space. Some expert knowledge or investigation is needed to establish the cause and effect relationship. The approach is sense – analyse – respond. Good practices can be developed for such situations.
Example: the implementation of development education modules in primary school that provide a framework for children to engage with a number of North-South issues, in order to promote a certain level of knowledge or attitude around these issues and to facilitate some simple action such as a theme walk, reading a book about another culture or doing a twitter session on internet around a relevant theme. Within the parameters of the school, you still have a certain amount of control to make sure that the children actually participate in all the activities.

Complex refers to situations in which cause and effect is understandable in retrospect but cannot be predicted and is often unrepeatable. Frequently it is also undetectable because of the multitude of external factors and actors that cannot always be known or understood. The approach in complex situations is probe – sense – respond. This involves the emergent practice of trying out specific interventions and then learning what works and what doesn't

work. On the basis of that knowledge one can then respond by scaling up or replicating (Woodhill, 2008).
Example: a global education campaign that aims at changing people's behavior towards buying more sustainable products such as Max Havelaar Coffee because of a changed attitude about the effect of consumption in the North on conditions in the South

Chaotic refers to situations in which the relationship between cause and effect is not detectable. In such situations there is often no time for planning and one needs to act immediately (e.g. in emergency situations after natural disasters). The approach is to act – sense – respond.
Example: the NGOs being confronted with a sudden decrease in funding from government because of a perception that they were not able to account for the effects of their activities. NGOs now frantically seek to improve their M&E practice at any cost.

The central part, 'disorder, represents the space of not knowing which domain we are in. In such case we will interpret the situation on the basis of our personal preference for action. This can sometimes result in making a decision for a specific action that is not appropriate for the situation, e.g. addressing a complex problem with complicated action response.

The logical framework which is still being asked by the back donor for subsidy proposals for public support activities, largely treats development as either a simple or a complicated problem that can be solved through rigorous analysis (e.g. problem and solution trees) and thorough planning (e.g. SMART indicators: Specific-Measurable-Appropriate-Relevant-Timing). Such an approach may suit the simple and complicated domains of development (e.g. infrastructure projects) but it faces some limitations for dealing with complex systems that involve people and a lot of unknown external factors that can have an effect along the way (Ramalingam, 2008). Often, a single programme may contain different domains of the Cynefin model and each domain, be it simple, complicated, complex or chaotic and will require different PM&E approaches (Rogers, 2010).

4. Towards better monitoring of the effects of our public support activities – Five steps for operationalising a M&E system for public support activities

Based on the challenges discussed above, insights from literature around M&E and our own practical experience from the action research we present a framework of five steps that can help us to develop a practical and useful M&E system. This framework doesn't have to be seen as a rigid planning blue print but as a guiding framework that can be used in a flexible and iterative way to develop a M&E system that is useful and adapted to your particular public support programme and the context in which you operate. Only steps 1 to 4 will be discussed in this paper.

4.1. Clarifying an actor centred theory of change.

A fundamental step in developing any M&E system is to have a clear understanding of the overall vision, goals and objectives that you want to contribute to with your public support activities. It is also crucial that you have a good idea about the activities you will carry out in order to work towards your goals and objectives. Many will agree that this constitutes good practice for any planning process.

Less commonly realized is the fact that such planning process can follow a 'functionalist' or 'an interpretivist' perspective. A functionalist perspective involves breaking down the desired changes into functional elements, i.e. the units of work/effort required to bring about the planned change (Crawford et al, 2005). Such planning perspective (as is the case with many of our logical frameworks) have a tendency to abstract the human actors that a project seeks to influence and instead to focus on the function or roles of the implementation team. (I.e. project activities). This frequently results in less clarity about the changes the project seeks to contribute to at the level of the target groups or actors whom the implementing team is seeking to influence directly or indirectly. Not surprisingly an M&E system based on such a planning will find it easier to monitor outputs of project activities instead of effects at the level of the target groups that the project seeks to influence.

An interpretivist perspective to planning on the other hand involves articulating the role/experience of key human actors involved in the change process. An interpretivist perspective acknowledges that social change, by definition, involves human actors interacting within a system (Crawford et al, 2005). Planning within such a perspective will involve clarifying and describing specific changes at the level of the actors whom the project seeks to influence directly or indirectly. These changes, to which the project hopes to contribute, can provide a framework for monitoring and evaluating the effects of the project. The resulting project plan is sometimes referred to as an actor focused theory of change.

An actor focused theory of change can be understood as a results chain that specifies the roles and expectations and possible influence relationships of the various actors or target groups involved in a public support project. The outcome mapping methodology developed by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) can help to develop such an actor centred theory of change. The concept of spheres of influence in outcome mapping (figure 5) when applied to the ripple model which we discussed earlier in the paper helps to make a clear distinction between the implementing project in the sphere of control (i.e. the implementing team has control about its own programme activities) and the direct target group in the direct sphere of influence (i.e. those actors that are directly influenced by the programme activities) and the indirect target groups further away in the indirect sphere of influence (i.e. those actors that are only indirectly influenced by the programme). In reality there are often several layers of actors before the final target group is reached.

