Briefing note

Outcome mapping

Learning brief

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Key messages

- Outcome mapping (OM) has a number of different benefits as a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) approach, including unpacking different uses of information at different levels of programme implementation; helping to develop a common language around progress markers; and going beyond monitoring to inform adaptation throughout implementation.
- These benefits are important aspects of monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management (MEL4AM), as they provide richer evidence for decision-making at a frequency that could mean real-time learning and change.
- OM works best when it is embedded throughout the organisation, and as part of programme and organisational culture, rather than tasked to a MEL unit or individual.

Executive summary

Adaptive programmes recognise that certain changes, particularly in behaviours, are complex, non-linear and difficult to measure. This briefing note[1] explores the use of outcome mapping (OM) as a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) approach to track behavioural change and inform adaptation for two programmes: the Pathways to Resilience in Semi-arid Economies (PRISE) research consortium and the Accountability in Tanzania programme (AcT I and AcT II). We discuss the implementation of OM, the ways in which it has enabled adaptation and enabling contexts in order to identify key considerations for MEL specialists and programme managers as they determine whether OM may be the right fit, and how best to use the approach.

Both programmes revealed key benefits of OM, specifically:

- OM allows you to unpack different uses of information at different levels of programme implementation.
- OM helps in developing a common language around progress markers that assists programmes in capturing their contribution to overall change across multiple countries and boundary partners.
- OM goes beyond monitoring to inform adaptation throughout implementation.

These benefits are important aspects of monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management (MEL4AM), as they provide richer evidence for decision-making, at a frequency that could mean real-time learning and change.

For both PRISE and AcT, the main enabling factors in their use of OM for learning and adaptation were:

- OM became more than just an MEL tool: it became a way of working and part of the overall programme strategy.
- OM was not necessarily applied in the same way everywhere; rather, it was adapted over time and between contexts. This quality is consistent with OM: it offers a common language around change, but is flexible enough to allow for adaptation in application, across contexts and time.
- Enthusiasm and commitment within the programme for OM was important – from strong senior leadership buy-in for AcT to having partner organisations with OM Focal Points on board from the beginning in PRISE.

The more a team understands how they are contributing to desired outcomes, the better they will be at making changes to their programme to maximise their chances of doing so. Both PRISE and AcT viewed OM as a tool for understanding *how change happens*. As such, not only did OM fulfil a monitoring function, it also informed the implementation strategy at different levels.

As donors and implementing partners consider using OM, they should keep in mind the following considerations:

- OM works best when it is embedded throughout the organisation, rather than tasked to a MEL unit or individual.
- OM can be viewed as a ‘way of working’ rather than a strict set of tools, and therefore needs to be embedded in programme and organisational culture. As such, it might be worth focusing on some early ‘quick wins’ related to the use of evidence generated by OM to inform decision-making.
- OM does not fit neatly into a logframe-driven MEL system, as it mostly operates in the ‘in-between’ of results along a results chain. Flexibility of approach is key.

1 This briefing note was originally written for the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative’s programme donors: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In light of the closure of the GLAM programme, it was agreed to make the note publicly available. It is targeted at other donors and practitioners who would like to know more about these methods and their practical implementation.

Introduction and purpose

For both the PRISE research consortium and AcT, OM offered a flexible MEL approach that could track behaviour change among key stakeholders. This comparative analysis is intended to showcase how OM can work in different programmatic models, and the ways in which it has enabled these programmes to make adaptations and use the information generated from OM to inform decision-making at different levels.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) developed the OM approach to look not only at *what* changes have occurred, but also *how* change occurs and the influences on that change, including the contributions of a programme.[2] Used to inform adaptive management (AM), OM allows implementers to think systematically about the process of change and continually refine implementation strategies to most effectively contribute to the change they seek to support. The OM approach and suite of tools has unique characteristics across the following three stages (Smutylo, 2005):

