MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING IN NGO ADVOCACY

Findings from Comparative Policy Advocacy MEL Review Project

Jim Coe and Juliette Majot | February 2013

For organizations committed to social change, advocacy often figures as a crucial strategic element. How to assess effectiveness in advocacy is, therefore, important. The usefulness of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in advocacy are subject to much current debate. Advocacy staff, MEL professionals, senior managers, the funding community, and stakeholders of all kinds are searching for ways to improve practices – and thus their odds of success – in complex and contested advocacy environments.

This study considers what a selection of leading advocacy organizations are doing in practice. We set out to identify existing practice and emergent trends in advocacy-related MEL practice, to explore current challenges and innovations. The study presents perceptions of how MEL contributes to advocacy effectiveness, and reviews the resources and structures dedicated to MEL.

This inquiry was initiated, funded and managed by Oxfam America. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) served an advisory role to the core project team, which included Gabrielle Watson of Oxfam America, and consultants Juliette Majot and Jim Coe. The following organizations participated in the inquiry:

ActionAid International | Amnesty International | Bread for the World | CARE, USA

Greenpeace International | ONE | Oxfam America | Oxfam Great Britain | Sierra Club

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

For organizations committed to social change, advocacy[1] often figures as a crucial strategic element. How to define and assess effectiveness in advocacy is, therefore, equally important. Questions around the efficacy and usefulness of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning [MEL] practices in advocacy are subject to much current debate. Advocacy staff, MEL professionals, senior managers, the funding community, and stakeholders of all kinds are searching for ways to improve ways of working, and thus their odds of success, in complex and contested advocacy environments.

This study considers a sample of what a selection of leading advocacy organizations are doing in practice. We set out to identify existing practice and emergent trends in advocacy-related MEL practice, to explore current challenges and innovations, to assess perceptions of how - and how well - MEL contributes to overall advocacy effectiveness, and to understand the level of resources dedicated to MEL.

This inquiry was initiated, and funded and managed, by Oxfam America and involved the following participant organizations:
- ActionAid International, (Secretariat, South Africa)
- Amnesty International (Secretariat, UK)
- Bread for the World (US)
- CARE, USA (US)
- Greenpeace International (Secretariat, Netherlands)
- ONE (US)
- Oxfam America (US)
- Oxfam Great Britain (UK, National Campaigns)
- Sierra Club (US)

Gabrielle Watson of Oxfam America, and Simon Hearn of the Overseas Development Institute [ODI] served as the core project management team overseeing the work of two independent consultants, Jim Coe (UK), and Juliette Majot (US).

Information was gathered through:
- A survey completed by 46 respondents (MEL professionals, advocacy staff, and senior managers) from across the participating organizations.

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[1] Different organizations use different terms in different ways; for the sake of brevity in this report we use the term 'advocacy' to encompass both high-level influencing and public facing approaches. We use the word 'campaign' when we are talking about organized effort focused on a specific issue.

- Follow-up in-depth interviews with staff designated as 'MEL leads' within each participating organization.
- Detailed review of participating organizations' documented MEL tools and approaches.
- Three webinars, in which participants (MEL leads from each organization) contributed to design of the inquiry and discussed findings and conclusions as they developed.

KEY FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Supporting evidence for findings and conclusions and a more detailed discussion is provided in the associated full report.

1) **There is widespread acceptance of formal planning and MEL processes as routes to advocacy effectiveness.**

Among participating organizations, advocacy staff and senior managers, as well as MEL staff, show support for systematizing and formalizing both advocacy planning and MEL processes - irrespective of funder requirements in that direction. MEL processes are underpinning more formal planning initiatives. Concerns about imposing linear ways of thinking and planning onto complex change processes seem to be very much in the background in practice, even as they appear in the foreground of much advocacy evaluation theory and literature.

2) **There is a trend towards centralizing MEL systems, whilst decentralizing advocacy structures and processes.**

The tendency towards centralizing MEL systems represents a response to managers' and funders' desire for aggregate information on global impact. However, this may place additional burdens on local actors without bringing obvious direct benefit to them.

An additional centralizing rationale is that applying learning can become more systemic, rather than merely happening in localized and ad hoc ways. However, when advocacy strategies themselves are decentralized, standardizing MEL can be problematic. One way to manage this is to mirror within the MEL set-up what is becoming a more common approach in advocacy - with strategy parameters set and managed centrally, but with operational delivery delegated to local levels.

3) **There is often tension between the desire for 'metrics' and the need for more meaningful analysis of progress and achievements.**

MEL staff perceive growing demand from funders and senior managers for advocacy results to be represented in quantified form. While MEL staff recognize that there are problems associated with quantifying complex questions of contribution, attribution, and

outcomes, they nonetheless harbor the desire to be able to construct metrics that would indicate results in these areas.

Implications of this trend toward quantification can be that:
a) Reporting focuses on what is inherently quantifiable (generally, activities and outputs), with the result that information about advocacy can be presented in somewhat underwhelming ways, falling short of making the strategic case for investment.
b) Alongside this go attempts to 'quantify' qualitative information (for example by giving rating scores to levels of support amongst targets): such approaches rely (necessarily) on subjective assessment and are not always considered (and may not always be) robust.

Seeking to contextualize data by pairing quantitative and qualitative information is one approach to mitigating these potential disadvantages.

In addition, ensuring quality of data and consistency of reporting is recognized as crucial to MEL effectiveness, and as an ongoing challenge.

4) Organizations typically have a strong focus on developing approaches to assess and present supporting evidence of outcomes, and their organization's contribution to them.

In different ways, organizations tend to categorize outcomes across three areas:
1) Internal outcomes – for example, growth in the supporter base, or other signs of enhanced organizational capacity.
2) Changes in policy and practice – and signs of progress towards them (shown for example in 'interim measures' such as the levels of support shown by key targets).
3) Changes in the advocacy context – through development of a more active civil society movement for change, for example.

Organizations tend to be better at collecting information at the various levels of change – activities, outputs, outcomes - than in joining the levels up. Paying explicit attention to testing *the links* in any theory of change (i.e. the assumptions of how one thing may lead to another) is key here.

Organizations make serious attempts to show their contribution to particular outcomes. However, there is a tendency to construct MEL processes around an organizational viewpoint, with the influence of others - and wider change dynamics - considered as an afterthought, rather than being integral to the system. This limits the usefulness of outcome contribution analysis in informing tactical adaptation and strategic development. It can also contribute to overstating organizational contribution to any given outcome.

5) MEL systems function across inter-linking levels

MEL systems can be understood as typically operating at 3 levels:
a) At an underlying level, organizational contexts and cultural sensibilities set the parameters within which advocacy-related MEL processes are developed.
b) The overall system tends to build from a starting point of an explicitly-stated notion of how change will happen (referred to as 'theories of change', 'critical pathways' etc.). From this, organizations create an overall chronological thread through the MEL system, linking short- medium- and long-term elements together.
c) Derived from this overall structure, a series of specific learning moments happen in response to need and opportunity as well as at fixed agreed times, to support tactical, strategic, program-wide and organizational adaptation.

6) Senior managers play a key role in driving and embedding MEL.

Levels of senior management support correlate positively with perceptions that MEL processes bring benefit, and that organizations are good at learning from experience, for example. Rhetorical support from senior managers alone is insufficient to embed MEL processes within advocacy: actual ongoing engagement and visible follow-up are key.

Organizations experience some difficulty in institutionalizing MEL beyond individual campaigns, and funders may inadvertently reinforce this dynamic (when support for MEL is tied solely to a specific campaign, for example). Senior management support is important to drive institutionalization forward.

7) 'MEL' systems can provide a bridge between formal and informal approaches.

MEL involves a combination of informal and formal processes and MEL systems are often purposefully aimed at bridging the formal-informal gap. Successful systems build organically on what is already in place, and operate in rhythm with existing organizational processes. Without this, 'invisible' informal processes can be undervalued and important tacit knowledge and innovation may be lost as a result.

8) 'MEL' expertise requires technical and facilitative skills, the balance between which depends on the context.

Structural approaches to organizing the MEL function range from:
a) Embedding MEL professionals in, or closely linked to, advocacy teams; to
b) Combining MEL and advocacy functions (with no specialized MEL staff); to
c) Creating separate MEL analyst teams that sit outside advocacy teams.

Models built around quantitative data collection tend to require specialist analysts. In other cases, MEL staff's abilities to facilitate and coordinate are likely to be more important than specific technical skills. Embedding MEL and taking a facilitative learning

approach has the added advantage of being most effective in building wider MEL capacity.

9) The "right" people are generally believed to be involved in MEL processes.

The 'right' people are generally considered to be those who are in a position to do things differently as a result of their involvement. However, as MEL systems evolve and develop, challenges remain for determining who generates and has access to data, who analyzes it, when, and for what purposes.

10) MEL focus tends to be on serving the purpose of 'upward' accountability, with space for strategic learning somewhat constrained.

There are outlier examples of MEL systems that focus on accountability to partners and constituents, but the strong tendency is for MEL primarily to serve the needs of funders and others to whom practitioners are 'upwardly' accountable.

The belief that learning and accountability goals can be mutually accommodated is widespread. But this is not fully borne out by the evidence: key dynamics around learning and adaptation include that:
a) Organizations typically struggle to adapt based on past experience.
b) Tactical learning is more prevalent than strategic learning.

MEL processes appear to be less oriented towards uncovering strategic limitations than tactical ones. This could be because Identifying operational learning carries less risk, whereas exposing strategic flaws or weaknesses could come at a cost in terms of reputation or future funding.

At the organizational level, MEL - and the associated systems and processes adopted - may function as *an expression* of organizational culture, as much as a *driver of it*. One consequence of this is that MEL tends to be more directed towards considering how existing strategies can be delivered more effectively rather than calling those strategies into question.

There are examples of MEL bringing strategic benefit, particularly by more clearly defining objectives and goals within an overall theory of change.

11) Ease of use is an area of particular concern.

MEL processes are generally not seen as easy to use. They can be made easier through developing streamlined systems for information gathering, producing clear supporting guidance, and ensuring proactive and tailored dissemination of information. Linking processes can also create synergies and streamline tasks.

Advocacy staff generally welcome the opportunity to engage in formal reflection and evaluative processes as long as they deliver both time-efficiency and value. Good preparation for such moments is vital to ensure this.

12) MEL staff consistently rate the perceived benefits of MEL processes more highly than advocacy staff and managers do.

Perceptions of the *actual* value of MEL are mildly positive, but somewhat muted. Advocacy staff and managers regard MEL support as important. But there is only limited support overall (with some variation, depending on some of the factors discussed) for the idea that MEL in practice fulfills key potential benefits, and only a partial overall sense that MEL processes help make advocacy more effective.

13) There is currently weak evidence that MEL actually drives advocacy effectiveness.

The purpose of MEL is to increase advocacy effectiveness. But evidence of actual MEL contribution to this is mainly anecdotal, more assumed than demonstrated. In this absence of formal evidence, MEL staff tend to find that engagement is the only path to enthusiasm.

14) Information is lacking on the cost side.

The consensus is that investing in MEL processes represents, on balance, a reasonably efficient use of resources. But systematic evidence about financial and staff resources dedicated to MEL was not easy to collect. There are a number of reasons why: where MEL begins and ends is not easily demarcated, for example. But, whatever the reasons, attempts to provide more robust cost/benefit analysis of MEL's contribution to effectiveness could usefully be explored.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING GOOD PRACTICE IN MEL

Our findings from this inquiry point to a set of key principles that can help guide good practice within organizational advocacy-related MEL approaches. Many of these principles reflect existing understanding in the field of advocacy evaluation that this research has helped to substantiate. Some are more emergent.

In building an approach to MEL, organizations should:

1. Ensure that centralized systems and parameters invite localized adaptation.

2. Subject moves towards quantifying information to a 'robustness test' to ensure that any such analysis and dissemination supports meaningful use.

3. Give particular focus to testing the links in the chain of change, rather than merely assessing the various elements in isolation.

4. Develop systems that fully contextualize contribution, including understanding the intervention of other actors and an overall sense of complex dynamics at play.

5. Design MEL systems to fit around existing advocacy programs, establishing a firm link to planning, including strategic planning and budgeting processes.

6. Build on the motivations and interests of different users, and their different uses of data and analysis, to devise learning moments and opportunities at key short- medium- and longer-term stages of the advocacy program.

7. Secure active involvement of senior managers in review and analysis processes.

8. Prioritize the facilitative role of MEL professionals in building evaluative capacity organization-wide, including through design (and constant iteration) of ways of working that make it easy for people to engage meaningfully in MEL processes.

9. Take active steps to rebalance accountabilities where necessary, countering a clear tendency to prioritize upwards accountability, to funders in particular.

10. Pay particular attention to building capacity for strategic - as well as tactical – learning and adaptation.

11. Develop an overarching approach to MEL that is intentionally designed to challenge and test strategy and the assumptions underlying it, as well as to improve implementation of existing strategy.

12. Gather evidence of MEL costs and benefits.

These principles could usefully be developed and corroborated further, with practical recommendations, in a good practice guide or set of minimum standards for advocacy related MEL.

There are a number of key areas where further exploration of principles and practice could be developed and encouraged. These would include developing organizations' evaluative capacities, balancing learning and accountability imperatives, exploring when and how best to use metrics, and assessing costs and benefits of MEL more robustly. As part of this, it would be important to find ways for the NGO community to engage directly on these topics with (a) the funding community, and (b) partners and those who are the intended beneficiaries of advocacy efforts.

PURPOSE OF PAPER

PROJECT FOCUS & STRUCTURE

In September 2012, Oxfam America initiated a learning inquiry focusing on monitoring, evaluation and learning [MEL] approaches to advocacy. The starting point was to reach out to organizations whose missions shared a somewhat common set of values, and whose programs of work included policy advocacy and/or public campaigning as means to drive positive social change. Nearly all of them welcomed the opportunity to join the project.

The organizations involved in the cohort differ significantly in resources (with annual budgets ranging from US$14 million, to US$590 million), number of staff, supporter and membership size, structure, country of origin, funding sources, and even primary approaches (some being campaigning or advocacy organizations, with others have an advocacy strand within a broader program focus). All but one of the participating organizations are global organizations composed of a secretariat and affiliate members. Of these, five participated as affiliate members within a global organization and three participated as secretariats of a global organization. Oxfam GB's participation involved its national campaign team, which operates in England, Scotland and Wales.

The cohort organizations are:

ActionAid International, (Secretariat, South Africa)
Amnesty International (Secretariat, UK)
Bread for the World (US)
CARE, USA (US)
Greenpeace International (Secretariat, Netherlands)
ONE (US)
Oxfam America (US)
Oxfam Great Britain (UK, National Campaigns)
Sierra Club (US)

The inquiry initially set out to consider

- **WHAT** organizations are doing in terms of MEL. (We assume there are both formal and informal processes for this).

- **HOW** and **WHEN** does MEL happen?

- **WHO** participates, and **WHO** benefits from MEL?

- **HOW** do they benefit?

- **SO WHAT?** How does MEL contribute to overall effectiveness?

- **WHAT ARE THE COSTS** and how are they budgeted?

- And more specifically, **WHAT WORKS WELL & WHAT LESS SO?**

This report seeks to answer those questions, as well as to present findings related to emergent trends in the areas of advocacy planning and MEL among participating cohort organizations.

METHODOLOGY

The inquiry has been commissioned by Oxfam America and conducted by two external consultants, one in UK (Jim Coe, London) and one in the US, (Juliette Majot, in Berkeley, CA).

A master list of 30 potential cohort organizations was produced by Oxfam America, and a short-list chosen by Oxfam America with input from external consultants and advisers, with the aim of having a diverse cohort in terms of organizational size and structure and influencing approach, yet having shared social justice values and some applied experience developing MEL systems for their advocacy work. Oxfam America approached potential cohort participants, and all but one agreed to participate.

The project was led by a core team composed of Gabrielle Watson from Oxfam America and Simon Hearn from the Overseas Development Institute [ODI], and the consultant team. Funding for this project was provided by Oxfam America.

Cohort organizations were asked to participate in three webinars, complete a survey and interview, and to provide information and examples about their approaches to advocacy-related MEL, and the level resources dedicated to MEL. They reviewed and commented on preliminary findings and the draft report, and - in most cases - also received an individual confidential report with a summary of their organization's survey data alongside averages for the cohort as a whole.

The core team developed an initial inquiry outline, which was refined based on inputs from cohort participants during an initial webinar to steer the inquiry's framing and methodology.

We collected data through an initial on-line survey seeking responses from staff fulfilling different roles within each cohort organization: MEL staff, senior managers, and advocacy

staff. We received 46 completed surveys. Response rates per organization ranged from 1 to 13. Analysis of the survey allowed us to compare data across organizations and across staff roles. We analyzed survey data for patterns emerging from the data, where clusters of question responses suggested trends and commonalities across the cohort organizations, or where there were notable deviations among organizations or respondent types.

One MEL lead person from each cohort organization participated in a one-hour follow-up phone interview with the consultants. Interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended, and designed to probe information provided in surveys. Interviewees were provided with full notes of their own interviews, and invited to clarify or add to them. Interview transcripts were mined, and excerpts organized by theme, allowing us to identify commonalities and outliers. Interview material was compared and contrasted with survey data.

We drafted a summary of each cohort organization's MEL approach and these were approved by MEL lead representatives. They also provided the cohort group with access to particularly useful tools and MEL documents from across participating organizations.