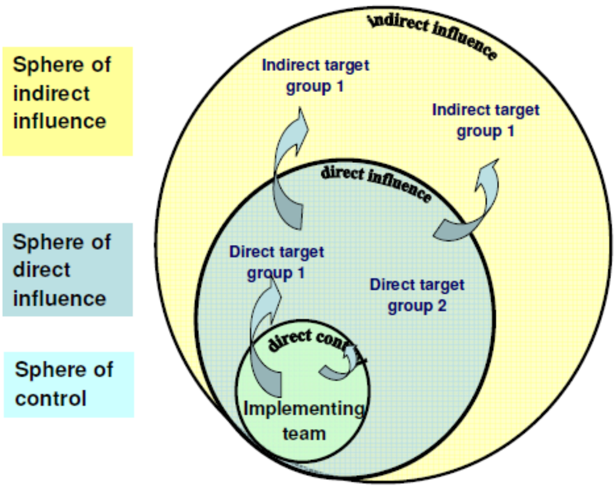
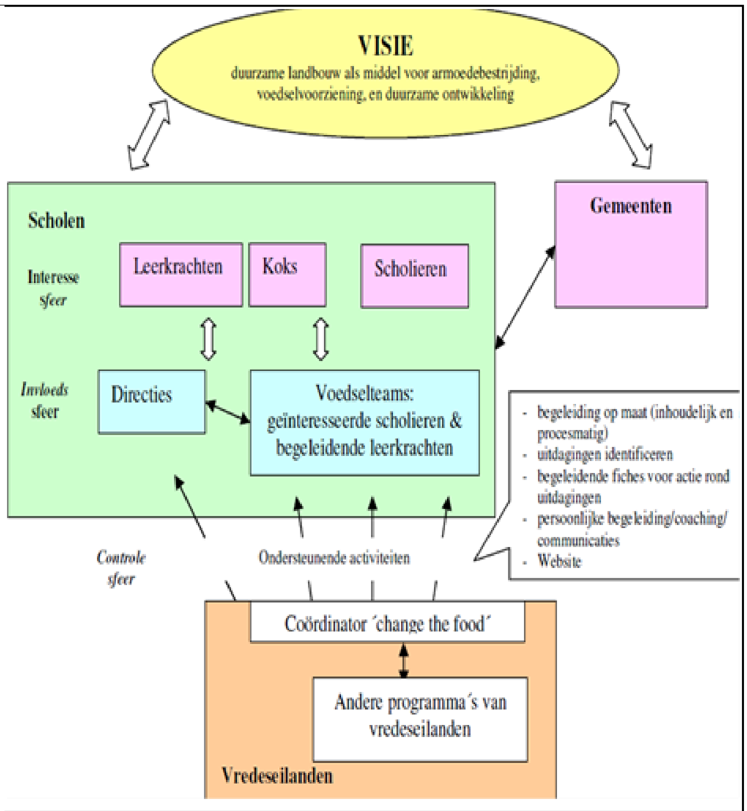


Figure 5: spheres of control, influence and interest (adapted from Deprez, 2010)

It can be a very helpful exercise to get together with your team, get out the flip charts and try to organize the various actors involved in your public support programme in the various spheres of influence. Box 3 illustrates an actor centred theory of change for the 'change the food programme' of Vredeseilanden

Box 3: The 'Change the Food' programme from Vredeseilanden supports the consumption of sustainable food products in secondary schools. The final beneficiaries are the teachers, the pupils and the cooks in the schools and the local city councils. It is however impossible for the programme team that consists of one coordinator to develop activities for all these target groups. For this reason the coordinator Works with intermediate actors in the schools. These are the 'change the food' teams who consist of interested pupils and teachers who promote sustainable food products on a voluntary basis. Another intermediate target Group constitutes the school administrations. The change the food teams with the support of the school administrations, organize educational activities around sustainable food products in order to influence change around this concept at the level of the pupils, the teachers and the cooks.



4.2. Identifying the purpose and information needs of the M&E system

The next step in developing an M&E system is to clarify its purpose. In other words, we need to be clear about 'why' we want to monitor and evaluate our public support projects? This is important because the purpose of M&E will inform its design. Coe & Main (2008) refer to the following purpose of M&E for campaign effectiveness:

- Improved decision making and impact
- Promote learning
- Ensure accountability to stakeholders
- Influence targets
- Motivate campaigners

Deprez (2009) refers to the wheel of learning from Guijt and Ortiz to illustrate additional elements concerning the purpose of M&E. This is illustrated in figure 6.

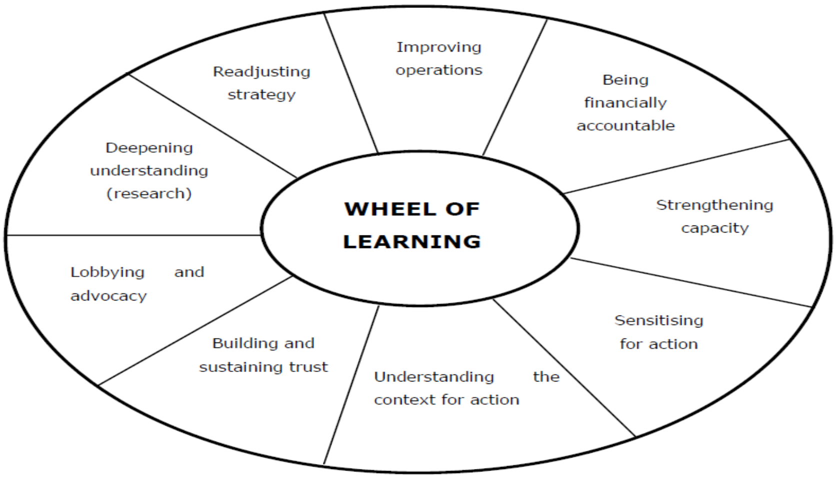


Figure 6: the Wheel of learning (Deprez 2009, adapted from Guijt & Otiz, 2007)

Determining the purpose of the M&E system goes hand in hand with determining the users of the M&E information and the specific information that they need.

Different stakeholders may have different information needs which are not always compatible (James, 2009). Sometimes donors might want the M&E system to provide information on the effects of public support campaigns for accountability purposes. On the other hand, organisations might want the M&E system to provide information that helps them to learn about what works and what does not work in order to inform future planning and implementation. Some trade off will be needed between these various information needs (*ibid.*) and will have to be considered when developing a M&E system. On the basis of these information needs it becomes easier to decide which information we need to collect with our M&E system and which information we don't need to monitor. This step will also help us to avoid a situation that we collect a lot of monitoring information that is nice to know but which nobody uses. Remember Albert Einstein's quote: *''Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted, counts. (Albert Einstein)''*

4.3. Planning for data collection and data synthesis

… those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable. (Former USAID President, 2010).