1. **Design –** key stakeholders are brought together to identify the high-level outcomes they would 'love to see', and the progress markers that identify incremental changes that the programme can reasonably influence/contribute to in terms of moving towards those outcomes. Progress markers are a pre-identified set of behaviours, actions and interactions that signify progress related to higher-level desired outcomes.
2. **Data collection –** individuals tasked with monitoring outcomes collect information around actions and relationships, activities and performance related to the identified progress markers. This can be complemented through 'traditional' MEL practices such as observation, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, or through more informal means such as stakeholder consultation.
3. **Use of data –** throughout the process, the design can be adapted to fit emergent needs and respond to challenges in the use of the various tools embedded in the approach. As data is analysed and 'made sense of', stakeholders can reflect on the data and performance against progress markers to adapt implementation strategies.

Programme description

AcT (now in its second phase, AcT II) is a governance programme funded by the FCDO in Tanzania. It works with mid-sized to large civil society organisations (CSOs) to strengthen their capacity to influence behaviour change among citizens, civil society and the government, with the goal of making the government more responsive and accountable. The programme does this through core and project funding, capacity-building support and knowledge exchange and learning among grantee partners (OMLC, n.d., b).

PRISE, a multi-country research programme funded by the FCDO and IDRC, used a 'policy and development first' approach to generate evidence about how economic development in semi-arid regions could be made more equitable and resilient to the effects of climate change. It produced demand-led research in response to the information needs of government, civil society and private sector stakeholders, which then made up seven specific projects in eight countries (ODI, n.d.). The ongoing engagement of those stakeholders was led by in-country partners and informed by real-time changes in the level of research uptake.

Comparative study approach and limitations

GLAM conducted a literature review of existing reports and learning documents from both AcT and PRISE, as well as a limited number of key informant interviews with current and former staff from both programmes. As the programmes had already produced practical descriptions of their OM approaches, this comparative study focuses primarily on how the approach can be used as a MEL4AM tool, and the considerations that programmes should keep in mind when determining whether OM is the right fit for

2 For more information, see the FAQ resource produced by IDRC's Evaluation Unit at the Outcome Mapping Learning Community (OMLC, n.d., a).

programmes seeking to be more adaptive and support ongoing learning.

As the study focuses on only two programmes for which OM offered numerous benefits, including in learning and adaptation, it can provide only limited information on the conditions under which OM may not work, or be less suitable. Further guidance may be needed in this area, including consideration of whether there have been successful versions of ‘outcome mapping-lite’ for programmes that are not set up to dedicate as much in terms of resources and time, or which are not as long-term as PRISE or AcT.

Outcome mapping as a tool for learning in PRISE and AcT

The AcT and PRISE programmes both endeavour(ed) to influence behaviour among target stakeholders. Given the complexity of these desired changes and the variety of factors that can influence (or create obstacles to) behaviour change, linear and output-driven MEL frameworks and tools would not sufficiently capture the journey of behaviour change, nor would they offer programme managers the nuanced information they need to understand how change is occurring, and identify what is contributing to or causing that change. Similarly, monitoring approaches that focus solely or primarily on the final intended outcomes or milestones of policy-making (e.g. policies that are signed into law) run the risk of not providing timely feedback to programme implementers on what is happening along the pathway of change or tracking changes outside of the ‘line of sight’ or in-between ‘levels’ of the results framework. This would then make it unclear whether the interventions are working (or not) until the desired outcome is realised (or not) much later on.

In response to the need to understand the incremental steps and nuances along their respective pathways of change, and to inform programmatic adaptation with rigorous evidence, both PRISE and AcT adopted OM as an approach that allowed them not only to ‘tell the story’ of change through regular reporting, but also to understand more about what it was in their approaches that was working, or not working, and why. Table 1 summarises the approach that both programmes took to OM based on their specific contexts and overall programmatic aims.

