Evaluating Adaptation: Common Challenges Identified Across Three Studies Commissioned by the AF-TERG

Technical Evaluation Reference Group
ADAPTATION FUND

Evaluating Adaptation: Common Challenges Identified Across Three Studies Commissioned by the AF-TERG

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The Adaptation Fund was established through decisions by the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol to finance concrete adaptation projects and programs in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. At the Katowice Climate Conference in December 2018, the Parties to the Paris Agreement decided that the Adaptation Fund shall also serve the Paris Agreement. The Fund supports country-driven projects and programmes, innovation and global learning for effective adaptation. All of the Fund's activities are designed to build national and local adaptive capacities while reaching and engaging the most vulnerable groups, and to integrate gender consideration to provide equal opportunity to access and benefit from the Fund's resources. They are also aimed at enhancing synergies with other sources of climate finance, while creating models that can be replicated or scaled up. www.adaptation-fund.org

The Technical Evaluation Reference Group of the Adaptation Fund (AF-TERG) is an independent evaluation advisory group accountable to the Adaptation Fund Board, established in 2018 to ensure the independent implementation of the Fund's evaluation framework. The AF-TERG, which is headed by a chair, provides an evaluative advisory role through performing evaluative, advisory and oversight functions. The group is comprised of independent experts in evaluation, called the AF-TERG members. A small secretariat provides support for the implementation of evaluative and advisory activities as part of the work programme.

While independent of the operations of the Adaptation Fund, the aim of the AF-TERG is to add value to the Fund's work through independent monitoring, evaluation and learning. www.adaptation-fund.org/about/evaluation/

This report was presented as information document by the acting Chair at the 26.b meeting of the Ethics and Finance Committee.

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Introduction

The Technical Evaluation Reference Group of the Adaptation Fund (AF-TERG) was established in 2019 to provide the Fund with evaluation advisory support and to ensure independent oversight of the implementation of the Fund's evaluation framework. In its first year of operation the AF-TERG commissioned three studies that explored discrete aspects of Adaptation Fund evaluation practice, and of the evaluation of climate change adaption more broadly:

STUDY	PURPOSE
Adaptation Fund Evaluability Assessment	To explore the extent to which the Fund's projects have in place structures, processes and resources capable of supporting credible and useful monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). In doing so, the assessment also aimed to identify gaps, opportunities and good practice for MEL across the Fund's portfolio.
Approaches to Ex Post Evaluation of Climate Change Adaptation	To identify gaps, opportunities and good practices for ex post evaluation across international development cooperation, particularly within sectors financed by the Adaptation Fund.
Innovative Climate Change Adaptation Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning	To identify the latest thinking and best practice on innovation and complexity, and what this has to offer the field of MEL: what are the implications for more innovative MEL of climate change adaptation, and what does this mean for the Adaptation Fund?

While these studies were quite distinct, some common challenges faced by the Adaptation Fund and adaptation evaluation practitioners were identified. The following briefing summarizes common problems that were apparent across all three studies, outlining the implications these challenges have for both Adaptation Fund stakeholders, and for the broader constituency of individuals and groups involved in the management and delivery of adaptation-focused monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). This report was presented as information document by the acting Chair at the 26.b meeting of the Ethics and Finance Committee on October 7, 2020.

Challenge 1:
Developing new MEL approaches for new MEL problems

Climate change adaptation is characterised by complex and dynamic interactions across social, economic and environmental domains.

Climate change and climate change adaptation are 'super wicked' problems that are characterised by complex and dynamic interactions across social, economic and environmental domains. However, there is an emerging consensus amongst MEL practitioners that MEL approaches are falling behind and are not adequately meeting the demands that climate change and adaptation have placed on evaluation. Initial attempts to address the complexity of evaluating adaptation have been grounded in new concepts such as transformational change and resilience building. But examples of new approaches such as these are limited, and the development and uptake of adaptation-focused MEL tools and concepts has been slow. For example, no clear methodologies yet exist for undertaking ex post evaluation of adaptation projects, despite the fact that – in many if not most cases – the anticipated impact of adaptation projects (e.g. stronger ecosystems, increased resilience, reduced vulnerability) will not be verifiable until several years after project implementation.

While the current lack of tools and approaches represents a challenge and limitation for the Adaptation Fund and MEL practitioners, this comparative 'blank slate' also presents an opportunity. If adaptation is to be measured effectively, the current gaps need to be filled, and – building on the practical experience gathered over the last decade – the Adaptation Fund is well-placed to lead and influence the development of not just new, adaptation-focused MEL tools, but entirely new MEL approaches that go beyond 'linear' evaluation and are better suited to the complexity of climate change.

Challenge 2:
Building MEL approaches that can work across contexts and systems

There are many complexities to deal with during the evaluation of adaptation-focused interventions, but one of the most critical dimensions is understanding and measuring the relationship between human and natural systems. MEL approaches tend to focus more effort on measuring human systems (including social and economic results), although most Adaptation Fund projects have also adopted MEL approaches that measure natural systems. However, there are significant gaps in measuring the interaction between human and natural systems: a MEL strategy may go as far as gathering data on human outcomes and natural / ecosystem outcomes, but there are few examples of projects that then seek to gather and understand data around the influences and dependencies between the two systems.