Measuring the effects of public support programmes remains a challenge for many organizations. In some cases M&E is limited to monitoring the outputs of programme activities such as the number of people that attended a specific event or activity. Monitoring the effects or impact over time of such activities is perceived as much more difficult, as illustrated by the following quote from one NGO representative: *''Many NGOs face difficulties in setting up a solid research about their impact and the effects of their activities. The fact that many NGOs don't have staff with a research background is the main reason for this. … NGO's are not motivated to develop their own monitoring system because they are of the opinion that this can only be done well if lots of time and expertise is invested in it''.*

Based on the first insights of the PULSE action research we would like to argue that M&E of the effects of public support activities doesn't necessarily need to be that difficult. In the three research cases we saw evidence of how programme staff was able to review and customize their own M&E approach to suit their specific context and information needs without heavy investment in terms of time and expertise.

4.3.1. The case of the 'change the food' programme from Vredeseilanden: a mix of simple surveys, personal observation and informal discussion moments.

The 'Change the Food' programme from Vredeseilanden supports the consumption of sustainable food products. The programme works with secondary schools where it seeks to increase the visibility of sustainable food products by introducing the school communities to products of sustainable food chains and various aspects of sustainability.

Through participating in the PULSE action research the 'change the food' team wanted to address a number of M&E challenges that they faced. Firstly monitoring was mainly focusing on the campaign activities carried out by the schools. There was little information about the effects of these activities on changes in student's attitude or structural changes related to sustainable food in the schools. Secondly, data collection through the change the food website was difficult because teachers perceived it as an administrative burden. As a result teachers rarely posted their reports on the 'change the food' website.

To address these challenges, the 'change the food' team adjusted their data collection activities. Key actors within the schools got a personalised email with a link to a number of adjusted evaluation questions (see box 4) that were now focusing more on the institutional changes in the schools in relation to the use of sustainable food products. The revision of the evaluation questions was inspired by an earlier exercise in which the actor focused theory of change of the programme was clarified (see text box 3 earlier in the paper). In this exercise it became clear that institutional changes implemented by the school administrations and the food teams fell in the direct

Box 4: Adjusted evaluation questions:

i. Which activities were carried out around sustainable food in the school? (by the pupils?; by the school management? By others such as the parents or the city council, …)
ii. Have you observed any structural changes in your school in terms of sustainable food (e.g. changed policy for buying sustainable food products in the cantine, …)
iii. How did change the food contribute to these changes?
iv. Which support from change the food was useful?
v. Do you have any recommendations for future support?
vi. Would you like to participate in brainstorming about the future set up of the 'change the food' programme?
vii. Do you have any other comments? Things you would like to share, positive or negative?

influence of the programme and could therefore be monitored. In addition, the programme coordinator also carried out field visits to the schools to collect extra information.
While the response rate on the evaluation questions remained low (only 3 out of 14 teachers), the small number of responses was found valuable because they provided additional evidence of changes in the schools that were already observed and known by the programme coordinator through the field visits and informal interaction with the schools. As such it allowed the programme coordinator to triangulate observations and conclusions.
Also the data collection through the field visits was useful for monitoring effects as illustrated by the following reflection from the 'change the food' coordinator:

''By talking with teachers and students I heard how they went about the programme and what the difficulties were. I shared experiences with them from other schools and that way provided new ideas and motivation. I have no reports of this. Informal learning was central here. The information I gathered through field visits was important to guide and to evaluate the program. These visits offered me the opportunity to get concrete material for the promotion of the programme or to share good examples. For example, through the field visits I came to know about how the students are struggling to sell sustainable food literally and figuratively. i.e. - How do you explain in a few words that sustainable food is an important part of your future? And why would students buy a bio apple when there are crisps and chocolates for sale in the school vending machines? That's how I came to realise that you can't just work on the level of the pupils but that also the school needs to make choices about banning the school vending machines if they really want to promote sustainable food.''

4.3.2. The case of the travel bursary programme of VLIR-UOS: a mix of web survey and most significant change methodology.

Through its 'travel bursary' programme, VLIR-UOS supports university & high school students to be attached, for a few months, to a project in a developing country. The programme aims to sensitise students to become ambassadors for more solidarity in the world and to support local projects with input from the North. Returning students are expected to share the insights they gained from their experience in the South with their colleagues, friends and family. The programme therefore seeks to deepen public support for development cooperation and to render this public support more permanent.

VLIR-UOS was facing a number of M&E challenges related to data collection. Firstly the questionnaires that each student had to fill out on their return resulted in a large number of reports (± 500/year) from which it was difficult to draw useful and practical lessons by the VLIR-UOS coordinator. Secondly, the student reports contained limited information about the impact or the effects of the programme on deepening public support for development cooperation in Belgium.

A first important step was the clarification of the spheres of influence of the programme (see figure 7). The VLIR-UOS coordinator and the field coordinator in the high schools and universities were seen to constitute the implementing team of the programme and therefore positioned in the sphere of control of the programme. Since the students who receive a travel bursary are the direct target group of the programme, they are situated in the sphere of direct influence of the programme. The programme implementing team tries to influence the students through providing travel bursaries, preparation and follow up of the students before and after travel, monitoring and evaluation. The families, colleagues and friends of the bursary students, who are only indirectly targeted by the programme through the students when they are back home, are situated in the programme's sphere of indirect influence. Based on the programme's theory of change, it was decided to monitor the effects of the programme at the level of the students. With the students being close enough to the programme, it was considered both practical and realistic to learn about the programme's contribution to possible effects at this level. Tracking contribution of the programme to possible effects at the indirect influence level of the student's colleagues, families and friends was seen unpractical and unrealistic.