What are/were the learning benefits of outcome mapping for both programmes

For PRISE and AcT, the key benefits that OM offered were:

OM allows you to unpack change at different levels. Understanding that behaviour change requires small, incremental shifts across many actors within a system, OM recognises and documents the ways in which different actors at different levels are making contributions to a wider story. The approach and suite of tools yield evidence showing how activities or a larger programme contribute to change, but also the ways in which they do so (the ‘how’).

> [Outcome mapping] encourages everyone who has a thirst for that kind of change to keep reaching for it, without the risk that someone is going to criticise the programme for not meeting targets (Kate Dyer, former AcT Director).

For example, AcT chose to pursue OM over results-based management (RBM) processes more linked to performance management. It had been observed that RBM created a tendency to set targets that are known to be reachable, while OM put transformative change on the agenda and allowed the programme to track the ways in which incremental changes could add up to something more substantial.

OM developed a common language around progress markers to help the two programmes understand and capture their contribution to change. As outlined above, progress markers are a pre-identified set of behaviours, actions and interactions that signify progress related to higher-level desired outcomes for a particular boundary partner (each boundary partner will have their own set of progress markers). For PRISE, the research consortium developed three sets of progress markers for each research activity – those that you would ‘expect to see’

Table 1 Description of outcome mapping implementation across PRISE and AcT

	PRISE consortium	AcT (I and II) programme
Programme description	Research-for-policy programme operating in eight different countries through seven workstreams/projects, led by ODI in London	Governance/accountability programme operating in Tanzania, implemented through a grant-making mechanism to approximately 20 CSOs
Decision to use OM	Use of OM was decided at the programme proposal stage, with the approach designed by ODI and based loosely on the ROMA model for policy influencing. The intention was for each PRISE 'project/country lead' to use OM, which then feeds into the larger picture of stakeholder and policy influencing	AcT I began to use OM in 2012 (a few years after programme inception). Although it had always been the intention since the proposal stage, the design of the approach took time to develop along with the theory of change, especially on a way forward that would still allow for logframe-based donor reporting from KPMG to FCDO
Key aim	To capture and understand how key stakeholder groups are responding to research and, consequently, to adjust stakeholder engagement strategies and activities based on the evidence	To build up a detailed and systematic body of evidence that would allow the programme to understand how change happens at different levels
Use of progress markers	Programme defined 'expect to see', 'like to see' and 'love to see' progress markers/indicators for five key stakeholder groups (boundary partners) (OMLC, n.d., c).	Progress markers were primarily used by programme partners for MEL of their individual programmes; collated by the AcT management team into a format for logframe donor reporting. The progress markers were loosely defined and specific to each partner
Data collection method	Observations on progress markers by country teams are entered into a Google online form on the programme's Knowledge Management website	Outcome journals held by AcT partners/grantees inform mini-case studies, success stories and 'most significant changes' stories
Data collection schedule	This was done on an ongoing basis but, in practice, data collection for OM often increased in the time prior to reflection sessions and the reporting deadline	Data collection is ongoing, but narrative reports from partners are shared with the AcT secretariat every six months. Evidence is coded and entered into the bespoke OM database (OMLC, 2012)
Approach to reflection	In-country teams reflected on their observations every six months and produced short reports and action plans based on this. Programme-level reflection took place at annual meetings	Schedules for individual (at partner/grantee level) and collective (all of AcT) reflection changed over time, but there were regular learning events
Personnel involved	MEL Focal Points were assigned in all countries where research took place, as a part-time role. In addition, there was an ODI-based MEL manager and OM consultant	Partner (grantee) organisations had their own arrangements for OM reporting. In addition, the AcT secretariat had MEL staff for data aggregation. Note that OM was not made a requirement for all partners, but specific support was offered for those who took it on – and all but one did so
Contractual relationships	IDRC, as the programme donor, holds contractual relationships with in-country partners, but ODI has overall management and research leadership, including research uptake and decision-making on the basis of OM data	KPMG holds the overall programme responsibility for AcT. In addition to selecting and funding grantee organisations, this lead holds responsibility for capacity-building of partners, decision-making and learning