An interim report of headline findings was presented to the cohort participants at a second webinar, at which areas of particular interest were identified for further development. This final report was subsequently produced, and then revised based on written comments from cohort organizations and discussions during the third and final cohort webinar.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

1. While all organizations agreed to solicit surveys from staff in different roles (advocacy staff, MEL staff, and senior managers), each organization independently determined the total number of surveys it would solicit. This variation in response rates across organizations means that findings from the overall data need to be treated with some caution. The sample of respondents is weighted towards those organizations that had

a relatively higher response-rate. Survey results are not statistically significant, and in line with this, we have been more interested in exploring patterns revealed by the survey, rather than focusing too deeply on specific data points.

2. Cohort organizations, while comparable in their shared commitment to progressive social change (particularly in the areas of poverty alleviation, environmental protection, and the upholding of human rights), are not directly comparable. We have aggregated survey results across all respondents and believe this to be valid, given the commonalities. We have also drawn out some common features where they are apparent across the cohort, as well as exploring some of the differences. Because of the extent of the difference between cohort organizations, and difference in terms of the implications flowing from this, we have been cautious in drawing too many conclusions that could be said to be universally applicable – although the evidence does point to some, as summarized in the final section.

3. Post survey interviews were conducted only with staff that could be called "MEL leads" (albeit that lead respondents encompass a wider range of roles and viewpoints than that common description might imply). Thus our findings most emphasize this perspective and the challenges and successes in driving MEL as a MEL practitioner or champion.

4. The survey and interviews were designed to capture *perceptions* of effectiveness, purposes, and the value of approaches, as well as to surface common challenges and effective tools to meet multiple purposes. The methodology did not include an independent and objective assessment of MEL effectiveness, which would require in-depth analysis of actual outcomes – those changes in strategy, or organizational processes or structure, that evidence learning associated with MEL - of a significant sample of MEL products. We did, however, additionally solicit practical examples of learning and we draw on the results of this in our findings.

1 HOW 'MEL' IS UNDERSTOOD AND ORGANIZED

Main findings supported in this section:

1. "MEL" systems can provide a bridge between formal and informal approaches if built organically on what is already in place, and if operating in rhythm with existing organizational processes.

2. "MEL" expertise requires technical and facilitative skills, the balance between which depends on the context.

BALANCING FORMAL AND INFORMAL PROCESSES

While organizations conceptualize MEL differently, in practice they all describe a combination of formal and informal processes aimed at encouraging evaluative thinking for both learning and accountability purposes.

Cohort interviews point to a clear consensus where undocumented processes - such as email exchanges and ad hoc discussion among advocacy staff - though generally viewed as relevant, are regarded as informal. By contrast, MEL is defined as formal when information is consistently collected, documented and analyzed in some sort of structured setting, usually with the guidance of designated MEL staff. One challenge from this is that the invisibility of informal processes can mean they are undervalued. Valuable tacit knowledge and innovation can be lost as a result.

Information we collected shows that roles MEL staff undertake range from:
- Facilitating short-term and informal reflection processes that are designed to support advocacy teams adapting in 'real time' (and to capture wider learning); to
- Developing, and supporting the development of, 'assessment parameters' (such as indicators of progress) for the purposes of reporting, review and adaptation; to
- Coordinating processes that support reviews of the overall effectiveness of a given campaign or major campaign component, for learning and accountability purposes; to
- Establishing, or helping to establish, systems and processes to support the above.

Some of these roles are purposefully aimed at bridging the formal-informal gap. Successful systems build organically on what is already in place that is deemed useful, and operate in rhythm with existing organizational processes. For example, in interview,

cohort participants often referred to MEL processes as tied in time with, and involving the same participants as, regularly scheduled campaign or program meetings, strategic planning processes and grant reporting processes. Less often mentioned was a clear tie- in with organizational budgeting processes.

Interviewees stressed that advocacy staff engage productively in formal MEL processes only if they clearly add value to already-ongoing informal review of campaign conditions and context. MEL processes that do not add value will (rightfully) be perceived as intruding on legitimate roles already played by others.

HOW MEL FUNCTIONS ARE STRUCTURED ACROSS ORGANIZATIONS

MEL functions are structured and organized differently in different organizations. Amongst cohort organizations, the set-up ranges from
1. **Embedding** MEL professionals in, or closely linked to, advocacy teams; to
2. **Mainstreaming** MEL, by combining MEL and advocacy functions (with no specialized MEL staff); to
3. Creating **separate** MEL staff, acting as analysts who sit outside advocacy teams.

Evidence from this inquiry suggests that embedded MEL serves short-term needs for advocacy innovation, essentially providing developmental evaluative capacity through high levels of engagement with advocacy staff. Embedded MEL also serves medium-term learning and adaptation purposes, through regular review for example, and has the potential to help embed longer-term learning and accountability if processes support this.

At Oxfam America, for example, a MEL staff member was **embedded** (essentially seconded to a particular campaign) for a period of 8 months. This led to the development of MEL systems that were comprehensively informed by advocacy staff with the added value of MEL staff expertise, thus successfully bridging the formal-informal MEL gap. The evaluation model developed in this campaign was then adapted and replicated in other campaigns. Alongside the ongoing responsibilities of MEL staff, advocacy staff are assigned specific data collection and analysis responsibilities. Each major campaign has a coordinator who spends about 25% of their time on MEL activities, and project leads are responsible for leading after-action reviews.

At ActionAid, there is reportedly often no conscious distinction between MEL and continuous campaign planning among field based advocacy staff and partners. This would suggest that 'MEL' is fully integrated, or **mainstreamed**, into ways of working. While at CARE - operating in the theater of US-based advocacy - the idea that advocacy practitioners take responsibility for MEL (rather than it being established a specialist discrete role) is met with some staff skepticism about whether the plan to have MEL everywhere "will lead it to being nowhere."

In addition to the difference between the theaters of focus, history and context also can influence internal perceptions about the potential risks and benefits of mainstreaming MEL by merging MEL and advocacy functions. MEL development at ActionAid has been driven by the organization's rights-based value system, and so the rights holders themselves were and remain central to MEL design and implementation. Over time, MEL processes in support of this grew developmentally among stakeholders, eventually becoming internalized.

At CARE, MEL had historically been centrally staffed, but a combination of organizational cut-backs and a desire to have MEL better integrated with advocacy were the drivers for a plan to 'mainstream' MEL functions. While combining the functions in this way is seen as conceptually ideal, there is concern that advocacy staff may not have the skills and knowledge, or the time, needed to fully integrate MEL into the organization's advocacy work.

The ActionAid and CARE cases suggest that mainstreaming MEL can be an evolutionary process if MEL is already institutionalized in the organizational culture. If not, mainstreaming requires directed and intentional design and budgeting.

Some other cohort organizations offer an alternative approach. This is characterized by the employment of specialist and **separate MEL staff** who are responsible for analyzing information and then feeding this analysis into decision making processes.

In the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign, for example, independent analysts who sit outside the campaign gather data and produce MEL reports that come out weekly, monthly, quarterly, biannually and annually. This information feeds into internal and external campaign reviews on a monthly and quarterly basis. Core advocacy staff review information about achievements and progress towards goals, and the overall strategy is updated to evaluate and refine targets. This approach bridges the formal-informal gap by continuously linking the two, while at the same time in effect operating a parallel system to whatever informal innovation is happening amongst advocacy staff.

Amongst cohort organizations there was no obvious trend or move towards or away from a particular model to another. Adopting a particular model seems more to do with the nature of the information being sought. This in turn reflects organizational values (in terms of what it is considered most important to measure and assess within an overall advocacy approach).

Models that are built around collecting (quantitative) data are more likely to require specialist analysts. In other cases, abilities to facilitate and coordinate are seen as more important than specific technical skills.

2 MEL SYSTEMS: CONTEXT, CONTINUITY & LEARNING MOMENTS

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **MEL systems function across 3 interlinking levels:**
- **a level of underlying culture and context;**
- **a level at which the overall system is built, derived from a theory of change; and**
- **a level of learning moments at which practical learning and adaptation occurs.**

2. **MEL becomes an expression of organizational culture as much as a driver of it, and therefore may tend to be more directed to assessing how well an organization delivers its existing strategic approach than it as at calling that approach into question.**

MEL SYSTEMS FUNCTION ACROSS INTER-LINKING LEVELS

This inquiry reveals a common pattern. As is particularly evident in examples of the more developed MEL systems, the overall MEL circuitry includes:

d) An underlying level, at which organizational contexts and cultural sensibilities set the parameters within which advocacy-related MEL processes are developed.

e) A starting point of an explicitly-stated notion of how change will happen (referred to as 'theories of change', 'critical pathways' etc.). From this, organizations create an overall chronological thread through the MEL system, linking short- medium- and long-term elements together.

f) A series of specific learning moments, which occur in response to need and opportunity as well as at fixed agreed times, to support tactical, strategic, program-wide and organizational adaptation.

IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT AND CULTURE

MEL processes flourish or struggle within unique organizational contexts. Evidence from this inquiry shows strongly that effective use of MEL is influenced not only by levels of resourcing, but also by organizational history and culture. Even when approaches are driven by the personal interests of senior managers, their development can be furthered

or constrained by wider organizational systems and norms. Evaluation approaches that fit with the cultural grain have more chance of being fully taken up within advocacy programs.

One possible consequence of this, supported by evidence from this inquiry, is that MEL (and the approaches adopted) becomes an *expression* of organizational culture, as much as a *driver* of it. A good fit with prevailing culture means that MEL is more likely to take root, but for what purpose? There is evidence of a tendency to use MEL as a means to assess how well the organization is succeeding in delivering its overarching strategic approach, rather than as a vehicle for calling broad strategic positioning into question.

This focus - on how predetermined strategies are delivered - may be the appropriate one. But it does imply that, unless deliberately oriented towards sitting *outside* and challenging organizational paradigms, MEL operates *within* them.

THE NARRATIVE CONTINUITY THAT RUNS THROUGH MEL SYSTEMS

Overall MEL systems incorporate a set of processes that create a central chronological thread. This provides a line of continuity linking processes functioning at daily, weekly, quarterly or biannually, and longer-term stages.

Greenpeace International, for example, has designed an overarching approach that nests a set of linked levels of evaluation according to purpose, timing and sequence over three years. These go from rapid sub-project evaluations undertaken immediately after an activity, through to major reviews that take place every 3 years.

The starting point for most organizations is some kind of explicitly stated notion of how change will happen. Cohort organizations use the language of 'theory of change', and 'critical pathways', for example. These typically involve a stage model that sets out the routes of anticipated change, against which actual progress can then be tested and assessed. Some are described as overarching organizational theories of change, and others as more campaign-specific planning tools, complete with targets and objectives. One organization refers to a 'predictive model' for a single campaign, though in the absence of an organization-wide theory of change, or strategic plan.

For some, initial strategizing and planning is not fully integrated with MEL processes. It happens, but simply is not regarded as MEL. In different ways, organizations typically use tools and approaches such as rights analysis or power maps to understand the context and possibilities for change. The same tools are often used subsequently for tracking actual change that has occurred. For example, CARE constructs detailed power maps setting out specific targets' positions and influence points. These operate as a planning

tool as well as a 'baseline' analysis against which any subsequent change could be assessed.

Whether or not planning processes and tools sit formally under a MEL wrapping, the clear and common underlying assumption is that plans and theories of change can prove sufficiently robust to operate as road maps for strategy and implementation. They are commonly believed to offer a plausible way to make sense of and navigate what may often be complex (and so, often inherently unpredictable) social change contexts.

Moving from this starting point, MEL builds opportunity to explore progress, identify lessons arising from achievements and set-backs, and capture both the learning and the results themselves. In these ways, it is intended to serve both learning and accountability functions.

LEARNING MOMENTS

Moments of learning operate at key points along the overall system, with information and analysis gathered and considered, enriched upon or discounted, reassessed, and put to use.

The majority of the cohort organizations have set up regular periodic review and reporting systems. These happen quarterly or twice a year, and alongside other ad-hoc check-ins at appropriate moments such as after a particular action, or key moment in a campaign.

At Bread for the World, for example, a campaign steering committee including members from all departments meets weekly. Short-term progress is reported biannually through the use of 14 agreed upon indicators, and the report includes an analysis of external context. At year's end, a new and more developed version of the biannual report is produced, which includes information and data on long-term trends in hunger and poverty. And finally, areas tracked are aligned with, and continue to inform, development of an organization-wide theory of change.

To take another example, the Sierra Club Beyond Coal campaign has developed a 'predictive model', which utilizes multiple variables (economic vulnerability, political will, local capacity, etc.) plus characteristics of the coal burning fleet to predict possible outcomes. On a quarterly basis, core campaign staff re-evaluate the more subjective variables and the model is updated to evaluate and refine targets. Quarterly meetings with main donors and partners are held to further review findings and strategize around next steps. There is feedback among the decision makers, and to a lesser extent throughout the ranks of the campaign.

Organizations typically build in learning moments so that information can be generated and fed back into practice at multiple stages.

From the cohort experiences, these appear to commonly occur at 4 levels:

Table 1: Levels of Adaptation

Type of adaptation	Purpose	Note
Tactical	To inform ongoing, real-time adaptations of tactics.	Advocacy staff create natural learning moments in the course of their work in internal subgroups and among colleagues and partners. Informal processes are strong at this level.
Strategic	To inform periodic assessments of any need for strategic reorientation	Formality begins to matter more, as strategy is considered over a longer time period and documentation becomes necessary to capture experience. Learning moments engage different actors at various points, from defining progress indicators, to selecting units of analysis, to the analysis itself, to making sense of how the analysis feeds the strategic plan.
Developmental	To support long term advocacy development	This tends to involve charting changes in the external as well as the internal environment and feeding this back into the underlying understanding of how best to drive change.
Organizational	To support improvement in organizational systems and processes	Processes at this level involve advocacy staff, MEL staff, and senior managers, with the purpose to uncover how organizational systems and processes detract or contribute to evaluative capacity and organizational learning.

The actual usefulness of MEL processes is largely expressed in terms of how well these different learning moments function. MEL systems with ineffective learning moments do not contribute to short-term innovation, nor do they feed into medium- and long-term planning. They may retain their usefulness for upward accountability to funders, but that is where their utility ends.

The overall circuitry can be summarized as follows:

Figure 1: Organizational MEL Circuits

level

EPISODIC	LEARNING MOMENTS
SYSTEMIC	NARRATIVE CONTINUITY
FOUNDATIONAL	ORGANIZATION CONTEXT

range of supporting tools and approaches

ongoing and ad hoc adaptation · after action reviews · quarterly/ 6-monthly set piece reviws · annual planning · 3-5 year strategic stocktakes

OVERALL MEL SYSTEM OPERATING ACROSS SHORT -> MEDIUM -> LONG TERM

STRATEGY

SENIOR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT: BUDGETARY, RHETORICAL, ACTIVE

ORG VIEW ON HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

ORGANIZATION CULTURE AND NORMS

3   PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE, PURPOSE & QUALITY OF MEL

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **Different actors perceive MEL in different ways.**

2. **MEL staff consistently rate the perceived benefits of MEL processes more highly than advocacy staff and managers do.**

3. **Senior managers are more inclined to support MEL in theory, but are relatively skeptical about its fulfillment of purpose in practice.**

4. **Advocacy staff often welcome participating in MEL processes if the benefits to their campaigns are evident.**

OVERALL, A MIXED PICTURE

Different actors perceive MEL in different ways. This is evident from survey findings, for example.