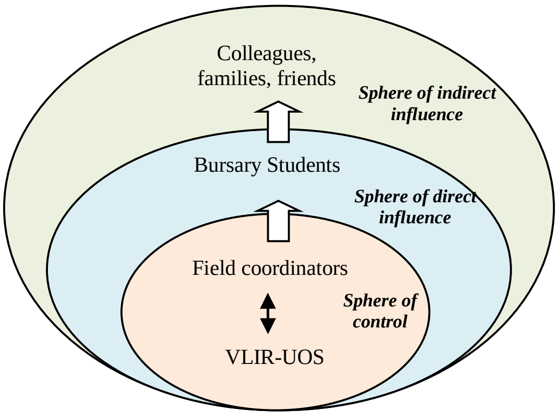


figure 7: spheres of influence in the VLIR-UOS case

Web survey

A second step to address these challenges was to rework the student report format by integrating questions that focus more on the effects of the programme. The questionnaire was also made web based using survey monkey as this would help the synthesis and first analysis of the data from the multitude of reports. Drawing from an earlier evaluation of the effects of development education in schools by the centre of experiential learning (Daems et al., 2010), the VLIR-UOS team and PULSE drafted the following questions to collect information about the effects of the 'travel bursary' programme. The questions are mainly measuring attitude and behavior of the students before and after their return (see figure 8).

* 4. Wat deed je reeds of ben je van plan nog te doen met je ervaringen na terugkeer? Hoe zal je die ervaringen delen met anderen? (je kan meerdere opties kiezen)

	dat heb ik al gedaan	dat plan ik nog te doen	dat vind ik (nog steeds) zinvol, maar ik heb hiervoor geen tijd (meer)	dat vind ik (nog steeds) zinvol, maar is niets voor mij	dat vind ik niet (meer) zinvol
Presentatie voor de volgende lichting reisbeursstudenten					
Gastles geven					
Artikel in de studentenkrant of een ander tijdschrift					
Fondsen werven voor de lokale partner					
Gaan spreken op een infoavond					
Een eigen website maken					
Een fototentoonstelling organiseren					

Ev. welke andere?

* 5. Hoeveel mensen denk je in totaal te bereiken of bereikt te hebben met alle initiatieven samen?

	0	1-5	6-20	21-50	51-100	101 en meer
Reeds bereikt						
Nog te bereiken						

* 6. Wat is je houding tegenover volgende acties

	Dat heb ik al eens gedaan voor mijn vertrek	Dat heb ik al eens gedaan na mijn terugkeer	Na mijn terugkeer
Durven ingaan tegen stereotype Noord-Zuidbeelden in dagdagelijkse omgang met vrienden, familie, studenten			
Geld geven aan een organisatie die zich inzet voor mensen in het Zuiden			
Producten van eerlijke handel kopen(fairtrade, Max Havelaar,...)			
Mijn ouders vragen of ze iets willen doen voor het Zuiden			
Meewerken als vrijwilliger			

Ev. welke andere?

Figure 8: extract from VLIR-UOS student evaluation questionnaire

The VLIR-UOS coordinator, PULSE, and the field coordinators from the various universities and high schools participated in the revision of the student questionnaire. This collaboration helped to make sure that the questions would address the various information needs of the main actors involved in the programme. The quote from the VLIR-UOS coordinator illustrates this: ''*It is interesting to observe that a few years ago, it was felt that the questionnaire was too quantitative and as a result a more qualitative questionnaire with open questions was developed. This time around it was observed that our open questions were not only providing limited feedback about effect of the programme, it was also felt that we needed a more balanced mix of questions that asked for quantitative and qualitative information.*''

Monitoring versus Evaluation: Monitoring refers to the regular collection and analysis of information to assist timely decision-making, ensure accountability and provide the basis for evaluation and learning. Evaluation refers to the systematic (and as objective as possible) examination of a planned, ongoing or completed project. It aims to answer specific management questions (often related to efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and the relevance of the project's objectives) and to judge the overall value of an endeavor and supply lessons learned to improve future actions, planning and decision-making (IFAD, 2002). The focus of the three cases in the PULSE action research is rather on the monitoring part of M&E. While less practical for regular effect monitoring, evaluative impact studies can provide useful insights in the longer term effects to which your programme may have contributed.
An impact study of the 'student bursary' programme of the University of Antwerp, made use of web survey which was sent to alumni students who received a travel bursary over the last 25 years (De Herdt et al, 2010). To get information about the control group, the alumni students were also asked to give the questionnaire to a number of people with a similar profile but who didn't participate in the travel bursary programme. Survey questions mainly focused on the background of the alumni, their current civil engagement, the effect of the travel bursary on their social engagement in the North and towards the South, their insight in development issues, and their intercultural competencies. The study showed that students, who participated in the travel bursary programme, demonstrated an increased and sustained social engagement later on in life as was evidenced by a higher level of participation in development and other social organizations.

Most significant change stories

the VLIR-UOS team also decided to make use of the most significant change methodology as a second step to address the challenge of having limited information about the effects of the programme.

Essentially the most significant change method involves the collection of significant change stories from target groups (in this case the students) that have been influenced by the public support programme and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by panels of designated stakeholders (in this case again the students) or staff (i.e. the VLIR-UOS coordinator and field coordinators from the universities and high schools). This way, the designated staff and stakeholders are initially involved in 'searching' for project effects. Once stories about changes have been captured, various people sit down together, read the stories aloud and have in-depth discussions about the value of these reported changes. Once the technique has been implemented successfully, whole teams of people begin to focus their attention on programme impact. Learning occurs through discussion and areas for improvement can be identified (Davies and Dart, 2005).

The VLIR-UOS team decided to integrate the 'most significant change' methodology as a data collection and learning activity during the 'come back' moment where testimonies from returning students are shared with students that are preparing to leave for their attachment. Text box 5 shows the various steps followed during the most significant change activity.

Box 5: Collecting and selecting the most significant change story

1. *Collection of stories:* in groups of two: interview each other and use the 'story collection format' to document the 'change story' of your partner. Try to document the story as literally as possible so that the story can also be shared in plenary later on.
2. *Sharing the stories in small groups:* In groups of 4 or 6, the interviewers are asked to read out the stories that they documented. The listeners are asked to write down any parts of the story that caught their attention or that they found important.
3. *Selection of the most significant story:* After the stories are read out, the group selects the story that they consider to be demonstrating the most significant change. The group is asked to document why a specific story was chosen as being the most significant change story.

