Briefing

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Policy pointers

Projects must engage local communities in participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning activities from the start, and integrate their learning and information needs throughout the project cycle.

Donors and aid agencies must recognise the role of bottom-up learning and make space for learning at all levels, explicitly integrating it into funding design and implementation.

Learning beyond accountability will build trust between donors and communities, leading to local ownership of adaptation projects for effective adaptation outcomes.

Donors must provide adequate project budget for learning and ensure that funding arrangements are flexible enough to incorporate and respond to lessons.

Closing the learning loop in locally led adaptation

Donor-driven monitoring and evaluation often does little to integrate or incentivise learning for locally led adaptation. Deterministic and rigid top-down approaches fail to capitalise on the important insights that bottom-up learning can offer for improving local adaptation planning and implementation. As a result, they fail to capture lessons that could be cascaded upwards to steer funding flows towards better results on the ground. This briefing explores current approaches and frameworks' attitudes to learning and why it is important. Gathering examples from existing programmes and projects, it draws out lessons on how to deliver effective learning for locally led adaptation and sets out recommendations for donors and aid agencies on how to help close the learning loop for greater impact.

To ensure effective locally led adaptation, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems must have a strong learning component. This will ensure ongoing, participatory processes of strategic reflection, allowing room for failure and reorientation of activities over time.

Donor-driven monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches do not always support effective learning to develop adaptive capacity. Instead, they often focus on feedback models with predefined indicators that collect data for and assess progress towards preset objectives. This misses opportunities to learn from local stakeholders and the processes associated with locally led adaptation.

Learning means different things for different stakeholders, depending on the governance scale and where and why it happens. Donors can use learning to reorientate their funding; project implementors can use it to improve programme outcomes, and rethink strategies and outcomes; and communities can use it to ensure adaptation meets their needs.

In the context of locally led adaptation, effective learning takes place at multiple levels, with the community at its centre. Involving local actors from the start, it brings together diverging viewpoints to learn and form a common understanding around a planned adaptation action that can then be implemented in cycles of action and reflection.[1,2]

Top-down adaptation: failing to learn

Local adaptation is a slow and inelegant process that does not naturally lend itself to measurement and quantification. Top-down adaptation planning and its associated M&E frameworks fail to capture an accurate picture of what works on the ground. Learning often takes place via retrospective evaluations and lessons are not acted on, thwarting theoretical and practical improvements across the climate finance

system.[1] Consequently, top-down adaption efforts continue to miss the mark, focusing on monitoring and upward reporting of results and failing to learn (see Box 1).

Why is learning important?

Learning and adaptation improvements go hand in hand. When learning progress and outcomes are visible, local actors demonstrate high awareness of how project design elements are interlinked. This can help build knowledge, facilitate resourcefulness and engender a sense of agency that will help actors pursue future options.[1,4] Explicitly integrating learning with local adaptation activities will lead to more sustainable, effective, relevant programmes and projects that lead to desired resilience outcomes. Learning will also help build a more robust evidence base over time.

Shorter learning loops can help local actors quickly detect and recalibrate strategies and actions that are not working

Learning can clarify expectations of change. Locally led adaptation and transforming power relations are neither linear nor predictable. Uncertainties and assumptions about impact and process will often inform project design and/or finance delivery mechanisms. Locally led adaptation can take a long time and requires coordination, flexibility and patience. So incremental shifts and iterative learning — which accommodates failure and the consequent reorientation of activities — are essential as local institutions and financing mechanisms evolve.

Positive changes in adaptation and social change are also likely to be seen over longer timeframes than the average project cycle. Iterative learning can help donors and local actors — who may have divergent views of success — reflect on what change and success should look like.

Learning can accommodate complexity in locally led adaptation. Successful locally led adaptation often depends on actions from multiple groups at different governance levels. And as collective action usually involves multiple stakeholders with different skills, values and perceptions,[5] the current donor focus on proving achievement to attribute impact to specific players is ill-suited to locally led adaptation.[6]

Learning can improve trust. Learning and accountability are compatible but distinct, and should be explicitly considered and reinforced in project- and programme-level M&E structures. A MEL system must clearly define its role, purpose and scope from the start. Involving local communities in learning will not only help ensure robust knowledge, a range of views and shared responsibility, it also builds greater trust.