(basic changes through initial engagement), 'like to see' (changes that show active engagement) and 'love to see' (transformative changes) (see Box 1). Similarly, the AcT programme partners developed highly contextualised progress markers that empowered community members and supported organisations to capture learning and progress in a way that they could easily recognise and understand. Having agreed-upon progress markers allows for change-tracking on various levels continuously; for example, in cities, in smaller communities, regionally and locally. To be able to capture changes, a common language is essential: the MEL Focal Point, the boundary partner and the community member or volunteer must all understand these progress markers to be able to gather the relevant data and evidence.

OM went beyond monitoring to inform adaptation throughout implementation. Representatives from PRISE and AcT II both noted that OM contributed to the programmes' understanding of how they were contributing to desired outcomes, thereby improving their effectiveness and allowing for changes so as to stay on track. Early on in project design and implementation, AcT staff conversations with partners centred around the link between strategic thinking, improved implementation and tracking the desired changes. OM was helpful in creating an environment with various levels and types of planning processes, while supporting more innovative lines of thinking. These processes helped tell a different story about the kinds of results that partners were achieving to that which a logframe, results-based measurement would. This nuanced understanding of how change occurs provided a rigorous evidence base to justify proposed changes and document the impact of those changes on the programmes' contribution to overarching desired results.

We have discussed the ways in which OM can be used to increase adaptation and learning throughout the programme cycle. This result was evidenced by both AcT and PRISE staff and partners coming together frequently to unpack the findings and discuss changes that needed to happen in the light of these findings. For PRISE, this took place partially through a community of practice of MEL Focal Points, which would meet with some regularity. With AcT, because the work was focused in one country, staff worked with partners to learn and adapt the application of OM tools. AcT staff indicated that they 'felt the pain that our partners were feeling whilst learning how to use this process'.

Box 1 PRISE technical reports

PRISE's OM evidence fed into six-monthly technical reports as well as the programme logframe. In these reports, the team included examples of observations (i.e. behaviours of boundary partners) and inserted diagrams of trends across countries, stakeholder groups and time. The logframe indicators and milestones were aligned with the OM system, with indicators such as 'number of "love to see" observations by X stakeholder group' or 'number of "like to see" observations in region Y'. As it was hard to estimate the number of observations that would emerge in a given timeframe, the MEL team set the milestones too low and far exceeded them, with over 400 observations of stakeholders responding to the PRISE research by the end of the programme.

Did PRISE or AcT observe other effects in their use of outcome mapping?

Some of the benefits of using OM that both AcT and PRISE cited included the ability to track more granular changes towards larger impact and the ability to course correct along the way, whether through tracking new pathways or moving away from implementing pieces of work. This is an important aspect of MEL4AM, as it provides richer, and more timely, evidence for decision-making. Both programmes indicated that the process allowed partners to share the results-tracking with their communities and volunteers. A case could be made to expect programmes to become more sustainable and more fully owned by these communities in the long run given this increased involvement and sense of partnership and ownership. In addition, having members of the community take ownership of the process and be able to modify it to the context enabled OM to be an adaptable tool itself. Lastly, the use of OM in both programmes also led to capacity-building of partners and beyond, with AcT II reporting on a set of capacity-building indicators based on partners' use of OM.

> AcT II positioned AM as 'development entrepreneurism'. For higher risk initiatives, AcT II used evidence from OM to assess whether these riskier initiatives were working and how.

What were some of the enabling factors in the programmes' use of outcome mapping for learning?