These show a reasonably strong sense that MEL support – in developing campaigns, re-orientating tactics and strategies and improving overall organizational processes in particular – is important. But, alongside this, the belief that MEL successfully fulfills these and other potential purposes is fairly muted:

Figure 2: Assessments of importance and delivery of MEL purposes and benefits

Potential Benefits- All responses

importance of these purposes to you/your team

your understanding of the importance of these purposes to your organization

how well 'MEL' currently supports the achievement of these purposes
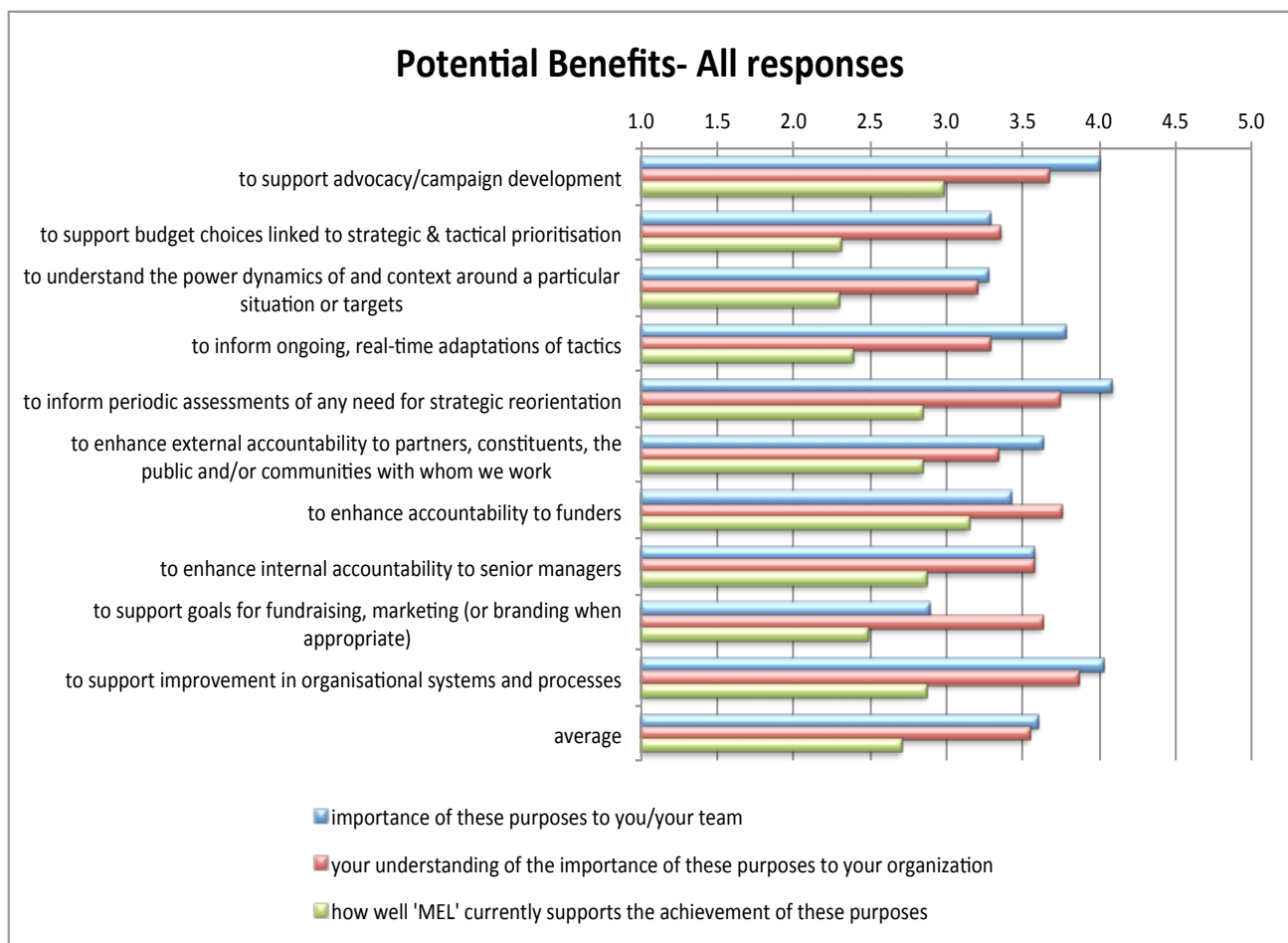
Respondents were asked to consider a range of possible purposes of/benefits arising from MEL (as listed in the graph above) and score (a) their importance and (b) the extent to which MEL currently supports their achievement on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being low and 5 high. This graph shows the average results across all respondents.

The survey also points to a moderately positive sense that MEL processes generate useful information, and a mild tendency to believe that, overall, MEL processes help make

advocacy more effective. There is support on balance that MEL processes represent an efficient use of resources:

Figure 3: Perceptions of the value of MEL processes

**VALUE OF MEL PROCESSES OVERALL
(based on average across processes)**

Category	Value
help promote a learning culture organization-wide	~3.50
have helped make our advocacy/ campaigning more effective	~3.70
represent an efficient use of resources	~3.50
generate insights that are then applied in future work	~3.65
generate insights that are robust/withstand scrutiny	~3.50
generate actionable insights	~3.65
are easy to use	~3.25

Scale: 1.00 1.50 2.00 2.50 3.00 3.50 4.00 4.50 5.00

Respondents were asked to consider a range of MEL processes from those used in planning through to those used to conduct post-hoc evaluations (see full list in figure 4) and score them against a set of positive criteria (as listed in the graph above). Scores were on a scale of 1-5 where 1 was low and 5 high. This graph aggregates the scores across the different processes to give an average value.

But again, the positivity is fairly subdued. Some of the reasons for this are explored further in this report.

PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE AND BENEFIT DIFFER ACROSS ROLES

MEL happens through human interaction. Levels of individual engagement, at multiple levels, are a prerequisite for success, and different individuals will have different incentives for being involved. The value of MEL can be gauged according to the extent to which it serves these multiple – and sometimes divergent - user interests.

Survey results suggest that different groups have different perceptions of the value that MEL processes bring:

Figure 4: Perceptions of the value of MEL processes, by role

ASSESSMENT OF VALUE OF MEL PROCESSES, VARIANCE BY ROLE

Legend:
- M&E
- Snr Mgrs
- Campaigning and Advocacy

Categories:
- processes used in pre campaign planning
- process for real time assessment of context and opportunity
- how you assess the effects of activites undertaken toward achieving your outcomes
- processes used for periodic formal consideration of progress of opportunities and barriers
- assessing major outcomes marking progress towards your objective
- quality and value of your organisation's contribution to given outcomes
- how you assess campaign/advocacy post hoc

Respondents were asked to consider a range of MEL processes (as listed in the graph above) that they would be likely to use in their organization, and to indicate the extent to which they agreed that these processes fulfill a set of positive criteria (see full list in figure 3). Survey respondents described themselves as MEL specialist (or equivalent), campaign staff, and/or senior manager (and/or 'other'). Breaking down results by these role categories highlights variances in opinion between these groups. Questions were rated on a scale of 1-5. This graph shows the variance from the mean: the difference between the particular respondent role group's average score and the average overall score.

These results show that MEL staff consistently rate the perceived benefits of MEL processes more highly than advocacy staff and managers do.

Meanwhile, senior managers' support for MEL Is notionally high but in practice their perception of what it actually delivers is on the comparatively low side:

Figure 5: Perceptions of importance of MEL and how well it achieves its purpose, by role
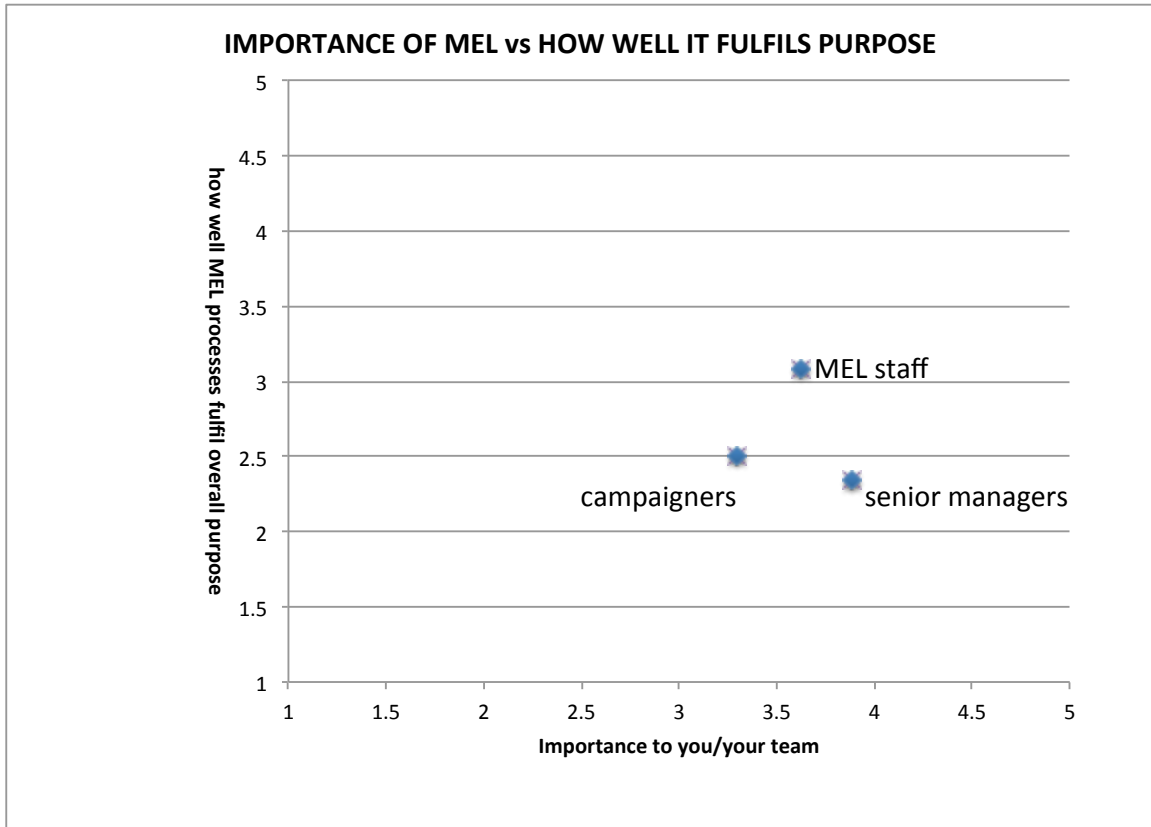
Respondents were invited to review a list of possible purposes and benefits of a MEL system or approach, and score them (a) in terms of their importance to their team and the organization, and (b) in relation to how well MEL supports the achievement of these purposes. Again, breaking down results by respondent role allows a comparison when plotting perceptions of importance against how well MEL processes achieve them. Data here is based on the average aggregate score across all the processes that respondents commented on. Scores on both axes were on a scale of 1-5 where 1 = low and 5 = high

These findings show that senior managers are more inclined to support MEL *in theory* but are relatively skeptical about its fulfillment of purpose *in practice*.

Results from the survey are consistent with the shared awareness among MEL staff in interviews of differing levels of receptivity to MEL among both staff and managers.

In interviews, cohort participants made clear that advocacy staff often welcome the opportunity to engage in reflection and evaluative processes when mentored and closely supported. Amnesty International, for example, has found that direct mentoring and facilitation serve to more successfully engage non-MEL staff than do more generic training approaches.

However, more than one MEL lead noted that in such sessions there must be ruthless focus on value to merit consistent participation. As one interviewee put it, "People will literally walk out of the room if it's too much time, and if it's not perceived as valuable."

Along similar lines, as the organization develops its MEL approaches, Greenpeace International has found that staff support is linked with MEL staff's ability to communicate how and why MEL processes are useful and for whom. The approach is based on the importance of MEL 'accompanying' campaigns, with MEL staff sitting in on weekly campaigns meetings when relevant, for example, to help identify any areas that may be ripe for further assessment.

Sometimes MEL processes are actively resisted. This resistance is widely regarded by MEL lead interviewees as justified when based on distrust of difficult-to-use bureaucratic systems that may slow down the ability of advocacy staff to make informed decisions at the pace they need to. Distrust was said to be justified, too, when expressed by those on the ground who cannot see obvious value in such formal processes, or worse, see them as forced upon them.

Resistance that is based on insecurity, fear of being monitored, or unwillingness to be evaluated, appears to be most successfully overcome through nurturing MEL champions among non-MEL campaign staff. Higher levels of engagement can lead to a greater shared understanding of the costs and benefits of MEL.

The fact that the value of MEL is experiential – that there is little formal documented evidence related to how MEL increases advocacy effectiveness – means that such engagement is the only path to enthusiasm.

4   GATHERING, ANALYSING AND USING INFORMATION

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **Ease of use is an area of particular concern.**

2. **The "right" people are generally believed to be involved in MEL processes. However, as MEL systems develop, challenges remain for determining who generates and has access to data, who analyzes it, when, and for what purposes.**

3. **Ensuring quality of data and consistency of reporting is crucial to MEL effectiveness, and is an ongoing challenge.**

4. The desire for MEL analysis to be widely disseminated is accompanied by a healthy concern about inadvertently exposing too much information about strategies.

CONCERNS AROUND EASE OF USE

Survey respondents were asked to rate different quality criteria that MEL processes might be expected to meet, such as how easy processes were to use, whether they generated actionable insights, and how well they contributed to campaign effectiveness.

Ease of use of MEL processes (or more to the point, lack of it) received markedly lower scores than other MEL quality criteria. This concern was reinforced in interviews:

Figure 6: Perceptions of how well MEL processes meet key criteria

CRITERIA MET BY MEL PROCESSES: VARIANCE FROM THE AVERAGE SCORE
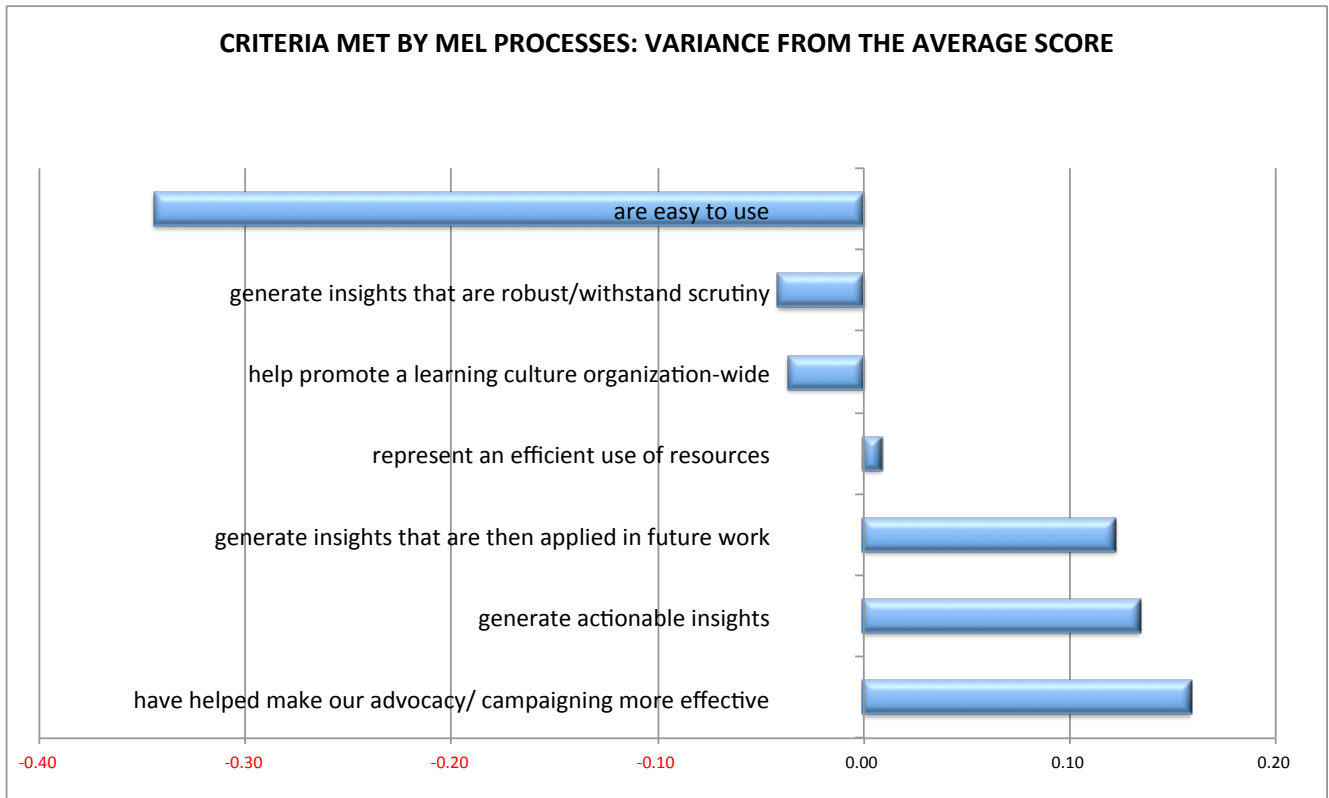
Respondents were asked "Thinking about [MEL] processes you use in in your organizations, please indicate the extent to which you agree that these processes …" The variance (from the average score across all criteria) shows which characteristics are perceived as being comparatively well or less well met through current MEL processes and practices.

The main issue with ease of use is about balance. On one hand is the need to have robust information, and processes that support its use. On the other is the need for processes that are not too diverting and time consuming.

Addressing this delicate balance and tackling 'ease of use' barriers to uptake and effectiveness is a challenge that requires significant attention. Experience of cohort organizations suggests that to navigate it requires a good working insight of opportunity and possibility.

One striking aspect of the approach taken by Oxfam America is the effort MEL staff have taken to develop clear and easy-to-use guidance notes covering everything from
- how to hold effective debriefs; to
- how to undertake an approach for minimalist MEL around campaign spikes; to
- recommendations for how to ensure maximum utilization of MEL processes and the documents that result from them.

The guidance notes are very straightforward - after-action reviews revolving around 3 questions, for example: 'What happened? So what? What next?' But this disguises the amount of work involved in preparing them, and distilling them to this level of simplicity. The value of MEL practitioner as facilitator comes out loud and clear.

Based on cohort participants' views, choices of when, how, and what data to report are clearly best informed by a deep understanding of who is using the data and for what purpose. For example, effective processes for collecting analyzing and utilizing information useful to advocacy staff differ from those needed to generate an analysis that would be valuable to funders or senior managers.

Recognizing the line between usefulness and overkill is critical too. Looking at broader ways to promote information flow and use, interviewees have found that it is important to push information out to people, in weekly digests for example, rather than creating static repositories of information.

The art is to strip things down as much as possible but without ending up with information that is bereft of meaning. This understanding led Oxfam America to a less-is-more approach, working across the organization to determine what indicators were important to report, when to report and to whom, and how best to communicate them. Oxfam America's quarterly review process is divided into two parts: quantitative data presented in a dashboard format, and a progress against plan narrative. Through trial and error, dashboard indicators reported have been cut from 8 to 3.

Oxfam America reports that the consistency of the quarterly review process is valuable in itself, successfully instituting a discipline that comes with people knowing that each quarter they will stop, document and capture at least some of what has happened that is important. (Prior to setting up the quarterly report process, reporting of wins of any kind

was restricted to what appeared in funders' reports.) Major campaigns have mid-course and final evaluations, increasingly involving external review. Findings from these reviews are presented to, and discussed with, the senior leadership team.