Practical lessons for effective learning

The programmes in Box 2 have engaged local actors in learning beyond upward accountability purposes. Drawing on insights from these and wider research, we outline some practical lessons to guide learning in locally led adaptation:

1. Ensure that learning is clearly articulated from the outset. Engaging local actors from the beginning will ensure that learning is meaningfully integrated into MEL frameworks.[7] By working with communities with the clear objective of learning, donors can harness local knowledge of what does and does not work in a specific context. Providing this opportunity to test, validate and where necessary reject assumptions that guide project design will generate buy-in from local actors, legitimise the MEL process and help with project management.

The **Dedicated Grant Mechanism** has separate learning components that support each other.[8] Its global learning, outreach and information sharing component facilitates workshops and peer-to-peer exchanges to enable learning from technical experts and successful community-led REDD+ projects; it also develops and collects culturally appropriate knowledge resources for indigenous peoples and local community use. Its planning, monitoring and reporting component generates information to share via outreach, capacity building and learning.

Box 1. The gap between words and action

The **Pilot Programme for Climate Resilience's** monitoring and reporting framework seeks to assess adaptation progress and ensure learning and accountability. Although stakeholders agree on indicator scoring through a participatory process, the framework does not create learning spaces that fully engage local actors. Despite its stated commitment to engage local stakeholders, their role is confined to reviewing data and providing feedback during national-level workshops. This is not active bottom-up learning.

Evidence-based decision making and learning also plays a minimal role in the **Global Environment Facility's** approach. Like most global funds, its Results Measurement Framework (RMF) mentions learning. But this is mainly a statement of intent to manage, produce and share knowledge; there is little detail on how learning will be used for decision making.[3]

The **Green Climate Fund's** learning-based evolving framework focuses on updating its own RMF and does little to deliver real learning. Accredited entities monitor, evaluate and report back on funded activities against the RMF. But there is no requirement to design or integrate learning as part of project design or M&E or to include learning components in a funding proposal. Several approved direct access adaptation projects have an explicit learning component, but even their M&E frameworks often focus on upward reporting, and learning remains disconnected.

The devolved climate finance (DCF) mechanism established consortiums of local and government actors to provide a forum for honest exchange and learning. This conferred legitimacy on the DCF approach and ensured a wide range of perspectives and a broad depth of knowledge were included in project decision making.[9]

The BRACED programme acknowledged learning as a key element to be implemented by the knowledge manager, who was also responsible for M&E. The programme developed different resilience measurement approaches and frameworks through a variety of M&E efforts. BRACED accountability and learning supported and separated out clear and discrete reporting formats.[10] Removing fear of reporting failure in this way helps incentivise learning.[11]

2. Iterative learning should be centre stage.
Iterative learning uses rapid and flexible learning processes and tools to enable a programme to modify its operations and change strategic direction, based on M&E evidence and feedback. If MEL is to provide credible information that facilitates learning on complex grassroots and local-level climate change adaptation, iterative learning cannot be an afterthought.

When establishing a MEL approach at project and programme levels, we must consider how to foster local stakeholders' learning and reflection skills to meaningfully promote more inclusive learning. Shorter learning loops can help local actors quickly detect and recalibrate strategies and actions that are not working. We can consider this learning to 'fail faster' as any actions that are not working can be more quickly identified and thrown out, and remedial action taken.[12]

The DCF mechanism established multi-stakeholder consortiums where state and non-state actors work together on strategic and technical decisions. Members meet quarterly to review progress, agree resource allocation and discuss learning, changing course as required in response to challenges or circumstances. Its use of participatory planning tools continually engages local actors and seeks to understand how to improve resilience.[9]

A BRACED evaluation concluded that learning is an ongoing process that should focus on building longer-term capabilities for self-directed learning, not just skills. This allows local communities to pursue further knowledge on their own, rather than rely on a project for their learning.[13]

3. Local context shapes and drives learning.
Although appropriate types of learning will vary by context, participatory MEL processes are better suited to addressing the needs and concerns of local stakeholders.[12] Social

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Box 2. Programmes that engage in learning beyond accountability

BRACED: the UK Department for International Development's Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) programme awarded grants to 15 projects to help integrate disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation methods into development approaches, seeking to influence policies and practices at local, national and international levels. It appointed a knowledge manager to generate evidence and learning.