At this stage in the action research the most significant change method has not yet been implemented with the returning students. It is planned for 2011. We can only share experiences from a workshop with the coordinators from High Schools, Universities and VLIR-UOS where the methodology was tested and where the usefulness of the methodology for the M&E system was discussed. The workshop provided us with useful insights about the potential advantages and challenges concerning the most significant change methodology in the context of the 'travel bursary' programme. Table 1 illustrates this through concrete quotes from the workshop.

Fragments of significant stories selected during the workshop:
- ''The stories and the questions from the students, their idealism, continuously bring you back to time when you were young, the time that you were also like that''..... - ''The conviction that intercultural contact is very fundamental, it is the driving force that keeps us doing this work, and that way we don't mind taking up the additional paperwork.....''
Advantages of the most significant change methodology
- "The interesting thing here is that you have to dig for your inside story. This helps you to think critically.'' - ''The nice thing is that you talk outside your normal day to day professional routine.'' - ''the students will learn more from this then from completing a written report. ''
Remaining questions and perceived challenges:
- How do you report, analyse and summarise such a process? - Comparing stories was sometimes too abstract because it was about values and visions. - The question: ''give the most significant change story'' comes rather direct! We are not used to tell a personal story to a larger group of people. Therefore, you need to create a sort of safe setting so that people are willing to share their emotions. - The task of the interviewer as a moderator is important to help you dig deeper. - Documenting the full story is difficult. There was a tendency that the interviewer would write a summary of the story making it difficult later on to share the story to the bigger group.

Table 1: outcomes from the MSC training workshop for field coordinators.

The reflections in table 1 show that the introduction of a new methodology such as most significant change doesn't follow a simple technical step by step procedure. It rather resembles a collaborative exploration process where various programme stakeholders reflect on the various advantages and remaining challenges of the methodology and in the process draw deeper lessons about their programme and develop a basis for adaptation and customization of the methodology to suit the specific context of the travel bursaries programme. Within the further course of the action research we will focus on how the most significant change methodology will be used with the returning students and how it will help the programme to measure and learn about its effects.

An important condition that made this exploration process possible is of course the space and time for exploration that is made available in the form of this workshop. This requires a level of leadership and prioritization that goes beyond any data collection tool but is rather part of the underlying learning culture in the programme. We will come back to this learning culture in the next chapter.

4.3.3. The Trias case: a mix of focus group discussions and a scoring tool for monitoring changes in knowledge, attitude and behavior.

Through its public support programme in Belgium, Trias works towards a better understanding of inequality and to an enhanced commitment of its partner organisatons in Belgium to North-South relations and international solidarity. Trias seeks to work towards this goal by supporting the development of strong partnerships between its member organizations in the North and the South.

The main challenge concerning M&E for Trias was to analyse the large amounts of monitoring data and to link this analysis process with decision making in the programme.

Trias developed a scoring tool to monitor changes in knowledge, attitude and behavior of its partner organizations who are involved in North-South partnerships. The scoring tool contains a number of proxy indicators for each dimension of knowledge, attitude and behavior. Each proxy indicator can be scored on a scale from 0 to 10. Specific descriptions of change associated with score values, help the scoring during each monitoring cycle. Besides giving a numeric score, there is also room to provide an explanation why a specific score was given. This explanation is used in the analysis of the indicator scores. The scores of the proxy indicators can also be aggregated to get one value for each of the main indicators of knowledge, attitude and behavior. The aggregated values help the team to visualize trends over time. An extract of the scoring tool is illustrated in figure 9.

	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 1			Score	explanation
Knowledge Understanding of development cooperation	A minority of the focus group knows different elements of North-South cooperation	Half of the focus group knows different elements of North-South cooperation	A majority of the focus group knows different elements of North-South cooperation		
Understanding of the context in North and South	Stereotypes and outdated views on context of MBOs in North or South still exist among a majority of the focus group	More accurate insights in the context of MBOs in North or South exist among the focus group	A majority the focus group has more accurate insights in the context of MBOs in North or South.		
Attitude Image about solidarity with the North or the South: relations with the North or the South have an added value for both parties	The majority of the focus group has no or very limited idea of what the added value of a partnership with other MBOs in North or South can be.	A majority of the focus group mentions an added value for one of the parties in the relationship.	A majority of the focus group sees building relations and partnerships with other MBOs with other MBOs in North or South as an added value for both parties.		

Fig. 9: extract from the Trias scoring tool

Scoring is done by the North-South advisors mainly on the basis of information collected during focus group discussions with groups of administrators, staff and volunteering members from the partner organizations both in the North and the South. The focus group discussions are structured around a number of lead questions that are in line with the proxy indicators in the scoring tool (see text box 6).

Box 6. Extract of the lead questions for the focus group discussions:

1. What do you know about the partnership? What do people in the movement about the partnership?
2. To what extent is the partnership alive in the movement? How do people react to this? And why?
3. How do people get to know about the partnership and how do they get in contact with it? Is the link being made between supply, communication and exchange and do people appreciate this? And why?
4. How is feedback about the partnership organised within the movement? Is there enough feedback? Does the partnership contribute to participation in the programme of Trias? In which way? What opportunities are there to be involved in the partnership? Are there enough opportunities for participation?
5. Is the partnership seen as a formal or informal exhange? Why so? Any challenges?
6. To what extent is the partnership playing a role in the planning of the movement?
7. .....

Experiences with the scoring tool and focus group discussions:

The focus group discussions are an important element within the M&E system of the Trias' North programme. This is because they provide concrete data about the effects of the programme in terms of changes in knowledge, attitude and behavior at the level of the partner organizations. This information is then used by the North South advisors to score the scoring tool. The scores from the scoring tool together with the information from the focus group discussions is used to report against the indicators of the specific objective of the logframe. After two years of implementation, the North-South advisors carried out a reflection about their experiences with the focus group discussions and the scoring tool. Some interesting contradictions emerged from this reflection, pointing towards important advantages and pertinent challenges associated with the use of these tools (see table 2).