Important too are streamlined and workable systems for information gathering. Amnesty International's use of wikis works well for some staff, for example, but doesn't fit the working styles of others. So for Amnesty the approach has been to develop a suite of tools that can be deployed according to preference.

Linking processes can also create synergies and streamline tasks. Both the Sierra Club (in its Beyond Coal campaign) and ONE operate to a consistent single framework, with highly centralized data collection and analysis processes that are clearly under the direction of professional MEL staff.

MOVING TOWARDS MORE CONSISTENT AND HIGHER QUALITY DATA

All cohort participants raised quality of data and consistency of reporting as a constant challenge.

Bread for the World, for example, developed an evaluation tool based on a series of questions that was originally intended to inform development of its change strategies. Key indicators were linked to supporter capacity, communications results and coalition participation. As the system was implemented, inaccuracies and inconsistencies in data quality and collection processes were uncovered. The discovery led to more emphasis on standardizing terminology *and* streamlining how people enter data.

In interviews, cohort participants described how, as MEL becomes institutionalized, new challenges emerge. These include how to collect, document, and store an ever-increasing amount of data and information. In particular, there are issues regarding how best to collate, aggregate and identify learning from multiple campaigns and multiple sources. There can be opportunity to learn from findings *across* campaigns for example, but this can be time-consuming, and patterns may be difficult to see if information is not easily compared, or if there are doubts about quality.

ENSURING THAT THE RIGHT PEOPLE PARTICIPATE

In discussing participation in MEL processes, most cohort participants focused their attention on who is involved in collecting information. There was comparatively less consideration of important questions of who analyzes and interprets the information, at what particular points, and why.

The survey does, however, reflect that most respondents feel on balance that the "right" people are involved in MEL processes generally. Respondents – across roles - were more inclined to agree with the statement "The right group of people are involved in gathering and analyzing data and information" than with the contrasting statement "Key people are often not involved in generating and analyzing data and information" [see Table 6].

Interpreting this finding based on interviews, the 'right' people are generally considered to be those who are in a position to do things differently as a result. (Rather than, for example, the people that the information is about, such as partners or supporters.)

For most cohort organizations, information is analyzed at multiple points in multiple processes. Some pre-analysis occurs, for example, when deciding what information to collect and report. Quantitative data that relies on qualitative judgment – for example how particular levels of activism among supporters are defined and categorized and therefore counted – is a case in point.

Once the data has been aggregated, the majority of cohort organizations take steps to review MEL information with stakeholders outside of their immediate team, such as board members and senior leadership teams.

A few organizations reported having formal evaluation protocols, which amongst other things set out when and how senior managers engage in the process. In at least one case, funders are directly involved at review stages too.

A widely shared desire for sharing evaluative information to ever-widening circles illustrates a healthy aspiration for transparency. It is coupled, however, with an equally healthy concern about the possibility of inadvertently exposing too much about internal strategy, or even raising legal liabilities.

Linked to this are questions about what information is held about whom by whom. While segmenting and profiling individuals has long been the territory of private sector marketers and political campaigns targeting voters (particularly in the U.S.), tracking named individuals and their activities directed toward a broad range of social change initiatives may raise ethical questions in the absence of clear permission to do so.

Whether or not permission is implied through membership status, or the concept of "joining" through electronic action, for example, is a matter of some debate among cohort participants.

5   IMPORTANCE OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **Senior managers play a key role in driving and embedding MEL. To be effective, this role must involve active and ongoing engagement.**

It is clear that senior management support for, and engagement with, MEL processes is an important factor in ensuring that MEL becomes organizationally institutionalized.

Survey results show that those respondents who report there is support from senior managers are more likely to
- identify that the right people are involved in gathering and analyzing information,
- regard the organization as good at learning from experience, and
- agree that data generated through MEL processes is sound and relevant

Figure 7: Correlation between perceptions of Senior Management support and MEL effectiveness
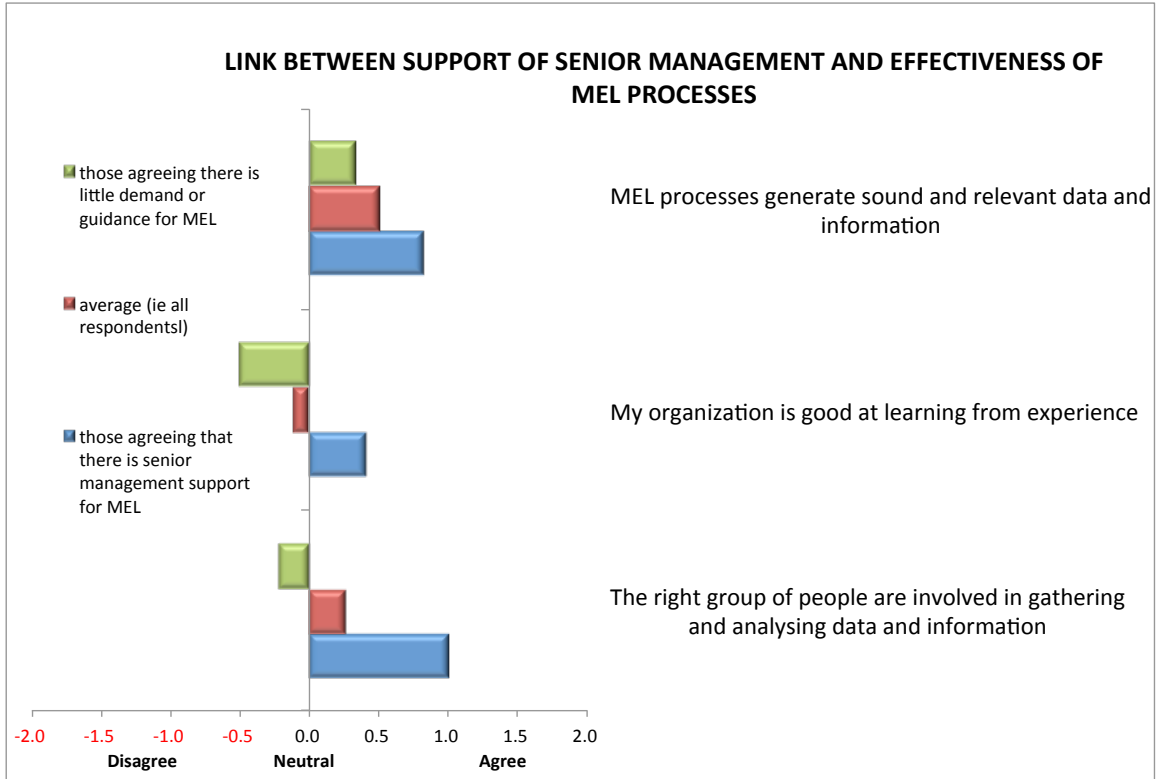
Survey respondents were asked a series of 'semantic differential' questions, indicating where on a scale their position lay between two contrasting statements. (A full list of statements is listed in table 6.) We looked at results for (a) those who agreed of strongly agreed with the statement 'Senior staff actively expect and support us to do MEL' versus (b) those who agreed or strongly agreed with the contrasting statement 'There is little demand and little guidance or tools for doing MEL'. Cross-tabulating these sub groups against other questions that would suggest that MEL processes are effective and working well points to a differentiation between the groups who said senior management support is evident and those who did not.

Moreover, those respondents who report senior management support are more inclined to report that MEL processes bring benefit, and are more likely to view the range of MEL processes positively:

Figure 8: Correlation between perceptions of Senior Management support and MEL delivery of purpose

HOW WELL MEL SUPPORTS PURPOSES ACCORDING TO LEVELS OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT
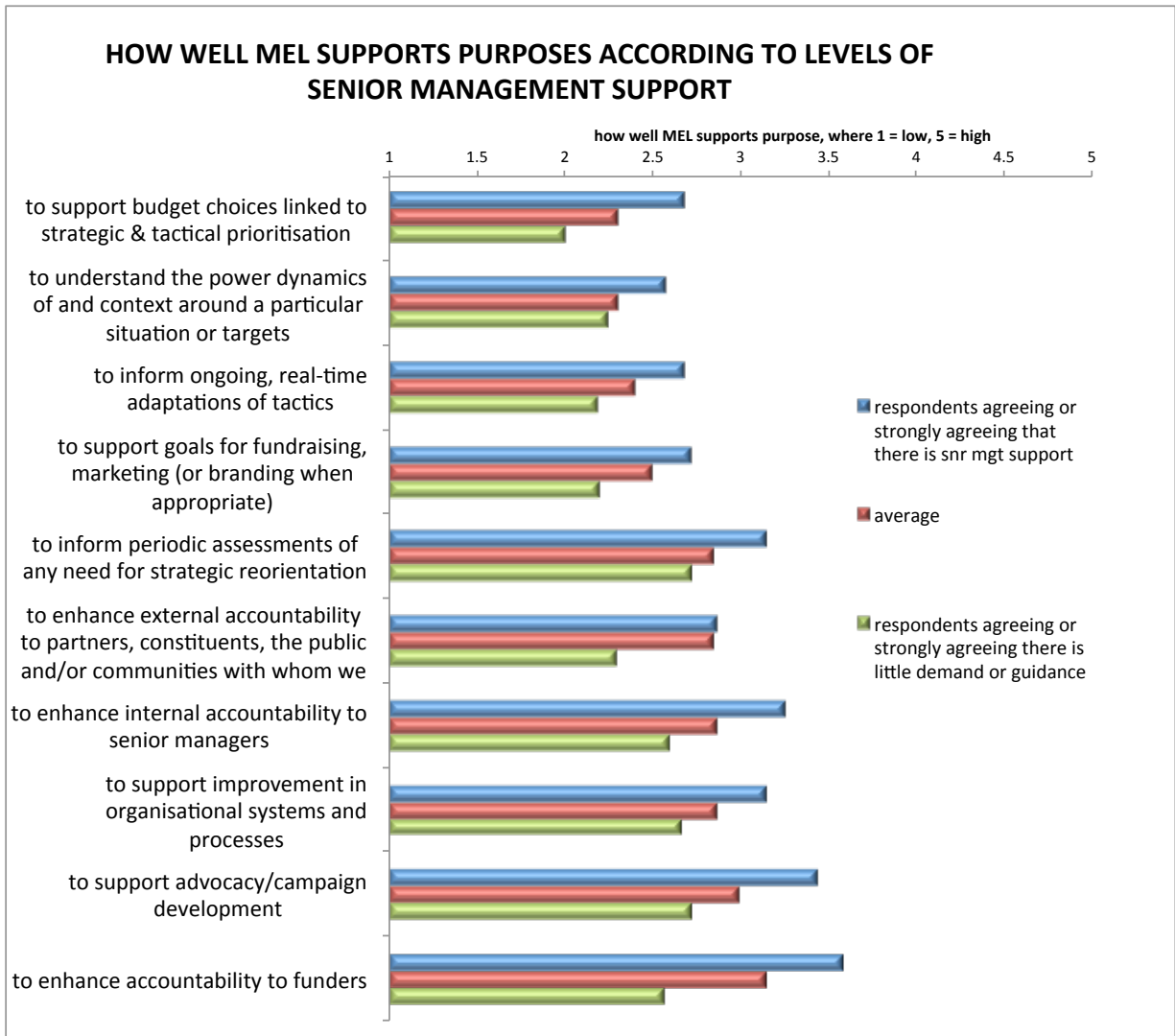
While this data show correlation and does not demonstrate causation, it is clear from interviews that senior management support is an important factor in helping to establish and implement effective MEL.

Experiences indicated that senior management support of MEL is particularly helpful in the early stages, when MEL approaches are being initiated and resourced. Once established, the level of senior management *engagement* in MEL processes appears crucial. In Oxfam America, for example, senior leadership actively engages in quarterly review processes. As a result these have become the centerpiece of the overall approach. A formal mechanism is built in for management response to main findings and engagement in follow-up actions. Evidence suggests that rhetorical support – offering generalized support for the value of MEL – is on its own insufficient. The practical interest, ongoing engagement, and follow-up of senior managers are key contributing factors to wide acceptance and high valuation of MEL approaches.

Budgetary commitment from senior managers is critical too. Several interviewees expressed concern about the gap between the value ascribed to MEL and the actual resources allocated to it.

Funders also influence senior management support for MEL, both directly and indirectly. This influence flows through specific grant requirements as well as more general communication indicating that funders increasingly expect robust evidence of results.

For a number of organizations, systems sprout well in individual campaigns, yet their seeds fail to take root across the advocacy program or organization-wide. Findings from this inquiry show that the subgroup of organizations reporting high levels of senior management support and engagement is also the subgroup that shows the greatest progress in institutionalizing MEL.

However, the failure to seed MEL processes organization-wide can be inadvertently reinforced by funders. This is true when MEL work is tied to and derived from funders' requests that are restricted to specific grants, and do not support thinking for a systems-wide approach across grants.

6 BALANCING CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **There is a trend towards centralizing MEL systems, whilst decentralizing advocacy structures and processes.**

One trend emerging is a move towards centralizing MEL systems, occurring simultaneously with processes decentralizing some elements of campaign management.

This is driven by the desire to promote organization-wide learning and adaptation. It also represents a response to funders' requests for aggregate information on global impact.

Three cohort organizations are attempting to find ways to link progress in both national and global advocacy through integrated MEL systems. The same desire is evident amongst national cohort organizations working with local members and partner groups.

For those organizations, questions of centralization and decentralization abound. Centralized secretariats serve and coordinate decentralized organizational structures. Central strategies run alongside national or regional strategies, which in turn run alongside state and local strategies. In these contexts, decentralized MEL systems can struggle to serve centralized needs, just as centralized MEL systems struggle to serve highly decentralized organizations.

As interviewees noted, promoting organization-wide learning in highly decentralized organizations can lead to creating standard metrics and indicators across non-standardized campaigns and implementers. When strategies themselves are decentralized, standardizing approaches can be problematic. For example, (how) can common indicators be developed in ways that they remain both clear and meaningful at all levels? And can common indicators be used in ways that are meaningful to all?

A number of organizations are testing ways to transfer learning across the organization through tightly coordinated MEL processes. At Amnesty International (currently moving towards a more decentralized model of advocacy), those working at the national level are encouraged to develop customized approaches to MEL that derive from a common set of global indicators.

For Greenpeace International, structural decentralization currently underway has provided a unique opportunity to experiment with ways to transfer learning organization-wide in such structures. The intention is to become tighter on strategy, delegated on delivery and tight on evaluation. The rationale for a common and centralized MEL approach is that it should help ensure that applying learning becomes more systemic, rather than happening in localized and ad hoc ways.

ActionAid has developed MEL practices at the ground level that are driven by and reinforce accountability to the rights holders themselves. The goal is to combine this with a process for arriving at a picture of global campaign progress and results. Whilst the aggregation this entails is useful for campaign managers - and important to funders too - the resulting reporting requirements place an additional burden on local partners without providing obvious direct benefit to them. ActionAid's plan is to test the downward

accountability value of methods that are intended to give a picture of change at the global level. The intent is to explore how aggregation processes and outputs could actually benefit the community and bolster the rights of those whose voices the organization is seeking to support and magnify.

The challenge for cohort organizations is to ensure that the MEL systems describe (a) changes in multiple national contexts, (b) the links between them, and (c) how all the change adds up, rather than succeeding only at the point where informed is aggregated.

Drawing on the experiences of the cohort organizations, important considerations when centralizing MEL in decentralized structures are:
- Getting the balance right between global consistency (to allow for meaningful system-wide assessment) and local relevance (to ensure that indicators, for example, are appropriate to the context).
- Evolving a global approach to MEL that mirrors the 'loose-tight' approach to campaigning that many organizations are following, with parameters set and managed centrally and operational delivery delegated to local levels.
- Exploring ways that aggregating *from* the local level can actually bring value *to* the local level – which could for example be through reporting back on overall findings and promoting discussion around the relevance to local contexts.

