Discussion Summary

Topic: Setting up an OM System: Q&A

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Discussion Starter by Kaia Ambrose

A colleague of mine from the Ottawa M&E Community of Practice wrote to me recently with some challenges in *data collection and analysis* that he has identified after introducing and working with OM in a program he coordinates. I thought our conversation would be interesting to share; many of the challenges are common amongst OM users. My response to these challenges are from one perspective and set of experiences, so I thought it would be interesting to solicit responses from the OMLC so that others may benefit from the conversation as well.

Because a number of partner institutions are involved with this initiative, and we don't have everyone's permission to share names of institutions and individuals, I have kept the program itself anonymous.

Program Context: A capacity building program (which involves both Mozambican and Canadian implementing and boundary partners) has hit a snag with implementing OM because of low uptake by implementing partners; these partners were identified as the best suited to observe and document changes among the boundary partners. The boundary partners are teachers and school administrators, students and employers. Canadian partners travel 3 or 4 times a year on technical missions, and so the program has asked them to observe and, at the end of each mission, to document significant changes using a fairly simple and brief form based on OM. The form contains a set of progress markers for them to use as tags when they are documenting an observation.

My colleague posed the following questions, with plans to further modify their OM system.

"We wonder whether we should remove the burden of documenting changes from our implementing partners and move it onto our project management staff; for example, rather than getting these partners to submit data after every 3-4 missions they do per year, perhaps we get one of our project officers to call our implementing partners once or twice a year and obtain the data with a structured or semi-structured interview protocol."

"We have reflection workshops built into the project occurring twice a year; the project is clustered around 4 Mozambican institutions and so we group the Outcome Mapping reflection workshops around these partner institutions."

Question 1: Is it possible to do outcome mapping where the observer and the documenter are different people?
Question 2: What would be the typical frequency for data collection for a project using outcome mapping? Is it an episodic process (i.e., document significant change whenever you see it), or can it be periodic, e.g. collect data once or twice a year?
Question 3: How often do most OM projects do such reflection workshops?

Response by Kaia:

OBSERVER VS. DOCUMENTER: Yes, it's possible. I think you have to be prepared for some 'broken telephone' and potentially more work for the documenter, but I have heard of and know a lot of examples of this; it often happens when language needs to change from a local language to the reporting language for example, and the person preparing reports inevitably has to go to the observer to get the data/observations.

FREQUENCY: Progress markers can represent quite nuanced change - it's not always 'somebody signed a new bylaw'; it can be a policy maker actually spoke at a meeting or asked a question; and that is of course one of the prominent features of a progress marker is that it captures those changes that may not seem like a big deal when compared to our traditional indicators. I've encouraged ongoing recording so people don't forget, but you don't need to analyze it on an ongoing basis, just capture it. So at the 6-month mark, when an OM report is due, based on a reflection session, I say to the M&E Leads "Ok, have a look at all of the observations that were entered and see if anything is missing. Once the gaps are identified then they start on the analysis and reflection - what trends are we seeing, are boundary partners moving towards 'love to sees' over time, are there any deviations (and why), what's working and what's not working (and why),where might we need to improve our actions to better support out boundary partners.

REFLECTION WORKSHOPS: In a certain program I have been directly involved in they do this reflection 2x year (and yes, there is mixed quality of these workshops, for many reasons, and I think understanding those reasons, and trying to provide support in the right places for more engaged and useful workshops, is key). Now, partly this particular program was doing these workshops 2x a year because they need the data/analysis 2x a year, to feed into bi-annual reporting, newsletters, and policy-influence planning. So it's a utility question- how often is the information going to be useful to you? In other programs I've worked on, 2x a year was too much, so we did it once a year.

Dr. Jacques Somda responded that these are the apt questions to ask when implementing an OM system and a lot of input can be achieved from the original OM Manual. In the original OM document, outcomes challenges and progress markers are intentionally designed without timeline, which I think does not prevent OM users to add intentional timeline for either the Outcome challenges (which may go beyond the project lifetime), or the progress markers (expect to see, like to see and love to see), some of them may also go beyond the project lifetime.

He reported his experience of OM implementations and shared that they discuss with boundary partners on timeline for the intentional design phases and then use those timeline to set the M&E timeline, following the steps:

- *Timing the M&E Planning in OM*: Agree with boundary partners on when each of them speculates to show up the identified outcome challenges and progress markers.

- *Periodicity for outcome journals:* Periodicity of one year was agreed up for the "expect to see", two years for the "like to see" and "love to see".

- *Observer vs Documenter*: There was also an agreement that those boundary partners who can write in French will submit their outcome journal annual, but also at any time when changes occurred in relationship with the planned and unplanned progress markers. Those boundary partners who cannot write in French we agree on the person who will help then report on progress markers on the yearly basis.

- *Annual M&E reflection:* Because some changes were gathered on yearly basis, the M&E reflection took place at the beginning of the following year, during the project review and planning workshop.

During this M&E reflection, evidences of changes are provided and sometime field visits were organized to substantiate the outcome journals.

Colin Mitchell and Valerie Gordon amongst others, pointed out that often we need to go below the "paper version" of the project, and understand underlying power dynamics, hierarchies, roles, responsibilities and specific team cultures in order to clarify project management, monitoring and evaluation motivations and capacities. This can help tailor documenting protocols and processes. It is also important to recognize how OM is supported both internally (at different layers of an organization, for example) and externally (by a donor, for example).

Emily Balls added to this with an example from her experience: "I like the idea of doing data collection episodically and people adding information as it happens - but this approach doesn't fit well with current ways of working/team cultures so we went for a periodic approach and collect data quarterly. We have annual project reflection workshops – these have been really useful for validating and checking data submitted, as well as for convening project teams in one place…My sense is that these workshops are more useful than written reporting [because they capture change that might not otherwise be documented for a variety of reasons] and offer an opportunity to better understand team dynamics etc." Jacques concurred with the value of the annual M&E reflection meetings based on his experience.

Marcel Chiranov and Emma Naughton reminded us of the importance of focusing on use-orientation: how often will new and important data appear in real life, who are the main stakeholders that need it or expect it and for what reasons (communication, advocacy, decision-making; for example "if somebody wants to use data in advocacy activities to persuade decision-makers to allocate resources to certain activities, the data should be in place before the budget process starts"); and what are the available resources to perform data collection at the right time.

Finally, three tools / approaches / applications were shared as complementary resources to consider when setting up an online system:

- Colin Mitchell suggested the Social Analysis CLIP (Collaboration and Conflict, Legitimacy, Interests, Power) technique by SAS2 for understanding team dynamics.

- Emma Naughton at Lucid Collaborative shared a web application based on OM (always fascinating to see what people have done in this regard!) with the usefulness and capacity aspects in min; thank you Emma for reiterating that uptake still depends on support for OM / ensuring it's the right approach for the context.

- Marcel Chiranov added that they also use an online portal for automated data collection, processing and sharing, which is perfectly adapted to OM and is available at www.manageforchange.com

And thank you to Niamatullah Rahi and Ricardo Wilson- Grau for reminding us that Outcome Harvesting can also be considered, especially if the initiative has already considered an Outcome Mapping approach.