Table 2: main insights from reflection on the use of focus group discussions and scoring tool	
Advantages	Challenges
• FGD brings out information that is not found in other reports or evaluations. i.e. it helps us to collect information about effects of the programme in terms of changes in knowledge, attitude and behavior of the partner organizations • People appreciate that they can give input and that they are listened to. • Follow up during FGD on expectations and concerns mentioned the previous year can strengthen participation in the process. • Volunteers find the FGD a rich learning opportunity. They are prepared to invest time in it. At the start it is often questioned what will come out of the FGD but in the end, two years in a row, it has been an interesting and insightful experiences	• Partner organisations have limited time available to invest in FGD. • Sometimes there is a feeling that the FGDs overlap with other M&E activities. Therefore FGDs are seen as extra work. • Partner organisations sometimes doubt if their input during FGD is valuable or important enough. • It sometimes seems more interesting for Trias then for the partner organisations. • It is questioned if the FGD with a limited number of people is adequate as tool to get a broad idea about the public support within the partner organizations. • Sometimes difficult to decide which score to give. Also the qualitative descriptions of change that come with the various scores of the proxy indicators can sometimes be interpreted in different ways.

- *A first contradiction is the perceived shortage of time for partner organizations and the perception that it is of use for Trias and not for them versus the observation that participants find the focus group discussions an interesting and insightful experience.*

This contradiction highlights the important question: Who is the focus group discussion and the scoring tool primarily for? James (2009) points out that different stakeholders have different agenda's for M&E. In the Trias case, it can be questioned if the sole reason for the focus group discussion and the scoring tool is to report towards the donor (i.e. DGD) or if it's also aimed for learning at the level of Trias and the partner organizations. Probably it is a combination of both and it may be necessary to be very clear about and negotiate these various purposes of the M&E activities. In case its main purpose would be to satisfy donor requirements then it will be important to ensure that it puts minimal burden on the partner organizations involved (James, 2009).

- *A second contradiction is the fact that people appreciate that they can give input and enjoy being listened to versus the feeling that their input during the focus group discussion may not be valuable or important enough.*

Self assessment can be a feasible and powerful tool for monitoring and evaluation. This is because the actors that a programme is trying to influence are often in the best position to identify meaningful change. The contradiction shows that people find it exciting to be part of such a self assessment process on the one hand but sometimes doubt about the significance of their stories or contributions. Such observation helps to emerge an important aspect of a learning centred self assessment process, namely the idea that not all our stories need to be grand narratives. In fact stories can also be accounts of the simple things in life and may comprise a single anecdote that holds significance for the writer or the teller. Such stories contain the seeds for real learning. (Hill, 2010). Good facilitation will be helpful not only to create the safe environment and focus for people to share their stories but also to make sure there is the necessary organizational time to do it well (James, 2010).

- *A third contradiction involves the observation that the focus group discussion provide information about the effects of the programme in terms of changes in public support versus the observation that the focus group discussion alone may not be adequate to get a broad view of this public support and that the scoring of the scoring tool based on the information of the focus group discussions may be subjective.*

A practical issue and a more fundamental theoretical issue seems to be at play here. The practical issue relates to the available capacity in the North programme of Trias to develop and administer surveys towards a larger number of staff and members of the partner organizations. Experience shows that many organizations do not have this capacity. Next to the difficulty of developing a good survey questionnaire, response rate and analysis of such surveys is often a big challenge. Making use of simple tools such as the focus group discussions and the scoring tool can provide a feasible alternative. The more theoretical issue relates to the question if we need to adopt an objective or an interpretive approach. As we have seen earlier in the paper, public support for North-South issues is a complex concept. It is impossible to avoid different interpretations about such concepts. In such cases it may be useful to allow different perspectives to be heard and to be explored in-depth during a focus group discussion. When scoring is done on the basis of such perspectives it will be again more useful to use these scores as a basis for further reflection. This way it could provide the necessary information to build up a well supported argument or judgment about progress in the programme.

4.4. Plan for sense making and learning

'The highest level of accountability is not that you did what you said you would, but that you are getting better at serving the underlying intent of what you said you were going to do' (Smutylo, in Ortiz, 2004).

Earlier in this paper we explained the importance of a learning oriented management approach when dealing with complex change processes, as is the case with programmes that seek to strengthen public support around development cooperation or North-South issues. In such complex processes cause and effect relationships are often unpredictable and therefore it's crucial to learn about observable changes as they happen on a continuous basis as quickly as possible in order to learn what is working and what is not and adjust programme strategies accordingly in order to improve the programme.

Many organizations expect their M&E system to contribute to such learning. In practice however we often see that satisfying the accountability needs (e.g. satisfying reporting requirements for the donor) takes the upper hand within many M&E systems. Learning often comes as an afterthought or is assumed to happen automatically, as long as we collect the right information. While collecting the right information can help the learning, practice and research have shown that collecting the right information will not per definition result in learning by various stakeholders involved in the programme (Huyse 2011, Watson 2006, Guijt 2008). So if we want our M&E systems to become more learning centred, then we will need to give learning the necessary attention as we plan our M&E activities. In the next part we will illustrate some of the learning challenges in the Pulse action research cases. We will also highlight how they were addressed.

4.4.1. Making space for joint reflection

In both the VLIR-UOS and TRIAS case, analysis of the monitoring data was initially done centrally by the coordinators at the head offices. This contributed to an overload of monitoring information which was difficult for analysis and for drawing meaningful lessons. Only the head office coordinators would learn in the process and were now facing the challenge to share these lessons to the other staff members so that these lessons could be used for future planning and for improving the programme. In reality, the M&E system became mainly a reporting system to satisfy reporting needs of the donor instead of a learning system for the programme. The role of the Staff in the M&E system was mainly limited to the collection of the data.

In the 'Change the food' case, centralized data analysis was less of a problem since it's a smaller programme with only one coordinator and a limited number of schools that are taking part in the programme. Progress markers are used as a framework to analyse the monitoring data. The progress markers are a tool from the outcome mapping methodology (Earl et al. 2001). Progress markers provide a graduated set of statements describing a progression of changed behaviours in the direct target group that the programme is seeking to influence. However, according to the programme coordinator, the progress markers were not used to draw lessons. Instead they were mainly used for reporting. At the same time progress markers were only formulated for the school pupils who are indirectly influenced by the 'change the food' programme. For the direct target groups such as the school administrations and the 'change the food teams' where the programme's influence is the highest, there were no progress markers. The progress markers for the school pupils are illustrated in table 3 below.