7   ACCOUNTABILITIES

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **MEL benefits in practice are strongly oriented towards fulfilling accountability purposes. Attention is directed to 'upwards' accountability, particularly with funders in mind.**

2. **There is insufficient evidence to support the commonly-held perception that learning and accountability goals can be mutually accommodated.**

FOCUS ON ACCOUNTABILITY IS TO FUNDERS

According to the survey, accountability to funders is perceived as the benefit best supported by MEL. Findings based on both the survey and interviews identify that, among cohort organizations, attention is primarily directed to upwards accountability, particularly with funders in mind:

Figure 9: Different purposes, how they are valued and how well they are achieved

SHORTFALL BETWEEN 'VALUE TO MY TEAM' AND 'HOW WELL MEL SUPPORTS THESE PURPOSES'
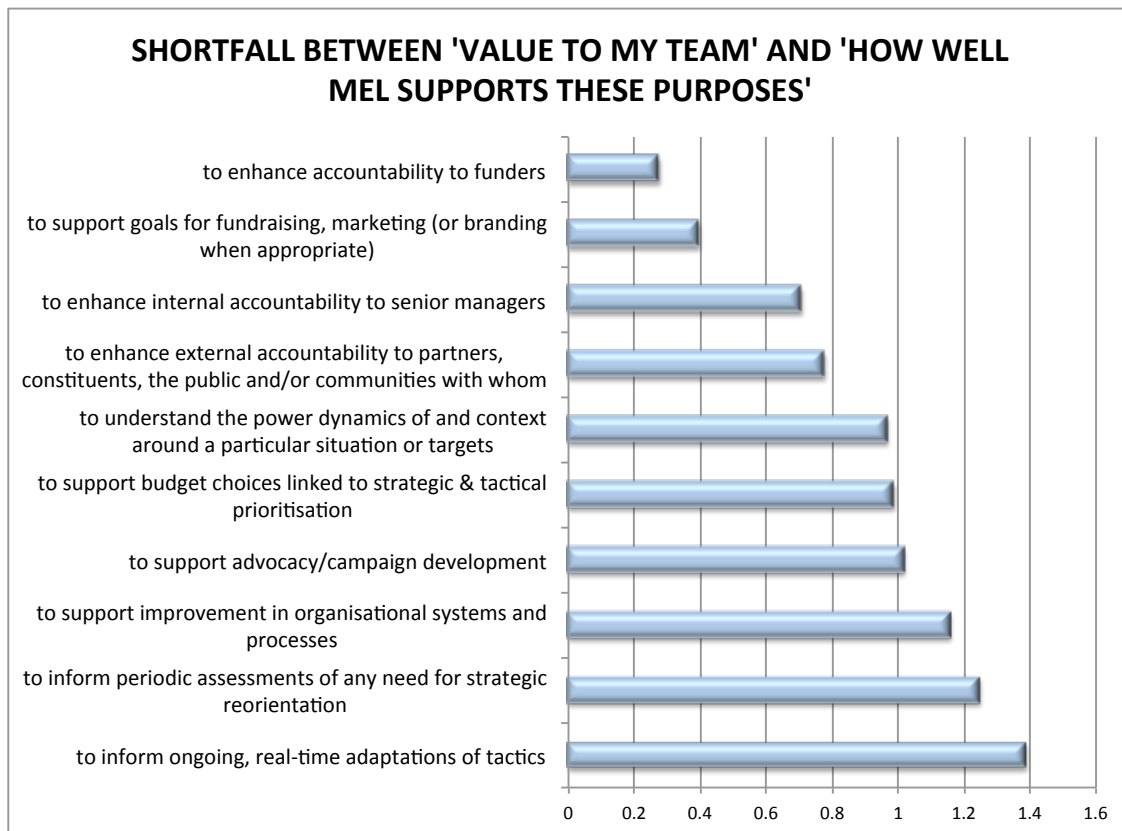
This graph sets alongside the average scores allocated to the different purposes in terms of (a) perceived value to the team and (b) perceived extent to which MEL processes support these processes. In every case, the 'value' question is scored higher, but the difference between the two (the 'shortfall' between how much the process is valued and how well it is delivered) varies. It is notable that external-to-the-campaign-team purposes – accountability to funders and to senior managers, and support to fundraising/branding goals - show the smallest 'shortfall' whereas the feedback purposes – real-time adaptation, strategic reorientation, and improvements to systems and processes – represent the areas of highest 'shortfall'. (Figure 2 shows the actual average scores from respondents assessing these purposes.)

These data suggest that MEL processes are perceived as being typically equipped to serve the needs of funders and others to whom practitioners are accountable better than delivering learning and adaptation benefits.

Though accountability to funders is clearly seen as a major purpose and benefit of MEL, the role of institutional funders in driving the formalization of MEL processes is not straightforward. Evidence from this inquiry shows that there is a preference for systematizing MEL whether the push is funder-driven or not. One specific area in which funders are exerting influence is in demand for quantitative metrics to express impact or outcomes (see TRENDS TOWARDS QUANTIFYING RESULTS below).

There is also a strong theme emerging (from the interviews in particular) of the importance of 'internal' accountability and internal learning, within teams themselves. This is along the lines that advocacy staff are generally keen to improve and to know if they are being effective.

Whilst downward accountability is perceived as important - and acknowledged in rhetoric - it did not feature strongly in practice. One approach and system focusing on downward accountability is evident at ActionAid, where partners at the ground level have the facility to hold the organization to account as part of a wider collegiate working relationship. Involving stakeholders in defining desired change and developing indicators through participatory processes is prioritized within MEL systems. Indicators are developed through participatory processes at local levels, in the field with the communities of rights holders themselves.

Within other cohort organizations, there is some shared interest in improving accountability to partners and constituents.

BALANCING LEARNING & ACCOUNTABILITY IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

Findings strongly point to MEL benefits in practice being oriented towards fulfilling accountability purposes.

From interviews, it is clear that learning is a major underlying motivation for MEL staff and important to campaign practitioners. Yet it is equally evident that the accountability impetus is of more universal interest across a wider swath of stakeholders, with learning a more subsidiary interest to many.

A schematic summary of different actors' main motivations is set out in Figure 8. This represents our interpretation based on discussions in interview:

Figure 10: Different actors' main motivations for MEL

motivations behind MEL for different stakeholders …

	SHORT TERM	MEDIUM TERM	LONG TERM

CAMPAIGNERS

ways to embed effectiveness	strategic learning

demonstrate 'results'

MEL STAFF

generation of insights that support adaptation

enhanced campaign coherence

enhanced capacity to account for campaign resources

SENIOR MANAGERS

support to resourcing decisions	support to prioritization decisions

understanding of effectiveness and additionality

FUNDERS

evidence of learning capacity

evidence of progress (and results)	evidence of results

SUPPORTERS

sense of being part of and contributing to an effective movement

PARTNERS

mutual accountability & support

Key to primary driver of motivations:
blue/clear box = learning;
red/shaded box = accountability;
purple/light shade = mixed learning/accountability motivations

One MEL system specifically designed to support learning as a lead aspect is underway at the Sierra Club. The funder Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Sierra Club worked closely

together to develop an approach that couples accountability and learning within the Beyond Coal campaign. Developing a predictive model was made a prerequisite to the awarding of the grant and the two organizations worked jointly to develop the model. Bloomberg Philanthropies was particularly interested in capturing learning, emphasizing the importance of what is learned when targets are, or are not, met.

Both survey results and interviews, however, point to the perception that MEL is not, in practice, strongly supporting learning generally and across all cohort organizations.

Respondents to the survey - from across roles - shared a strong belief that learning and accountability imperatives can be mutually accommodated:

Figure 11: Agreement that MEL can support learning and accountability functions

Can MEL support both learning and accountability?
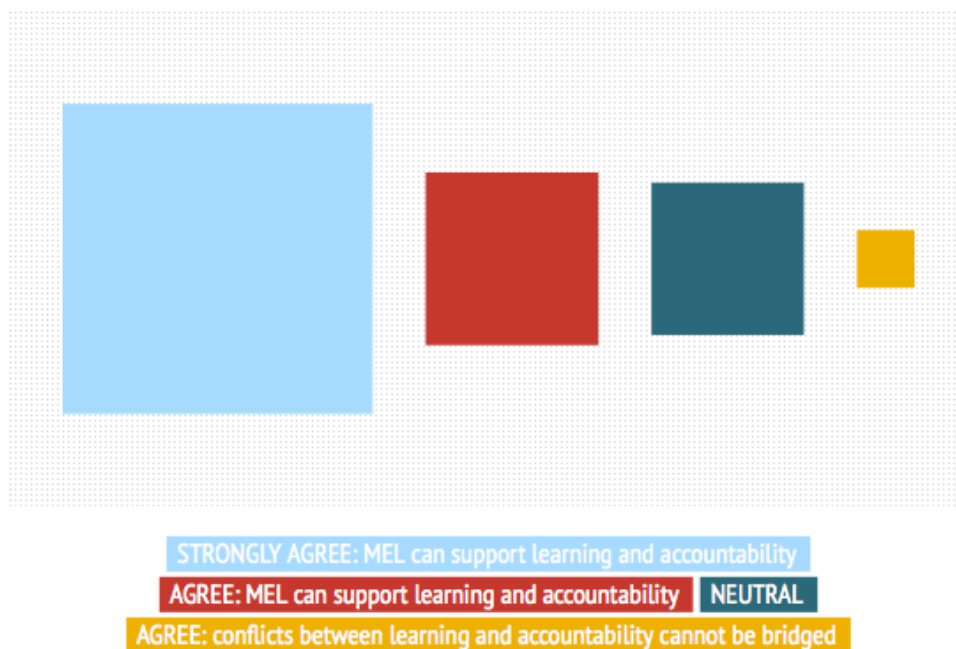
STRONGLY AGREE: MEL can support learning and accountability
AGREE: MEL can support learning and accountability | NEUTRAL
AGREE: conflicts between learning and accountability cannot be bridged

This figure shows the proportion of respondents strongly agreeing, or agreeing with (or remaining neutral to) the contrasting statements "MEL can both support internal learning and demonstrate accountability to key audiences" and "It's not possible to bridge the conflict between demands for 'learning' and 'accountability' [NB no one strongly agreed with this latter statement].

But whilst there is a strong belief in this potential, there is a much more mixed sense of learning actually taking place:

Figure 12: Mixed perceptions of organizations' learning capacities

Experiences of organizational learning

STRONGLY AGREE: My organization is good at learning
AGREE: My organization is good at learning   NEUTRAL
AGREE: My organization struggles to adapt
STRONGLY AGREE: My organization struggles to adapt
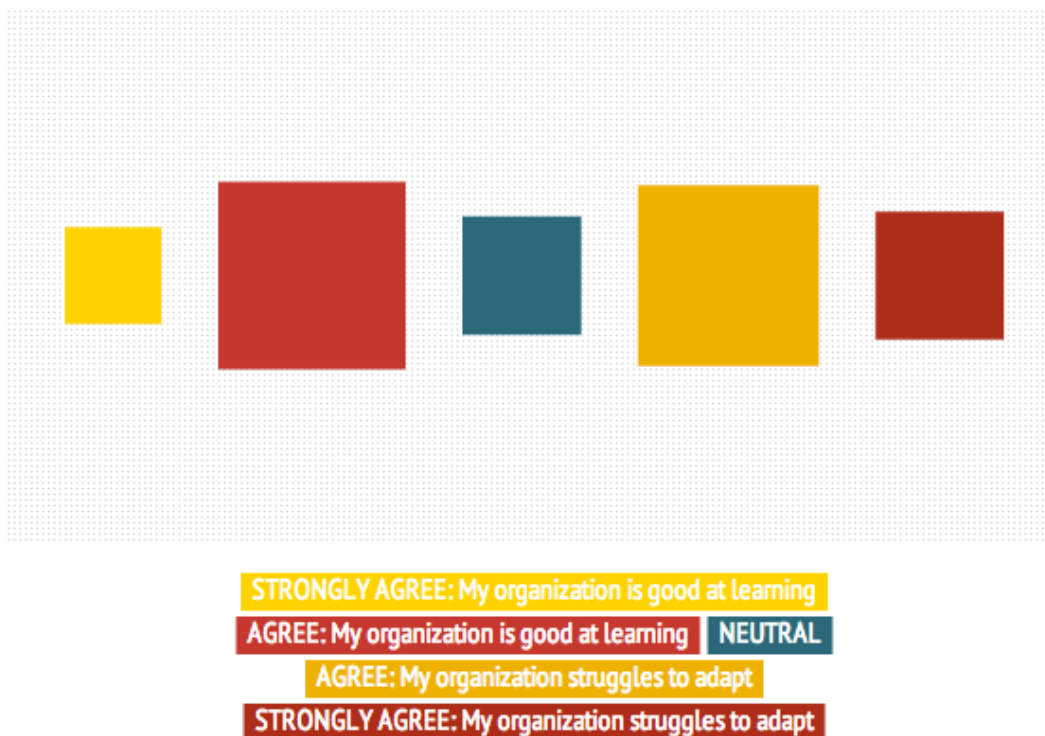
This figure shows the proportion of respondents strongly agreeing, or agreeing with (or remaining neutral to) the contrasting statements "My organization is good at learning from experience" and "My organization struggles to adapt based on past experience".

Rhetoric is widespread about the importance of learning and the value of discerning what is not working. But questions arise as to how well MEL approaches actually serve the dual purposes of supporting internal reflection whilst also providing summative information to senior managers and funders, for example.

Unsurprisingly, in several organizations, MEL processes are seen as vital to making the case internally that policy advocacy is valuable and worthy of organizational resourcing. (Or even, to show that it is not.) MEL can have consequences along these lines, with examples cited of where evaluations have been used to assign blame, and to support decisions about ending a particular campaign.

This is not that surprising, given that MEL would naturally be part of the equation in informing organizational decision-making in situations where there is internal competition

for resourcing. So it is a logical motivation to use information-gathering processes as a vehicle for demonstrating effectiveness.

This dynamic helps explain why cited MEL-inspired changes tended (with some exceptions, discussed below) to be at the operational level, rather than involving significant strategic insight.

Examples of 'failure' may be notionally sought, but may come (or at least be perceived to come) with an associated sense that decisions about organizational priorities and funding could flow away in the wrong direction from such information. In such a situation, there may be reluctance to be too explicit in formal processes about limitations. Identifying learning at the operational level is safer, without risk.

Exposing strategic flaws or weaknesses could come at a cost.

8   DEFINING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSING INFLUENCE

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **Outcomes fall into three general categories; internal outcomes relevant to organizational development; changes in policy and practice; and changes in advocacy context.**

2. **Organizations typically have a strong focus on developing approaches to assess and present supporting evidence of outcomes and their organization's contribution to them.**

3. **There is often tension between the desire for 'metrics' and the need for more meaningful analysis of progress and achievements.**

4. **MEL staff perceive growing demand from funders and senior managers for advocacy results to be represented in quantified form.**

HOW ORGANIZATIONS TRACK CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS CHANGE

Most cohort organizations differentiate between activities and outputs [measures of what the organization has done and generated] on one hand and outcomes [actual change] on the other.

Outcomes tend to fall into three categories:

1. Changes in policy and practice – and signs of progress towards them (shown for example in the levels of support shown by key targets).
2. Changes in the advocacy context – through development of a more active civil society movement for change, for example.
3. 'Internal' outcomes –growth in the supporter base, or other signs of enhanced organizational capacity, for example.

Distinctions between the three are conceptualized differently by different organizations and sometimes the different dimensions merge into one another.

Looking across participating organizations and aggregating and categorizing what is currently being measured gives the following picture:

Table 2: What is being measured

INPUTS		• staff time • budget
ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS	SUPPORTER ACTION	• number of online actions • number of offline mass actions (action cards, petitions) • number of personalized communications with decision-makers • number of visits to decision-makers • number of campaign events organized
	ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITY	• number of Tweets • number of press releases • number of staff meetings with govt. and parliament • number of times advice/support was solicited by decision makers • number of coalitions the organization is participating in or leading
	PUBLICATIONS & MEDIA COVERAGE	• briefing papers' and publications' distribution (and sales) • number of media hits (by type: e.g. print/radio/broadcast or national/local/specialist) • number of letters published in media • tone of media coverage
INTERNAL OUTCOMES	SIZE OF SUPPORTER BASE	• number of affiliated/supporting groups • size of activist network/membership • number of subscribers to newsletter • numbers of trained/active local activist leaders • numbers of subscribers to e-lists/size of

		eCommunity/number of online activists
		• number and type of donors
		• diversity of support
	SOCIAL MEDIA & ONLINE REACH	• website traffic
		• Facebook friends
		• Twitter followers
		• podcast downloads
		• blog views
	FINANCIAL	• income
		• unrestricted income
	REPUTATION	• reach
		• brand perceptions
PROGRESS TOWARDS AND CHANGES IN POLICY & PRACTICE	TERMS OF THE DEBATE	• publications' citations and other evidence of reach/use
		• nature of the discourse on the issue
		• state of public opinion/awareness
		• profile of the issue and the extent to which it is on public/political agendas
	SIGNS OF SUPPORT FROM, & INFLUENCE BROUGHT TO BEAR ON, DECISION MAKERS	• levels of interest in the issue shown by decision/policy makers
		• levels of awareness and understanding of the issue by decision/policy makers
		• advocacy and supportive acts undertaken by decision/policy makers
		• strengthened relationships with key influentials
		• private and public statements of support
		• commitments made to instituting (or opposing) policy
		• legislative action towards policy goals
		• sense of overall 'political will'
		• likelihood of policy victory
	CHANGES IN POLICY & PRACTICE	• (changes to) budget allocations
		• changes in policies
		• policy being enacted and other changes in practice
	BROADER POLICY	• shift in wider policy orientation
		• ODA funding levels
CHANGES IN THE ADVOCACY CONTEXT	CHANGES TO POWER RELATIONS	• improved civil society/community access to decision makers
		• acceptance of civil society's role in debate and decision making
		• civil society participation in decision making
		• institutions' transparency
		• changes in actors' levels of mobilization and advocacy
		• extent to which power holders are held

		accountable for their actions
	NETWORKS/STRENGTH OF MOVEMENT	• size of networks (i.e. number of members, and levels of activity) • functioning strength of networks/coalitions (strategic synergies, levels of trust, etc.) • extent to which local, national and international struggles are connected • extent of mutual accountability within networks/coalitions
IMPACT	MATERIAL/SOCIAL	• people living in poverty • number of households in food security • proportion undernourished • freedom from human rights violations • material and social equality • access to services
	POLITICAL	• rights holders' capacity to claim their rights and critically engage with power holders • unequal power relations challenged

At least one organization, Amnesty International, has dropped the language of "outcomes" in its formal planning templates and developed a framework that considers four *dimensions of change*. The dimensions are designed to help in the analysis of both positive *and negative* impacts of Amnesty International's work, particularly amongst those affected by the work. The primary dimension of change is defined as "changes in people's lives". Recognizing that their work is also aimed at influencing others whose actions can in turn affect the lives of intended beneficiaries, Amnesty defines three other important dimensions of change: changes in public policies; changes in accountability; and changes in [levels of] activism and mobilization for human rights.