For PRISE and AcT, the main enabling factors in their use of OM as a tool for learning and potential adaptation were:

- OM became more than just a MEL tool: it became a way of working and part of the overall programme strategy. For AcT, this involved commitment to OM at every level of the organisation, including a mandate from senior leadership. One respondent noted that this commitment from leadership 'helped embed [OM] within whole teams, putting resources into training, hiring the right people, etc. … it was quite a close-knit team – all together in the same office, so use of OM in decision-making maybe came more naturally'. In both programmes, this translated into understanding OM as an approach to measure, track and act upon complex change mechanisms.
- OM was not necessarily applied in the same way everywhere. In AcT, grantees were allowed to make the tool their own, and it was not a requirement for funding. Linked to this, the use of OM itself was adapted over time, with teams trying to better understand the approach and its nuances at the same time as applying it. This was critical to maintaining commitment to the OM approach, as grantees could adapt the tools to respond to their own information needs, while also providing information upwards to AcT programme managers.
- Enthusiasm and commitment within the programme for OM outcomes was important – from strong senior leadership buy-in for AcT to having partner organisations with OM Focal Points on board from the beginning in PRISE.

Although we have noted a number of similarities in the factors that allowed both PRISE and AcT to successfully make use of OM – probably owing to their similar 'generic' list of stakeholders (civil society, local and central government, thought leaders) and the fact that, despite different models and aims, both programmes are ultimately trying to influence the behaviour of those stakeholders – this does not mean that their overall experience with OM was the same. The AcT programme operates in one country with a narrower sectoral focus in its second phase, which has enabled OM to become more deeply embedded into ways of working, from central management down to the grantee organisations. PRISE, by contrast, covered several countries in different regions, and implemented OM as a way to track research uptake across various fields, but with less control over how that data was then used in decision-making by the various partners. Second, in practice, the implementation of OM in both programmes differed. PRISE used more of a form-based, continuous data entry approach, whereas AcT was often able to dig deeper through its case study/story-telling approach.

> [AcT partners] came up with adaptations around using the exercise books. One example of how they made the approach their own was to write down a progress marker at the top of each page of the exercise book, and then having people write what they thought had occurred with regards to this. The staff member of the organisation would then go to the file and flick through the journal to see what was going on. Other partners chose to keep the whole process oral, so OM was not in any way assuming literacy.

In both programmes, though, the teams had a process for looking at the progress markers and reflecting on the overall picture of change. PRISE's main interest was in how research users were engaged in the research process (and, ultimately, how the research was being used by different actors), as its production had to be demand-led. OM allowed ODI and country partners to unpack this and then 'zoom in or out' to specific projects to gain a better understanding of progress, and hence where things might need to be changed. AcT had a commitment to learning, especially in response to complex behaviour change among its Tanzanian stakeholders. This meant tracking change related to political economy, intervention effectiveness and capacity-strengthening within the grantees/CSOs. As these factors do not fit neatly into logframe and indicator-driven MEL frameworks, OM allowed AcT to collect richer data that could speak to shifts in context and capacity, and therefore inform decision-making more rapidly. For a discussion of how to assess whether OM is the right fit for a programme, see Box 2.

Putting learning into action

The more a team understands *how* they are contributing to desired outcomes, the better they will be at making changes to their programme that maximise their chances of contributing to those outcomes. As noted, both PRISE and AcT viewed OM as a tool for understanding *how change happens*. As such, OM does not just monitor, it also informs the implementation strategy as it goes along, and both programmes did so at different levels.

For PRISE, the OM process started by setting progress markers – which are behaviours of the targeted stakeholders (boundary partners, in OM language), categorised into 'expect to see'/'like to see'/'love to see'. By monitoring actual behaviour and results in terms of influencing and research uptake, the team would see whether these agreed-upon markers were being achieved, and whether they needed to be modified. As the programme embarked on OM use, they had access to staff and consultants who were knowledgeable and experienced in the process and its specifics. PRISE utilised the results and learning coming out of the OM processes for internal learning as well as communication materials. For example, PRISE published a working paper highlighting what had been learnt from the application of OM in a multi-stakeholder research programme, in addition to multiple articles, blog posts and guidance documents. Staff interviewed also indicated that they participated in conferences on the topic, focusing on sharing experience of using the method with relevant audiences.