Table 3: progress markers for school pupils.	
PM1	We expect an average of 100 unique visitors to the change the food website on a daily basis.
PM2	We expect that in at least 50 fare trade municipalities and candidate fare trade municipalities at least one school collaborates at Change the Food.
PM3	We expect that pupils in the change the food schools know why sustainable agriculture and sustainable consumption are important as part of their future, the future of next generations and the future of farmers in the South and the North.
PM4	We expect that pupils from five change the food schools organise activities or participate in activities to promote sustainable food within their schools.
PM5	We hope that the pupils of three change the food schools organise or participate in activities to promote sustainable food in their municipalities.

The above examples from the three cases illustrate that analysis of monitoring data can easily remain an individual task to feed reports without contributing to wider learning among various actors within a programme. Such situation will also not easily motivate the wider staff or members of the target groups to be actively involved in M&E activities since they are not involved in the sense making about the information that comes out of the M&E activities. The often heard complaint that there is no time for M&E activities, as was the case in the three action research cases, is not too unexpected in such setting. This is illustrated by the following quote from one of the Trias North South advisors: *''some of the insights/decisions from the previous evaluation moments were not taken up in our current way of working. For example, we would limit the number of steps in the M&E process but now there are even more steps.''*

Investing in joint reflection, at various levels, on our own learning, both implicitly and explicitly is key (Smit, 2007). The mistake we often make is to keep these concepts about learning too vague and not translate them into concrete actions. In such cases it is difficult to change deeply engrained behavioural patterns in organisations, such as a lack of time for reflection. It is therefore essential to create the space to actually get together with the relevant actors and make collective sense of the concrete significant observations we have made or insights we have gained during our daily activities and interactions and our M&E activities.

In the Trias and the VLIR-UOS case, it was decided that North South advisors (Trias) and the field coordinators (VLIR-UOS) would carry out a first analysis of the M&E information from their specific target groups. The expected changes as determined in the respective theories of change are being used as an analytic framework for this analysis. Also reflection meetings with project staff are being organized during each monitoring cycle to collectively discuss the results from the first analysis phase and to draw lessons for future planning within the programme. Text box 7 illustrates this for the Trias case.

Box 7. Trias has a rich toolbox with instruments to collect monitoring and evaluation data. These instruments include an excel data base where quantitative information is stored by North South advisors and partner working groups about the number of participants at project activities, the number of requests for support from the partner organizations, number of people that are actively involved in the member organizations, and participants at north-south exchange visits. Also effect diaries filled by the North South advisors and the scoring tool for monitoring changes in knowledge, attitude, and behavior of partner organisations form part of the data collection toolbox. Analysis of the large amount of data provided by these tools and collective learning about these data was a major challenge. This challenge was addressed in the following way:

- making the North South advisors responsible for analyzing the M&E data from their specific target groups.
- Organizing a two day reflection meeting every year to draw lessons from the M&E information that is analysed by the North South advisors.
- Feedback of the main lessons learned from the M&E cycle to the partners during partner meetings linked to each monitoring cycle..

Reflection space in the 'change the food' case consists of a combination of more formal and informal reflection moments. Informal reflection moments include informal interaction with partners in the schools during field visits or during participation in school activities and informal interaction with colleagues at the Vredeseilanden office. Formal reflection moments involve work meetings every two months with the head of department to discuss developments in the project. While these formal meetings help to make links with other projects within Vredeseilanden that work towards the same specific objective, the informal reflection moments are seen by the project coordinator as more effective for learning and for getting insights to adjust the project. '' This is illustrated by the following reflection from the project coordinator on the formal reflection moments: *'' besides the work meeting with my head of department every two months, the space to learn, to share information and lessons with colleagues and to give and get feedback and to cross check ideas and to make decisions is limited. Because of that, ideas sometimes lay on the shelve for a long time.''*

The key is to draw lessons that are then used to inform decision making and future planning and to provide feedback on these lessons learned and decisions to the actors who were not present at these joint reflections but who are stakeholders in the programme. M&E systems, both formal and informal, that can facilitate such space for joint reflection will help us to learn and to ask ourselves the question **why** we are doing things on the basis of the outcomes and the situational context we learned from.

Deprez (2010) regards the process of conceptualisation and of learning lessons as an essential step in planning, monitoring and evaluation. 'This step focuses on the process of drawing lessons which differentiates learning from simple information exchange and analysis' (Britton, 1998: 17). Lessons learned in this context refer to knowledge generated in one situation which can be generalised to other situations in order to improve action (Deprez, 2010). Such lessons can be learned during scheduled events such as self-assessment workshops, partner meetings and reflection meetings, and these are often part of the M&E system. However, informal interactions during field visits, informal conversations and ad hoc meetings can also provide very important lessons. The lessons learned from such informal events are often not captured in formal M&E systems and mechanisms are therefore needed.

4.4.2. Participation

Providing the necessary space for reflection is actually only one side of the coin. The other side relates to the relevance of the learning process that occurs during such reflection meetings. In fact we are quite good at organising all kinds of reflection activities with various techniques that are intended to help us deepen our reflection. However, very often we face challenges to keep the momentum or the rhythm of such moments and to draw meaningful lessons during such sessions. We face an even bigger challenge in terms of implementing these lessons in practice and monitoring the effects. The question is what can we do about this?