In reviewing policy outcomes, various organizations have developed methods for tracking progress (including signs of progress towards ultimate policy goals). For example:

- The Sierra Club employs an internal "Victory Tracker" to enable its highly decentralized chapters to report victories. The on-line tracker asks a few simple questions about the victories (outcomes) - whether they represent stopping something bad from happening, or have introduced something good. The template also asks for simple descriptions of the level and type of contribution to the outcome made by the Sierra Club. The data is sortable, and available on the Sierra Club's intranet site.

- ActionAid collects stories of change and case studies, which are collected on an ongoing basis and compiled in an annual report.

- Oxfam America tracks policy wins and politics wins using the following categorization:

Table 3: Policy and political wins

Type of win	Explanation
Policy wins	"Changes in policy or practice (public or private sector, at national, regional or global level) that we can plausibly link to Oxfam's engagement. Includes both positive changes and avoiding negative changes. Includes incremental progress, achieved wins and implementation".
Politics wins	"Significant political pressure in support of our policy agenda or a decrease in opposition to our agenda, resulting in whole or part from Oxfam America action. Sometimes measured by changes in Oxfam's political access, influence and relevance that strengthens our ability to achieve wins now and in the future".

Some organizations have developed tools for more detailed evaluation of specific strategies or campaign components. This can allow the organization to build robust evidence of progress in a particular area of work. CARE for example tracks results of its flagship learning tours by tracking past and subsequent actions and demonstrations of support for CARE's goals (including, for example, rhetorical and voting support, as well as evidence of acting as an advocate more broadly). An associated scoring system allows for a quick and visible snapshot of any changes amongst participants.

For some, the focus of attention and information gathering is oriented to measuring support for that organization, as demonstrated in numbers of members or supporters, levels of activism amongst supporters, or the number and strength of affiliated organizations. This information can help support internal growth strategies. ONE for example is rethinking metrics, developing techniques to gather robust data that will enable linking of individual members with individual actions and interests. The goal is to generate data that will contribute to developing higher levels of engagement of members. Metrics tend to focus on gathering member data that can be drawn on to further segment and profile individuals and their interests and concerns. Analysis of the data then influences ongoing decision making in advocacy. For example, advocacy teams can see if particular outreach efforts have a comparatively positive or negative response rate from members, and can adjust tactics accordingly.

In most cases, information about the 'advocacy strength' of the organization is contextualized to include an assessment of the activism and influence of the wider movement. For organizations that include among their objectives the engagement of civil society in governance, for example, signs of diverse and popular influence on policy is simultaneously an outcome in itself and a sign of potential progress towards specific policy goals.
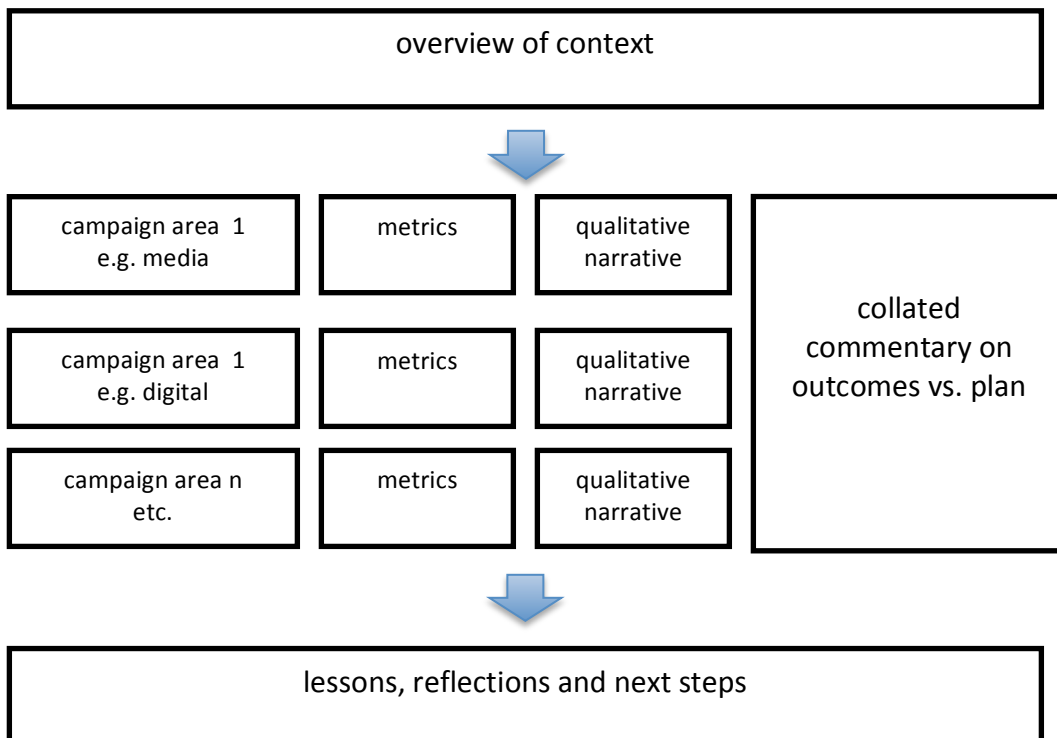
CHALLENGES IN CAPTURING PROCESSES OF CHANGE

Many of the cohort organizations are generating significant information about both activities and outcomes. Of particular interest is finding meaningful ways to combine and present quantitative and qualitative information.

While information about activities and outputs is primarily quantitative, information about outcomes (and impacts - ultimate results) tends to be primarily qualitative. This creates a situation where organizations collect information at the various 'levels' of change but can have difficulty finding a compelling way to join them up. Analysis of contribution to outcome is the point at which both quantitative and qualitative assessments should come together, but this does not always happen easily.

Different organizations are developing ideas for how best to present data linked to activities and outputs and more qualitative information together, with an awareness of the importance of ensuring that the narrative information helps explain and qualify the more visual headlines of the quantitative information. Oxfam GB's campaign monitoring template, for example, is essentially along the following lines, ensuring that commentary sits directly alongside the more visual metric representation:

Figure 13: Reporting quantitative and qualitative findings

overview of context

campaign area 1 e.g. media	metrics	qualitative narrative	collated commentary on outcomes vs. plan
campaign area 1 e.g. digital	metrics	qualitative narrative	
campaign area n etc.	metrics	qualitative narrative	

lessons, reflections and next steps

In addressing questions of attribution and contribution to outcomes, most cohort participants in interview expressed distrust in attempts to claim and quantify sole attribution for any specific outcome, seeing the exercise as

- somewhat fruitless, given the multiplicity of factors and actors driving change, its inherent unpredictability and sometimes even unknowability; and
- potentially divisive, given the validity and value of joint contributions arising through working in coalitions and networks.

However, there is a tendency for organizations to construct MEL processes that focus disproportionately on the organization's activities and interventions and pay insufficient attention to other influencing forces and factors, and to wider change dynamics. As a result the leap from activities to outcomes (and from outcomes to impact) can be underdeveloped, and the organization's contribution overstated. Cohort participants flagged this as a major challenge.

Explicit attention to testing *the links* in any theory of change is also vital in making informed judgments about the fitness for purpose of the overall strategic approach. An example of this kind of focus was provided by Oxfam America, who commissioned outside consultants to test the links in the theory of change within the climate change campaign: testing the assumptions between the stages of change in this way was helpful in uncovering obstacles to the Obama administration taking a strong stand at the Copenhagen COP 15 negotiations.

TRENDS TOWARDS QUANTIFYING RESULTS

From different perspectives, respondents anticipate a continued demand for 'MEL' data, including a growing trend for expressing outcomes in quantitative ways.

This is perceived by cohort participants as being primarily driven by senior management and funders. There are differing opinions of the value and legitimacy of expressing organizational contributions to any given outcome in such terms, with some internally inconsistent views regarding outcomes and how to assess and express contribution to them.

While most cohort participants expressed distrust of quantifying attribution, and of quantifying qualitative outcomes, they often expressed a desire to find a way to overcome these obstacles. There seems to be an *emotional* desire expressed by a number of cohort participants to follow that path. This dissonance leaves the impression of insecurity around both positions.

This wish, in part, seems to represent a desire to be able to apply a common model of financial return on investment to social changes in an advocacy context. The problems

here are myriad, including the complexity of social change, the unpredictability of other inputs and outcomes in a dynamic environment, and the inability to express social change (the outcomes) in the same terms as the inputs ($).

One response is a tendency to report on advocacy by focusing on what is inherently quantifiable. These tend to be activities and outputs. In some instances, such as recording changes in voting numbers and patterns, or budget dollars shifted to social justice purposes, such quantitative data can describe an outcome. However, there is also a clear trend towards finding ways to quantify what is inherently qualitative information, such as by giving ratings to levels of support, the importance of changes secured, etc.

The issue with the former approach – focusing on reporting numbers - is that campaigning success can be presented in somewhat underwhelming ways as a result. One interviewee provided an example of how using quantitative data can fail do justice to the advocacy work the organization was actually carrying out. Available information relating to numbers of supporters in parliament may have reflected impressive effort and good results, but it fell far short of offering convincing evidence about actual contribution to the wider goal – in this case, women's empowerment.

The difficulty with the latter approach – allocating quantitative scores to complex change processes - is that approaches that rely on subjective assessment (as change in an advocacy context almost necessarily does) are more easily open to criticism or dispute. They can be easily countered, and may not always be considered robust (and may not actually be robust).

One risk in consequence is that advocacy can look unimpressive compared to programs where powerful results can be more directly evidenced, and to fundraising where the numbers have more tangible meaning.

Importantly, insecurity about the validity of expressing outcomes - and contributions to them - *qualitatively* can leave organizations vulnerable to assessing and quantifying outcome contribution that lack validity. This they do simply in response to what is perceived as a growing trend in demand for quantification by funders, and by senior managers, who are increasingly looking for summary comparative information that will support decision making and prioritization (a) between campaigns (b) between advocacy approaches and (c) between the advocacy function and other disciplines.

9   DOES MEL DRIVE EFFECTIVENESS?

Main findings supported in this section:

1.   **Evidence that MEL actually drives MEL effectiveness appears to be assumed, rather than clearly demonstrated.**

Cohort participants recognize that, ultimately, MEL's raison d'etre is to increase advocacy effectiveness, through contributing to strategic clarity.

However, evidence that it does so appears to be assumed rather than demonstrated. Supporting information to show MEL influence is reported to be rarely collected, documented and evaluated. Rather ironically, given the influence of MEL in promoting formalization of advocacy-related information gathering processes, the evidence of MEL contributing to advocacy effectiveness appears to be collected anecdotally and informally and is undocumented.

More systematic evaluation of MEL's contribution would help show if and how MEL interventions have led to changes in approach, which, in turn, have led to enhanced advocacy effectiveness. Evidence of this may be apparent internally, but it was not clearly reported by cohort participants.

Interviews, and responses to a subsequent information request, suggest that it is in the more operational-tactical areas where MEL processes have led to changes to subsequent approaches. Examples cited of actual changes informed by, or resulting from, MEL information and processes tended to be more operational than strategic.

Three clear examples of learning informing strategic (rather than operational) change reflect a common theme: that of finding new clarity in defining objectives and goals within the overall theory of change.

After considering data relating to supporter activism, Bread for the World drew on various models describing how people organize to achieve impact, and concluded that there were limitations to the organization's traditional advocacy approach. This led to the decision to engage people in different ways - tapping into the people who would act as advocacy 'multipliers'. Bread for the World now takes a more deliberate organizing and advocacy approach, establishing new objectives of providing activists with tools to broaden the movement by themselves recruiting more people into advocacy work.

Through periodic review and reflection processes, and internal and external evaluation, Amnesty International began to question whether human rights education was an end in

itself (a goal) or if it was better seen as a means to an end (an objective) that should be more closely integrated with the organization's advocacy work. As a result, campaigns, particularly those involving community mobilization, are increasingly integrating human rights education as one of their main components.

In the case of Greenpeace International, comparing internal assessments of progress and strategy made by different staff members uncovered confusion about the end goal of a campaign. According to different views, this was (a) to change practices of a particular set of corporations and thereafter, the entire sector and/or (b) to influence the same set of corporations to become advocates for change with government and/or (c) to change the activities of key suppliers. Greenpeace also realized that it lacked the necessary depth of understanding of how the corporations thought – or sufficient contacts to provide this viewpoint: "the information was based more on astrology than astronomy". Learning was evidenced in changes to the strategy. This involved: refocusing the campaign on key corporate targets and suppliers; streamlining the objectives; and placing more attention on deepening the understanding of the corporations themselves, as part of gathering the necessary intelligence for strategic development.

One dynamic we observe here is that, at the strategy level, the benefits of adapting are recognized through the interplay of information and the reflective process itself.

Rarely in advocacy are particular strategies identified as definitively right or wrong. Or at least, it is hardly possible to generate information that would unequivocally rule out one approach in favor of another. Given this, strategy decisions tend to be more about the balance of judgment, and so the quality of the reflective process informing this judgment becomes particularly important.

In contrast, operational decisions can typically be more clear-cut, with lessons more obviously directly apparent from the data (around response rates to a mailing for example). In such cases, accuracy and relevance of the information may be the more important factor.

10 STRUCTURED ADVOCACY, FORMALIZED MEL

Main findings supported in this section:

1. **There is widespread acceptance of formal planning and MEL processes as routes to advocacy effectiveness. Though concerns about imposing linear thinking and planning on complex change processes appear in the foreground of much advocacy evaluation theory, in practice these concerns are very much in the background, if there at all.**

Findings strongly show a widespread acceptance of formalized planning and formalizing MEL as being routes to advocacy effectiveness.

These trends come out very strongly from the survey. They are linked to the extent that MEL processes are formulated around advocacy objectives and theories of change and from these starting points are intended to support ongoing development:

Figure 14: Perceptions of the desirability of structured advocacy and formalized MEL
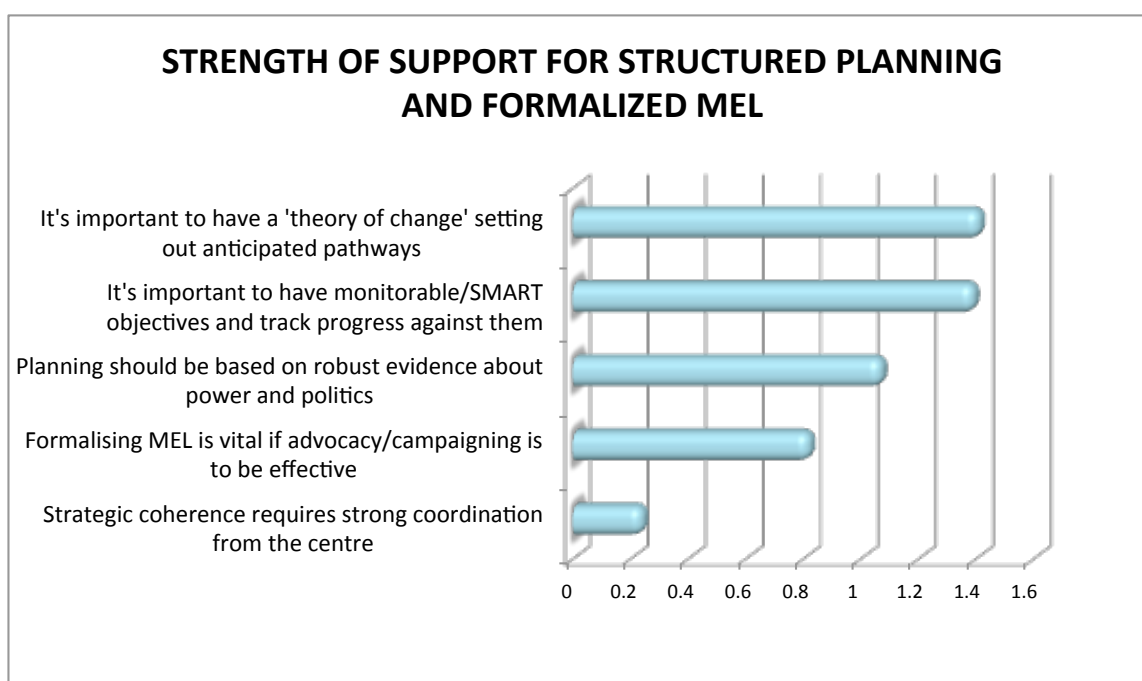
STRENGTH OF SUPPORT FOR STRUCTURED PLANNING AND FORMALIZED MEL

A series of 'semantic differential' questions explored respondents' perceptions around (a) the desirability or otherwise of more structured campaigning (SMART objectives, theories of change, etc.) versus more fluid and iterative approaches and (b) the desirability or otherwise of formalizing MEL processes. Respondents leant – sometimes very strongly – towards supporting more structured and formalized approaches. The scale operates to a score of 1= agree, 2 = strongly agree (showing agreement to one or other of the statements; there was also opportunity to score 0 if neither statement was favored). This graph shows the balance of agreement with the statements listed. Contrasting statements are set out in full in table 6.