PRISE also created a network of MEL Focal Points across its activities that served as a community of practice and acted as a space to share learning and adaptations being made within the various country-level processes. The processes devised included a biannual 'sense-making' or reflection session that allowed

Box 2 How do I know if outcome mapping is the right fit for my programme?

When considering whether to apply OM to your programme as a MEL4AM approach, keep in mind the following:

1. OM works best when it is embedded throughout the organisation, rather than tasked to an MEL unit or individual. For example, throughout the AcT programme, there has been an organisational and programme-wide commitment to OM, with resources dedicated to hiring the right staff to lead OM, extensive training for grantees and programme officers, and a high level of investment in knowledge-sharing.
2. OM can be viewed as a 'way of working' rather than a strict set of tools. As an overall approach, OM works best for programmes or organisations that seek to understand how they are contributing to desired changes, and the approach is flexible enough to capture several contributing factors to a complex change process.
3. OM does not fit neatly into a logframe-driven MEL system, as it mostly operates in the 'in-between' of results along a results chain. For organisations with a heavy emphasis on indicators and logframe-style MEL systems, OM can require a significant shift in thinking and culture, and should be resourced appropriately to support this shift. Although both PRISE and AcT used a logframe alongside their OM approaches – mostly to facilitate donor reporting – teams sometimes found it hard to integrate the two ways of working. There was concern around not losing the richness of OM data to the more quantitative and outputs-focused indicators in a logframe.

the MEL Focal Points to look in depth at the evidence collected, while also taking time to make changes and adjustments to their approach. The structure of PRISE necessarily meant that there was limited oversight of the use of OM data for decision-making since ODI did not hold contractual relationships with partners. Given that PRISE operated across several countries, there was variation in the application of OM and the use of data to inform decision-making. In particular, when one partner was overseeing a workstream in a country in which they were not present, the quality of stakeholder engagement was felt to be lower in the country with no direct presence – and as such, there was less rich OM data.

AcT embarked on a process that brought the programme staff as well as the grantees/partners together to learn about and plan for applying their OM methodology. The processes resulted in several iterations of the guidance and continuous updates of the capacity-building modules within the programme. Partners applying and using OM enjoyed the flexibility of modifying the process as they saw fit in the field. AcT did not have such clearly defined and preset progress markers, but the grantee partners worked together with the stakeholders to define and update them on a regular basis to take into account learning from application and changes in context (Box 3). AcT staff were clear that these adaptations and changes were led by the partners and stakeholders as they were closer to the application and had the agility to respond accordingly. During AcT II, the process was advanced, and OM was used for portfolio-level decision-making and to highlight gaps and opportunities within partner projects. This process allows the programme to put emphasis on the areas that are most likely to lead to the desired change and support the programme actors in managing and mitigating risk within their portfolio.

Box 3 Emergent learning for donors and partners implementing outcome mapping

1. Governance and learning culture are very important. Due to the status of OM as 'more than just a MEL tool', the approach needs to be deeply integrated and embedded into the programmes, with a high level of commitment (and dedication of resources) to learning. According to a respondent from AcT II, 'to get the most value you need to get an institutional commitment and you can't take it lightly'.
2. Flexibility of approach is key. The use of OM as a tool for meaningful learning and adaptation seemed to rely on a level of flexibility to adapt the tool and methods to variations in capacity, programme context and available resources. The use of OM does not need to be overly strict and can be changed over time.
3. OM is often viewed as resource- and time-intensive. Teams may feel that OM is very 'heavy'; however, experience from both programmes shows that it is not necessarily the OM approach that is intensive or heavy, but rather the processes that it supports (influencing, behaviour change, engagement, learning), which are complex and therefore require significant resources.
4. In terms of embedding OM as a way of working in the programme, it might be worth focusing on some early quick wins related to the use of evidence generated by OM to inform decision-making. Quick action will contribute to increased buy-in for the approach and get staff and partners on board, with a show of commitment for learning and ongoing adaptation.

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