We believe that looking for better reflection tools is important but not the only answer. We also need to consider whether the reflection process remains relevant to the participants outside the context of the reflection activity. Surely, many of us know the situation of there

being very good workshops with lots of insightful reflections and good commitments for action but then, after the workshop, of people seeming to go back to real life and get on with their work or their lives and forget about what was learned or planned during the workshop. It is then up to the workshop organisers to make sure that there is some follow up. In many cases the story ends with a workshop report on our hard discs or on our desks.
Active participation goes further than merely attending M&E activities and also involves participation in a process that is relevant for the life or work of the participant and in which he or she has an active role in the sense-making process and a voice in future decision making based on the lessons learned. Such participative processes can take time to evolve and will probably not happen by themselves. In some cases they can be purposely avoided because they may threaten existing power positions and well-established ways of working (Vare, 2008). Text box 8 illustrates opportunities for active participation in the M&E process in the three cases

Box 8. In the **Trias case**, a reflection exercise on the monitoring and evaluation system of the North programme was carried out with active input from the Trias programme coordinators and representatives from the partner organizations. This reflection exercise provided the space for discussion about what was going well and what was seen to be a challenge. This resulted in concrete steps to improve the M&E system such as the improved alignment of the various data collection tools with collective reflection moments, the reduction of the number of focus group discussions to avoid work overload for the partner organizations and to involve field coordinators in the data analysis process.

In the **VLIR-UOS case**, making the field coordinators responsible for analysis of their own monitoring data has resulted in the creation of extra reflection space where coordinators are asked to share the insights of their analysis process. These reflection spaces provide a forum for drawing lessons about the programme and for making decisions for the future. This is evidenced by the decision to explore and pilot the most significant change methodology to learn about the effects of the programme through significant change stories from returning students.

In the **'change the food' case**, participation and learning is not happening through formal reflection moments. It is rather integrated within the action during activities in the schools. The lessons are learned while doing and through informal processes of collaboration, reflection and feedback with the teachers on the ground or through informal communication channels such as a spontaneous phone call or email. The formal M&E procedures in this case such as the evaluation reports and the progress reports are rather helping to keep the bigger picture across the various school activities and to make sure that the lessons learned are not lost but followed up. The cases illustrate the importance of recognizing and strengthening both formal and informal learning processes as spaces of active participation by the various actors in M&E of the programme.

The cases illustrate that if we do invest time in such active participation, trust and transparency among the participating stakeholders can be effectively enhanced and ultimately lead to strong partnerships. Elements of such partnerships include shared vision, clear intents and purpose, negotiation processes, clear roles and responsibilities, flexibility and openness to change (Horton et al., 2003).

A practical way to foster such active participation is through promoting open communication and feedback. Communicating M&E findings and decisions taken – based on the collected data – recognises and acknowledges the contributions from different actors by showing that the data is actually used (and for what). It is an important feedback mechanism that can improve transparency, downward accountability and trust. Stimulating quality feedback is almost synonymous with stimulating and contributing to learning (Leeuwis, 2004, in Deprez, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Maybe M&E of the effects of public support programmes for development cooperation doesn't need to be so difficult after all? While this question cannot be convincingly answered within the scope of this action research, insights from the three cases do provide us with evidence that effect monitoring is indeed feasible. And it doesn't necessarily have to require unrealistic amounts of resources or time. Instead the action research has been able to point us towards the following potential ingredients for a functional M&E system:

1. A minimum requirement is to have people who are genuinely interested to learn together with colleagues or programme stakeholders about the effects of their programme. This interest can help to provide the energy and the leadership to explore and adapt M&E tools, to create the necessary space for M&E and to motivate colleagues and even target groups to become actively involved in M&E activities. In the three action research cases, the programme coordinators, provided this leadership towards strengthening M&E processes within their respective programmes. As a direct result, new M&E approaches and tools such as most significant change, focus group discussions, scoring tools, web surveys and simple email based evaluation questions were explored in the three cases. The challenge is therefore not only about finding the right M&E tools, but also about how we can strengthen a learning culture in our programmes and organisations.

2. Clarifying a programme's actor centred theory of change, will help to determine at what level in the change theory you can realistically look for the effects of the pogramme. From the cases we learn that it is easier to monitor a programme's effects at the level of the actors whom the programme is influencing directly (i.e. in the programme's sphere of direct influence). Such direct target groups are closer to the programme and therefore it is easier to track the possible contribution of the programme to these effects. For example, in the 'change the food case', monitoring institutional changes in the schools was found to be easier and more feasible then to track changes in the attitudes and knowledge of the school pupils who were only indirectly reached by the programme.

3. Only data collection about a programme's effects will not do the trick. Once the data have been collected there is need to analyse the data, to make sense of it and to use the lessons to improve the programme and to provide feedback to various stakeholders within the programme. From the three cases we learn that making the necessary space for collective reflection can strengthen this sense making process. This can be done formally through for example focus group discussions and staff reflection meetings like in the Trias case. It can also be done informally, through on the job reflection during programme activities, as was evidenced in the 'change the

food' case. Also providing the opportunity for genuine participation in the M&E process can help to make sure that the lessons learned are indeed used to improve practice. The exploration of the most significant change methodology with the field coordinators in the VLIR-UOS case is an example of such active participation in the M&E process.

4. A last ingredient is the skill to see M&E challenges as possible sources for learning and improvement. This is evidenced in the three cases by the way specific M&E challenges were identified and reformulated into research questions which were then explored in the action research process. This not only resulted in the piloting of new approaches in the three cases but also in a more systematic reflection upon the implementation of these new approaches, drawing lessons and using these lessons to adjust and improve practice. Through this process of ongoing action research cycles the 'change the food' case for example, by the time of the publication of this working paper, has already evolved into a new programme concept. Maybe we need to become a bit more like action researchers in order to strengthen our M&E practice.

While the ingredients described above seem to draw a rather rosy picture, many challenges still remain. The three cases clearly show that time remains a limiting factor for sustaining M&E practice and to involve various stakeholders in the M&E process. Also many questions remain about data collection, data analysis and sense making in other public support processes such as media campaigns, festivals, ... In this paper we also didn't zoom in on other challenges such as baselines, donor reporting requirements, limited organizational space for experimentation, ….

There is still some work ahead. As we said in the introduction, this paper doesn't claim to provide solutions to all M&E challenges of public support programmes for development cooperation. It presents a first step in providing a framework that can help practitioners to become action researchers themselves and to explore solutions for their own M&E challenges.

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