These findings are even more starkly demonstrated when broken down by individual responses. Forty-three of forty-six respondents agreed or strongly agreed that, "It's important to have monitorable/SMART objectives and track progress against them". Only two choose to agree with the contrasting statement, "Objectives are artificial; advocacy/campaigning and the context in which it takes place is essentially uncontrollable" (and none strongly agreed):

Figure 15: Perceptions of the importance of structured advocacy

Support for setting SMART objectives
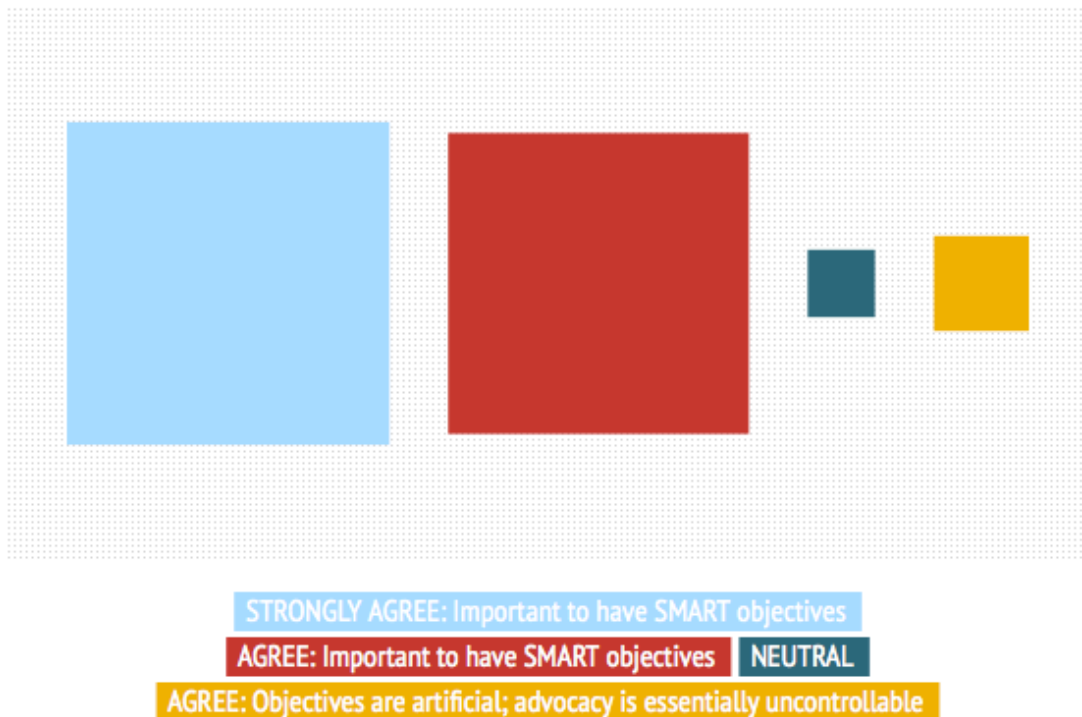
STRONGLY AGREE: Important to have SMART objectives
AGREE: Important to have SMART objectives   NEUTRAL
AGREE: Objectives are artificial; advocacy is essentially uncontrollable

This figure shows the proportion of respondents strongly agreeing, or agreeing with (or remaining neutral to) the contrasting statements "It's important to have monitorable/SMART objectives and track progress against them" and "Objectives are artificial; advocacy/campaigning and the context in which it takes place is essentially uncontrollable" [NB no one strongly agreed with this latter statement]

And these views were at least as strongly held - more strongly according to the detailed data - by senior managers and advocacy staff as by MEL staff:

Figure 16: Perceptions of the desirability of structured advocacy and formalized MEL, by role
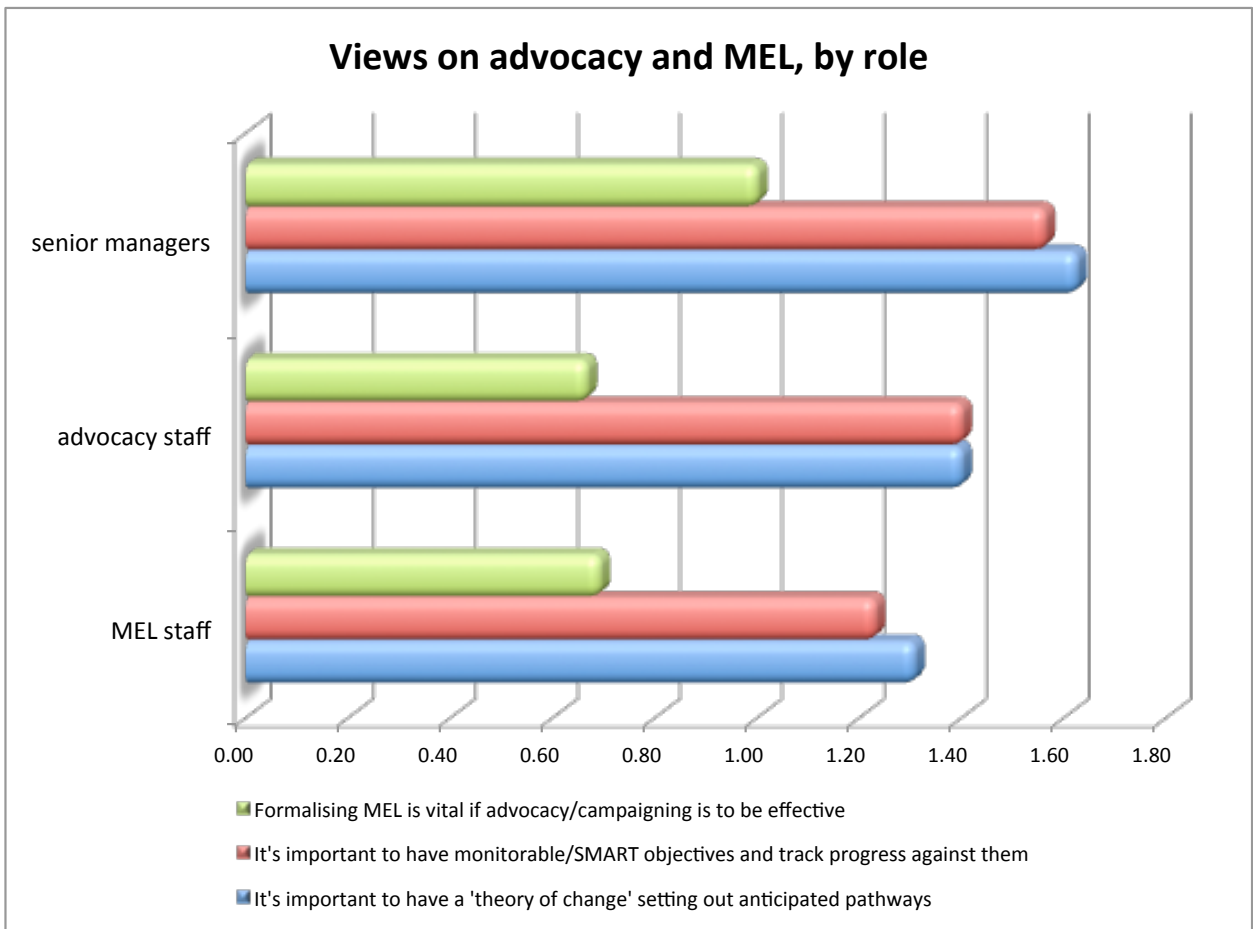
Views on advocacy and MEL, by role

Legend:
- Formalising MEL is vital if advocacy/campaigning is to be effective
- It's important to have monitorable/SMART objectives and track progress against them
- It's important to have a 'theory of change' setting out anticipated pathways

A series of 'semantic differential' questions explored respondents' perceptions around (a) the desirability or otherwise of more structured campaigning (SMART objectives, theories of change, etc.) versus more fluid and iterative approaches and (b) the desirability or otherwise of formalizing MEL processes. Respondents leant – sometimes very strongly – towards supporting more structured and formalized approaches. The scale operates to a score of 1= agree, 2 = strongly agree (showing agreement to one or other of the statements; there was also opportunity to score 0 if neither statement was favored). This graph shows the balance of agreement with the statements listed, by role. Contrasting statements are set out in full in table 6.

These findings were a particular surprise us as authors as the working hypothesis would have been that MEL staff would have been more likely to be more in favor of formalizing initiatives than campaigners themselves. This was not the case.

The strength of feeling towards more structured ways of conceptualizing how change happens was also something the we did not expect, given the validity of the alternative perspective - that campaigning often takes place within highly changeable and volatile contexts where sequences of events cannot always be predicted.

In this context, processes built on assumptions that the sequence of events is predictable may not always practically work. The extent to which structured approaches are fit for purpose depends on how much flexibility there is within planning to look for unintended outcomes and adapt to the unknown.

Nevertheless, these survey results do point to MEL being the zeitgeist, in tune with the way campaigning is evolving, helping to drive support for formal planning initiatives (as well as being an important way to prop them up) through providing processes and information in support.

The trends toward formalizing campaign planning processes and formalizing MEL processes are not, however, clearly matched by trends in resources allocated to MEL generally (across the organizations in this project). The medium-term picture points to a trend towards increased resourcing (through employing specialist MEL staff) and giving greater attention to the MEL function. But – for different reasons – two of the organizations in this review have recently experienced a decrease in dedicated MEL resourcing. It is not possible to discern within this review whether this might be part of a wider development.

We were not able to access financial information from cohort organizations about amounts spent on 'MEL', either in absolute terms or as a proportion of advocacy budgets. Nor was information available about time spent on MEL. There are barriers to gathering such information, notably that where MEL begins and ends is not clearly demarcated. But it does mean that both the cost and the benefit side of the analysis of the contribution of MEL currently lack robust evidence or data.

From our perspective, though not straightforward, it would be beneficial to develop evidence in these areas, if for no other reason than to help validate – or otherwise – organizations' decisions to invest or cut back in this area.

A number of respondents raised the importance of MEL in influencing internal budgetary choices and priorities.

Survey responses show this to be particularly important to senior managers but widely regarded as being poorly fulfilled by current MEL processes:

Figure 17: Perceptions of MEL support in budget choices

'to support budget choices linked to strategic and tactical prioritisation'
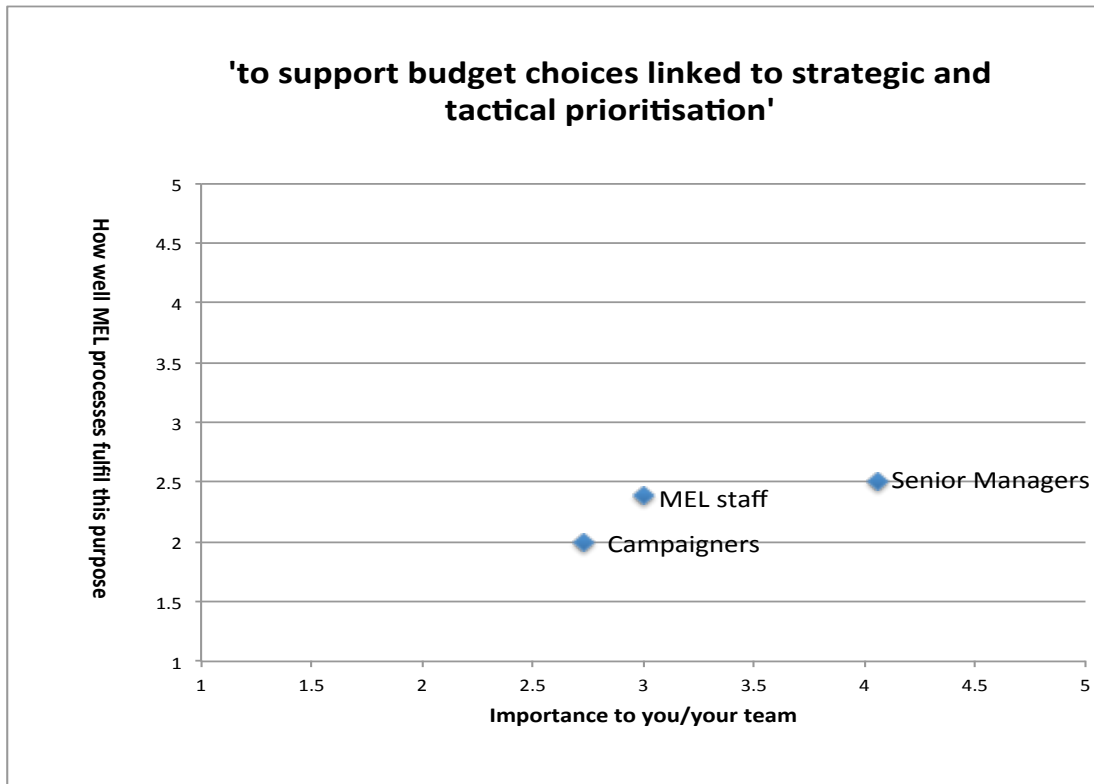
This chart shows the results of the questions linked to the potential MEL purpose of supporting budget decisions, that is (a) how important this purpose is and (b) how well MEL processes fulfill achievement of this purpose. Responses were on a scale of 1-5 where 1 = low and 5 = high

Survey respondents expressed confidence that, through MEL, it is possible to demonstrate value for money in advocacy [see Table 6]. This links to the discussion about making decisions about budgets because it is this kind of analysis that would be most useful in budgeting. (Or at least, likely to be considered useful by senior managers having to take budgeting decisions.)

The fact that information from MEL is not currently strongly supporting budget decision making backs up the evidence we heard elsewhere, that 'value for money' type analyses are not being currently delivered, even whilst it is widely considered possible that they could be.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING GOOD PRACTICE IN MEL

Our findings from this inquiry point to a set of key principles that can help guide good practice within organizational advocacy-related MEL approaches. Many of these principles reflect existing understanding in the field of advocacy evaluation that this research has helped to substantiate. Some are more emergent.

In building an approach to MEL, organizations should:

1. Ensure that centralized systems and parameters invite localized adaptation.

2. Subject moves towards quantifying information to a 'robustness test' to ensure that any such analysis and dissemination supports meaningful use.

3. Give particular focus to testing the links in the chain of change, rather than merely assessing the various elements in isolation.

4. Develop systems that fully contextualize contribution, including understanding the intervention of other actors and an overall sense of complex dynamics at play.

5. Design MEL systems to fit around existing advocacy programs, establishing a firm link to planning, including strategic planning and budgeting processes.

6. Build on the motivations and interests of different users, and their different uses of data and analysis, to devise learning moments and opportunities at key short- medium- and longer-term stages of the advocacy program.

7. Secure active involvement of senior managers in review and analysis processes.

8. Prioritize the facilitative role of MEL professionals in building evaluative capacity organization-wide, including through design (and constant iteration) of ways of working that make it easy for people to engage meaningfully in MEL processes.

9. Take active steps to rebalance accountabilities where necessary, countering a clear tendency to prioritize upwards accountability, to funders in particular.

10. Pay particular attention to building capacity for strategic - as well as tactical – learning and adaptation.

11. Develop an overarching approach to MEL that is intentionally designed to challenge and test strategy and the assumptions underlying it, as well as to improve implementation of existing strategy.

12. Gather evidence of MEL costs and benefits.

SOME FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The principles set out above could usefully be developed and corroborated further, with practical recommendations in a good practice guide or set of minimum standards for advocacy campaign MEL.

In addition to this, on the basis of findings to this inquiry, there are a number of key areas where further exploring principles and practice could prove useful.

Many themes have emerged. We see four primary areas worthy of particular attention, around the following questions -

- How can MEL professionals more consistently and explicitly facilitate growth of **evaluative capacity** within organizations?

- How are **costs and benefits** of MEL within organizations currently being assessed, and how could they be assessed?

- Is there an iron law of **upward accountabilities** always crowding out strategic learning and 'downward' accountability? What are the ways to rebalance incentives and results across these areas?

- When and why are **quantitative metrics** appropriate, valid, and useful?

Because the funding community is one of the primary drivers of MEL, it is very important that its thinking about MEL be informed and influenced by the people who are actually carrying out advocacy. With this in mind then, one overarching question is,

- Recognizing the power dynamic that exists between funders and their grantees, **how best can NGOs engage with the funding community** to develop best practices in MEL?

Because accountability is multi-directional, it is also important to ask,

- **How best can NGOs engage with partners, other advocates and intended beneficiaries** in ways that can contribute to best practices in MEL?

APPENDIX: SURVEY DATA

The survey was in 3 main parts

1. Questions around a list of possible purposes and benefits that a MEL system and approach could fulfill. We invited respondents to score each of them in relation to their importance (a) to them/their team and (b) to their organization. We also asked them to score how well 'MEL' currently supports the achievement of these purposes.

2. Questions around different MEL processes and the extent to which each met a set of desirable criteria.

3. A series of 'semantic differential' questions focusing on what makes effective advocacy and what kind of overall MEL approach best supports effective advocacy.

Survey results are summarized below, looking at these areas in turn.

There was additional opportunity for respondents to give narrative response to questions about what worked well and what less so.