The Forest Investment Program's Dedicated Grant Mechanism: the Forest Investment Program's Dedicated Grant Mechanism is a US$80 million grant window that channels funding directly to indigenous peoples and local community representatives to enhance their capacity to engage and contribute to national Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) dialogue and actions. The Forest Investment Program design identified the need for active participation of indigenous peoples and local communities.

Devolved Climate Finance: the Devolved Climate Finance mechanism uses public financial management system architecture to deliver finance at scale for local adaptation planning and implementation. The pilot in Kenya, Tanzania, Mali and Senegal used wellbeing analysis, participatory climate resilience assessments and village-level theories of change to deliver project-level learning.

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structures can encourage or hamper individual and community capacity to adapt to climate change, and this should be factored in when engaging local actors in MEL planning and activities. Climate change may also require a shift from social to technical learning approaches that focus on quantitative technical data, and vice versa. Learning is particularly complex where multiple bodies and institutions interact,[1] and early community engagement means their strong working knowledge of local specificities can help guide learning.

4. Consider cross-scale trade-offs in learning.
Learning requirements vary at different levels. Programme-level learning is geared towards aggregating and synthesising evidence for consistency and comparability across a programme, whereas project-level frameworks that engage local actors collect evidence and generate learning to meet specific project needs. Project stakeholders may be inhibited from participating in programme-level learning,[10] which could create cross-scale tensions that need to be managed.

5. Adequate resources must be allocated for learning.
When funds are not allocated to facilitate learning, engagement of local stakeholders is limited. Likewise, where funding agencies and donors impose inflexible rules and conditions, implementers cannot adjust their work plans in response to learning.[2]

BRACED included funding to support project-to-programme learning as well as project-to-project learning and exchange visits. A small collaboration grant to support learning between implementing partners helped project teams make new connections and exchange knowledge that was not included in annual work plans and project logframes.[13]

Closing the learning loop

These preliminary recommendations can guide the design and implementation of community-led learning as an integral part of adaptation MEL frameworks and approaches.

Donors and aid agencies must do more to recognise the vital role of learning as an integral part of programmes and projects across MEL frameworks. Shifting away from a linear, deterministic view of local adaptation towards greater consideration of the complexities of individual and community decision making to capture and learn from them[10] will help facilitate strategic adjustment and operational reorientation through evidence-based reflection.

To generate more trust between donors and communities and encourage two-way accountability, MEL frameworks must involve local communities in learning from the start. Practically, this will mean including learning opportunities at appropriate points across a project cycle to allow for shorter learning loops and ensure that local actors are instrumental in the process, from planning through to completion.

This will require rethinking how learning is implemented. Evaluations should be used on a rolling basis, not as post-mortems. Regular feedback and reflection meetings, for example, can offer all stakeholders an opportunity to discuss findings and their implications for effective locally led adaptation planning and implementation. By providing diverse inputs into problem solving, local and changing forms of knowledge, and emerging concerns and constraints will all feed into decision making.[14] As well as allowing capacity building to be based on learning, this would capture stories of change or impact narratives that lie beyond rigid indicator frameworks. Donors must therefore ensure the right people with the right skillsets are in place at various levels — sitting at both programme and project levels — to enable learning, remembering that this is different from MEL for accountability purposes.

Donors must also put mechanisms in place to support learning, allocating flexible budgets for learning, reflection and project adjustment.[13] While 10–13% of project budget may suffice,[12] contract agreements must also be flexible around additional learning or reallocating resources in response to emerging findings and lessons.[11]

In the coming months, the Global Commission on Adaptation will develop a MEL approach as part of its Locally Led Adaptation Track. This will set out further guidance on how to deliver learning within adaptation MEL frameworks.

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Knowledge Products

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GLOBAL COMMISSION ON ADAPTATION

Notes

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