Possible Purposes and Benefits of MEL

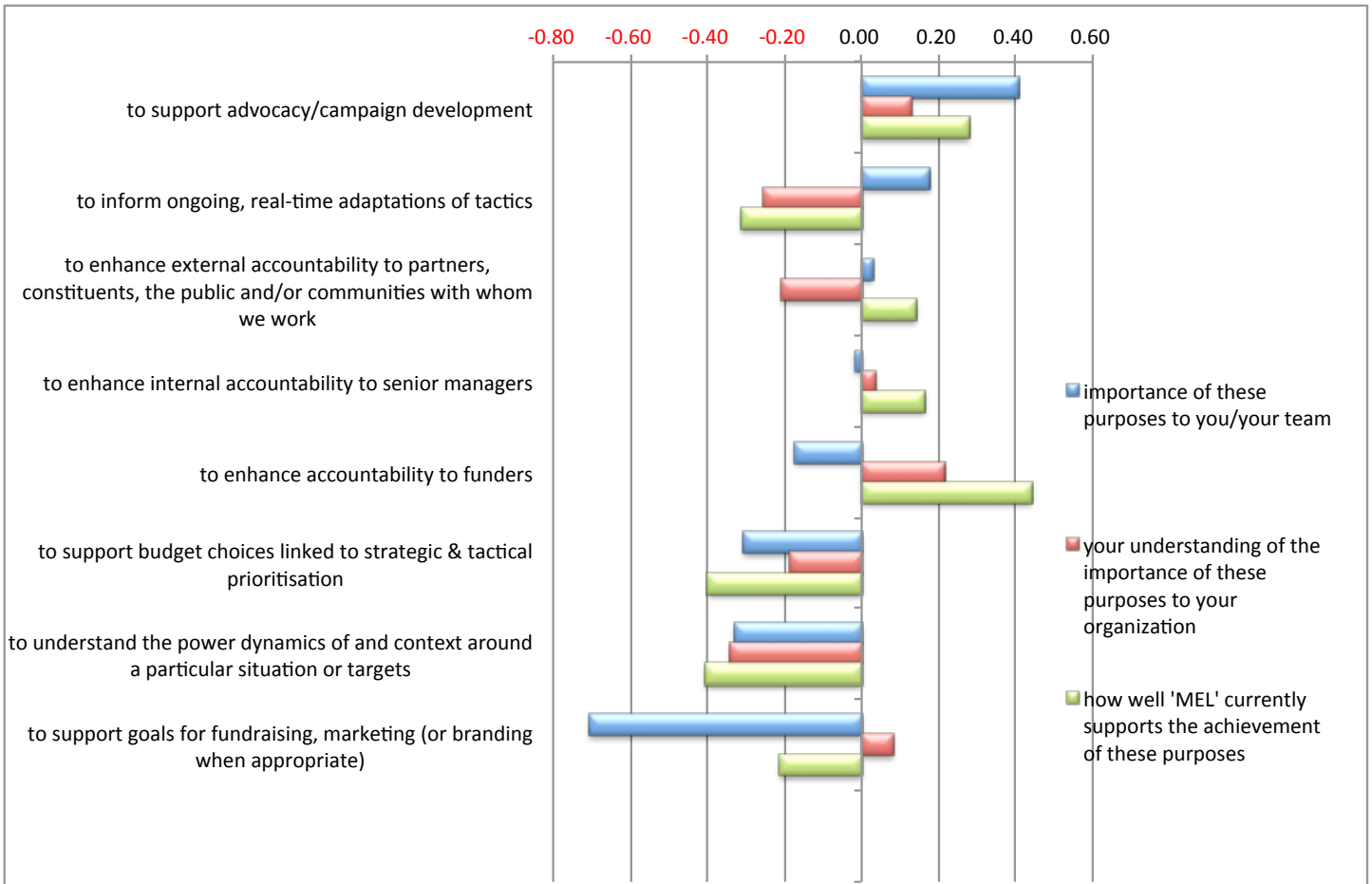Average overall scores – across all respondents - were as follows:

Table 4: Survey Responses: Purposes and Benefits of MEL

	Importance of these purposes to you/your team	Your understanding of the importance of these purposes to your organization	How well 'MEL' currently supports the achievement of these purposes
To support advocacy/campaign development	4.00	3.67	2.98
To support budget choices linked to strategic & tactical prioritization	3.29	3.36	2.30
To understand the power dynamics of and context around a particular situation or targets	3.27	3.20	2.30
To inform ongoing, real-time adaptations of tactics	3.77	3.29	2.39
To inform periodic assessments of any need for strategic reorientation	4.09	3.73	2.84
To enhance external accountability to partners, constituents, the public and/or communities with whom we work	3.62	3.33	2.84
To enhance accountability to funders	3.42	3.76	3.14
To enhance internal accountability to senior managers	3.58	3.58	2.86
To support goals for fundraising, marketing (or branding when appropriate)	2.89	3.62	2.49
To support improvement in organisational systems and processes	4.02	3.87	2.86
Average	3.60	3.54	2.70

Responses were on a scale of 1-5 where 1=low, 5= high

There was evidence of variance in response across the different purposes. This graph takes the average score across all purposes as the mean and shows how individual purposes compare to this average (i.e. whether they were seen as relatively more or less important and relatively more or less well achieved through existing MEL processes):

Figure 18: Purposes seen as relatively more or less important, and better or less well achieved

There is also evidence of variance by role, as this graph – breaking down average responses by role – shows:

Figure 19: Perceptions of how well MEL supports purposes, by role

How well MEL currently supports achievement of purposes, by role
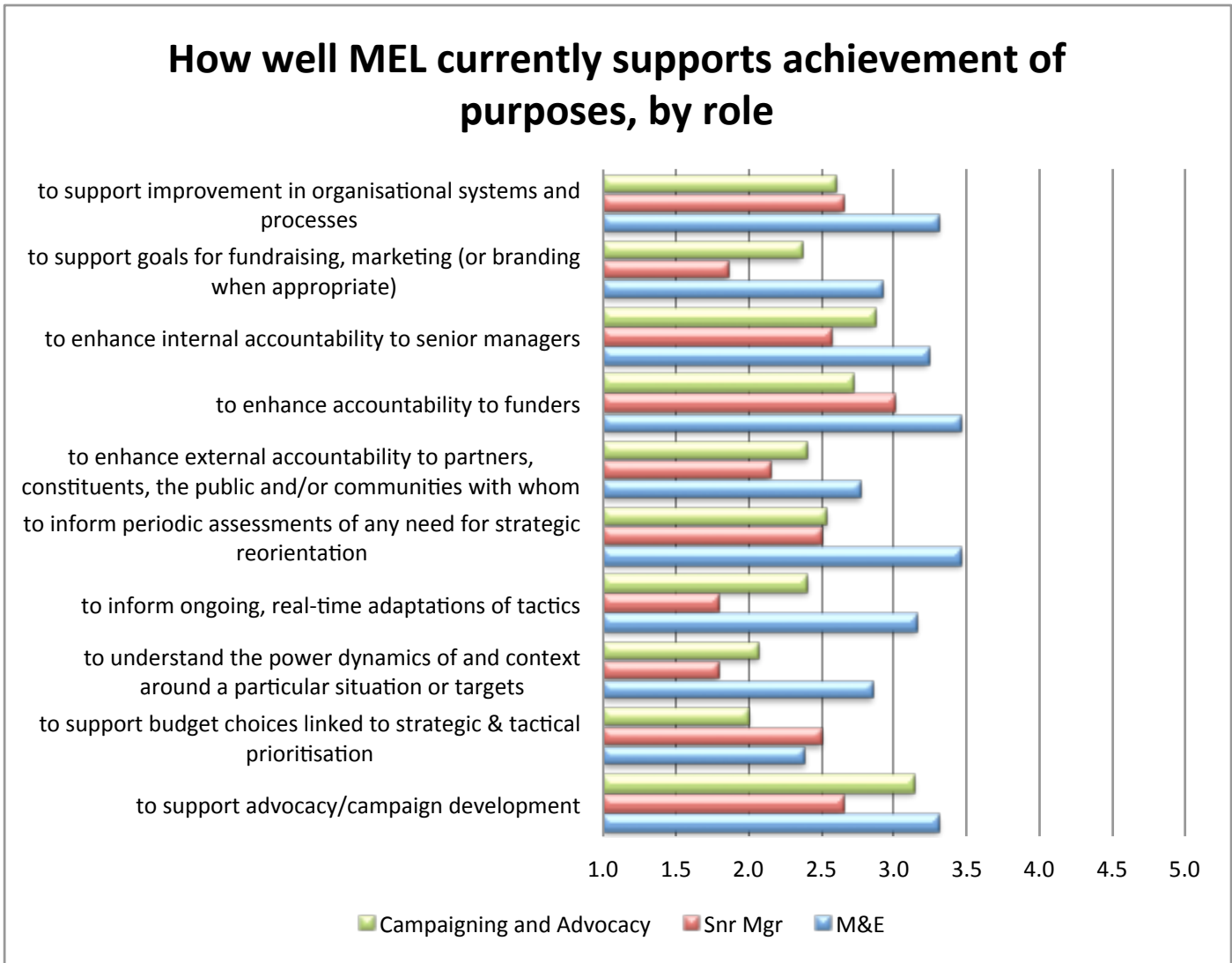
Quality of MEL Processes

Average overall scores – across all respondents - were as follows:

Table 5: Survey Responses: Quality of MEL Processes

	are easy to use	generate actionable insights	generate insights that are robust/ withstand scrutiny	generate insights that are then applied in future work	represent an efficient use of resources	have helped make our advocacy/ campaign-ing more effective	help promote a learning culture organiz-ation-wide	**Average**
Processes used in pre campaign planning	2.98	3.62	3.33	3.57	3.18	3.64	3.29	**3.37**
Process for real time assessment of context and opportunity	3.22	3.82	3.38	3.63	3.71	3.70	3.58	**3.58**
How you assess the effects of activities undertaken toward achieving your outcomes	3.18	3.61	3.44	3.68	3.63	3.78	3.44	**3.54**
Processes used for periodic formal consideration of progress of opportunities and barriers	3.19	3.55	3.35	3.47	3.36	3.48	3.41	**3.40**
Assessing major outcomes marking progress towards your objective	3.23	3.60	3.65	3.60	3.63	3.58	3.43	**3.53**
Quality and value of your organization's contribution to given outcomes	3.00	3.29	3.18	3.47	3.30	3.45	3.28	**3.28**
How you assess campaign/advocacy post hoc	2.92	3.57	3.49	3.54	3.38	3.59	3.43	**3.42**
Average	**3.10**	**3.58**	**3.40**	**3.57**	**3.45**	**3.60**	**3.41**	**3.44**

Scores were on a scale 1=5 where 1 = strongly disagree through to 5 = strongly agree.

(Graphs showing data broken down by sub-groups feature in the main report.)

Effectiveness: Views on Approaches to Advocacy and to MEL

Average overall scores – across all respondents - were as follows:

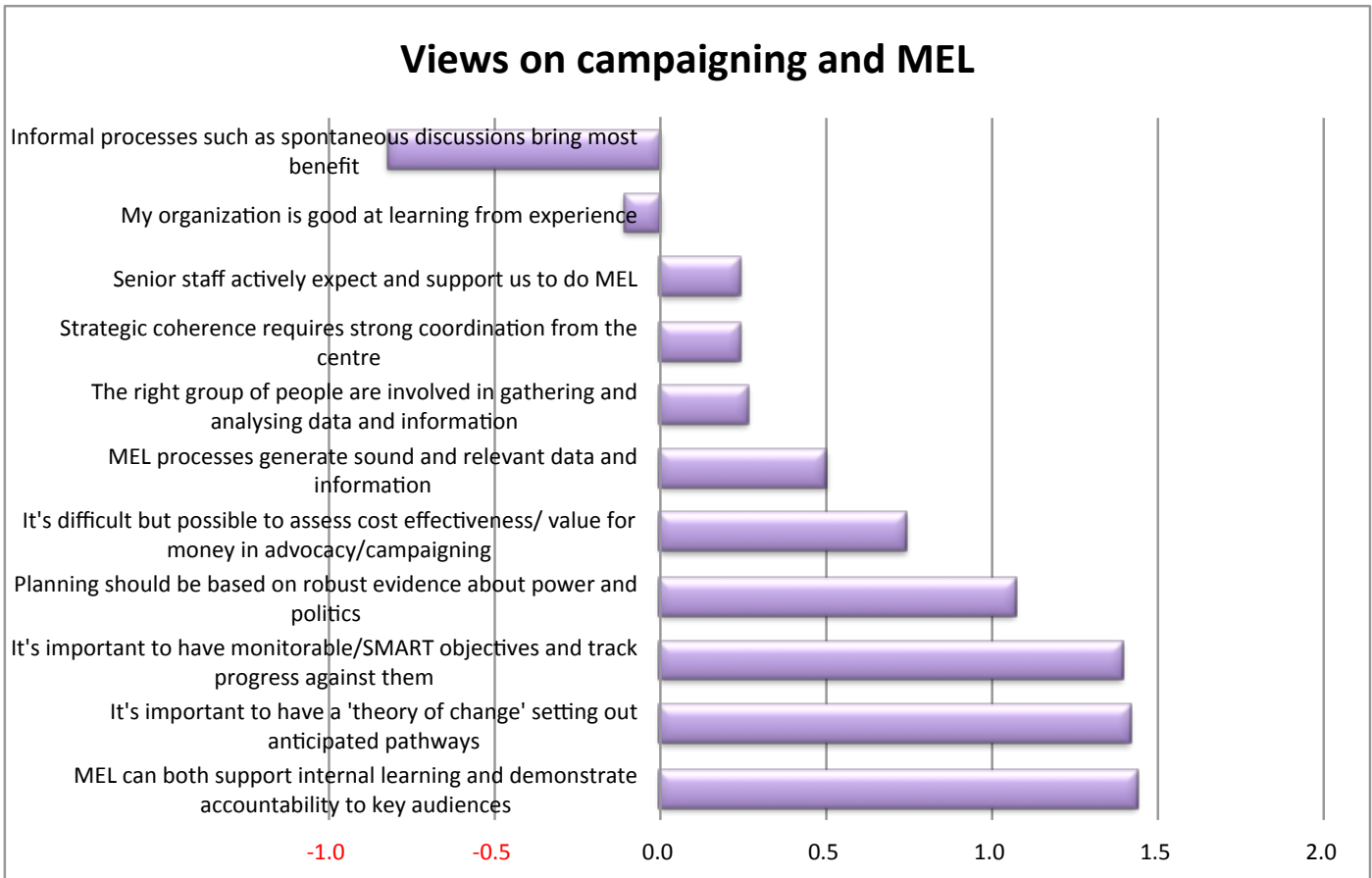**Table 6: Survey responses: Approaches to advocacy, and to MEL**

1. USEFULNESS OF OBJECTIVES		
It's important to have monitorable/SMART objectives and track progress against them	1.39	Objectives are artificial; advocacy/campaigning and the context in which it takes place is essentially uncontrollable
2. BASIS OF PLANNING		
Planning should be based on robust evidence about power and politics	1.07	The best campaigning/advocacy tends to be intuitively planned
3. THEORIES OF CHANGE		
It's important to have a 'theory of change' setting out anticipated pathways	1.41	Advocacy/campaigning can lead in unpredictable directions, frameworks that set out the route are not that helpful
4. COORDINATION vs DELEGATION		
Strategic coherence requires strong coordination from the center	0.24	The most effective advocacy/campaigning delegates responsibility to the frontline
5. LEARNING vs ACCOUNTABILITY		
MEL can both support internal learning and demonstrate accountability to key audiences	1.43	It's not possible to bridge the conflict between demands for 'learning' and 'accountability'
6. INFORMAL vs FORMAL		
Informal processes such as spontaneous discussions bring most benefit	-0.82	Formalizing MEL is vital if advocacy/campaigning is to be effective
7. LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE		
My organization is good at learning from experience	-0.11	My organization struggles to adapt based on past experience
8. SENIOR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT		
Senior staff actively expect and support us to do MEL	0.24	There is little demand and little guidance or tools for doing MEL
9. MEL DRIVERS		
MEL processes generate sound and relevant data and information	0.50	Data and information generated through MEL tends not to be that meaningful
10. WHO'S INVOLVED		
The right group of people are involved in gathering and analyzing data and information	0.26	Key people are often not involved in generating and analyzing data and information
11. VALUE FOR MONEY		
It's difficult but possible to assess cost effectiveness/value for money in advocacy/campaigning	0.74	It's not meaningful to try and assess cost effectiveness/value for money in advocacy/campaigning

Semantic differential questions pose two contrasting statements and invite respondents to indicate which statement they lean towards agreeing with more. Responses were on a scale of 2 = strongly agree, 1 = agree, 0 = neutral (represented as negative scores when agreeing with the statements on the right in this table).

The same results can be represented graphically as follows:

(NB this graph shows one half of the contrasting statements only)

Figure 20: Perceptions on what makes effective advocacy, and what makes effective MEL

Views on campaigning and MEL

Informal processes such as spontaneous discussions bring most benefit

My organization is good at learning from experience

Senior staff actively expect and support us to do MEL

Strategic coherence requires strong coordination from the centre

The right group of people are involved in gathering and analysing data and information

MEL processes generate sound and relevant data and information

It's difficult but possible to assess cost effectiveness/ value for money in advocacy/campaigning

Planning should be based on robust evidence about power and politics

It's important to have monitorable/SMART objectives and track progress against them

It's important to have a 'theory of change' setting out anticipated pathways

MEL can both support internal learning and demonstrate accountability to key audiences

-1.0   -0.5   0.0   0.5   1.0   1.5   2.0

Broken down by role, average results are the following:

Figure 21: Views on campaigning and MEL by role

Views on Campaigning, and MEL, by role