Again, the challenging complexities here also offer an opportunity for the Adaptation Fund and adaptation-focused MEL practitioners. As a first step, MEL approaches need to be based on the principle that the separate measurement of human and natural systems is not sufficient for a rounded understanding of adaptation processes and outcomes: MEL approaches need to acknowledge – and build in the measurement of – system interaction from the beginning. This could be achieved through (for example) comprehensive theories of change, but – as with climate change evaluation more broadly – the current absence of ready-made tools means that there is considerable scope for innovation and developing entirely new MEL approaches for the measurement of human-natural system interaction.

Challenge 3: Strengthening MEL data management and use

Long-term, post-project data management processes and ex-post evaluation resource requirements should be considered and specified at the project design stage.

Adaptation and climate change interventions often deal with significant volumes of valuable data, with – for example – many Adaptation Fund projects explicitly focused on building sub-national and national infrastructures, institutions and capacities for the generation and management of climatic data. However, there is often a disconnect between data gathered or generated through a project's 'core' activity and the same project's MEL strategy: potentially valuable project-generated data is not taken into account by the MEL activity, simply because that data hasn't been classified or recognised as MEL-relevant data. This can happen where the MEL effort is conceived of and operates as a standalone exercise, and/or is perceived of as solely an accountability requirement, rather than an activity that can also support project learning and adaptive management. Similarly, there can often be a lack of recognition or consideration of the potential value to MEL of project-generated data after project completion. Even where an intervention (for example) establishes permanent structures for the ongoing, long-term generation and management of national climatic data, the link between those structures and the measurement of the same project's long-term impact is sometimes missed.

Such gaps and missed opportunities can be addressed by ensuring that an intervention's MEL strategy is well-embedded within – and has formal links with – a project's data-focused 'core' activities. This will likely necessitate the development of MEL strategy during project and activity-level design rather than (as can sometimes be the case) designing MEL strategy after project approval and during the project's inception phase. The early, design-stage consideration of MEL should also be used to strengthen the foundations for any possible ex-post evaluation: long-term, post-project data management processes should be considered and even specified, as should any resource requirements for ex-post evaluation.

Challenge 4:
Ensuring the genuine, substantive participation of all interest groups with MEL processes

Substantive participation is likely to yield valuable data and learning that may not have been identified through a top-down approach to MEL.

By definition, adaptation interventions invariably aim to improve the ability of groups – institutions, communities, individuals – to adapt to climate change. For an adaptation intervention to be effective, it follows that those interest groups should be intimately involved in the design and delivery of the intervention. Equally, there's an increasing recognition that an intervention's approach to MEL – and the data that MEL generates – can only be credible if it is based on the consent and participation of the people and institutions that the intervention aims to support. The design and delivery of adaptation interventions are often based on the substantive participation – and increasingly the direction – of the intended 'beneficiaries'. However, when it comes to MEL there is still a prevalence of top-down approaches, where beneficiaries are passive recipients rather than active participants: adaptation evaluation is something that happens to interest groups, rather than something that they are part of and that they can use.

There are many well-established means through which participation in MEL can be strengthened although – again – these approaches invariably benefit from the consideration and integration of MEL strategy in the early (pre-approval) design stages of an intervention.

Aside from helping to build ownership of an intervention and empowering beneficiaries to influence or even dictate the design of MEL approaches, substantive participation is likely to yield valuable data and learning that may not have been identified through a top-down approach to MEL. Not all relevant climate information is quantitative and technical in nature or can be extracted from equipment and meteorological stations. Indigenous knowledge and local understanding of patterns in natural systems, as well as traditional coping and management strategies, are also key inputs and strategies for designing and assessing adaptation options, and for understanding the results of interventions. The depth and quality of adaptation MEL is likely to be considerably strengthened through the full engagement of the groups that have the closest interest in – and experience of – an intervention's 'target' area.

Challenge 5:
Moving beyond accountability and strengthening MEL's support for adaptive management and learning

MEL is often still viewed (and applied) exclusively as a process for supporting accountability: did an intervention achieve the targets and results that it set out to achieve? Were resources allocated according to the original funding agreement? Accountability will and should continue to be a central objective for any MEL approach, but the role and value of MEL's learning dimension remains under-developed – even unrecognised – in many projects. This is particularly ironic within the adaptation sector, where institutions that promote climate change adaptive programming are often failing to be adaptive in their own designs, actions and behaviours.

One of the unique features of adaptation-focused MEL is the need to monitor performance in the face of climatic shocks and stresses. This dynamic, unpredictable context means that adaptation MEL needs to be designed so that interventions can learn from climatic shocks and stresses as they occur, then can adapt to these shocks and stresses in as close to real time as possible. 'Standard' MEL tools are unlikely to be helpful here, rather an intervention's whole MEL system needs to be designed from the outset to be capable of generating learning and supporting adaptive management on a continuous basis. Such an approach places new demands on the institutions that are leading adaptation initiatives, but also implies that donors and investors that are financing adaptation projects need to ensure that adaptation projects are given the flexibility to use MEL resources for accountability and learning.

Conclusions

The five challenges presented here are commonly faced when developing and implementing monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches within any sector, not just adaptation: these are recurring problems and difficulties that any MEL practitioner will be familiar with. However, these MEL challenges are particularly problematic for adaptation interventions. The pressures of climate change and adaptation are urgent and accelerating, yet there's also an increasing recognition that depending on current and 'legacy' approaches to MEL will not be sufficient to generate data and learning quickly enough, nor in a way that can support the effective adaptative management of interventions.

Adaptation interventions offer a significant opportunity to address these five persistent challenges in a comprehensive way.

But adaptation interventions also offer a significant opportunity to address these persistent challenges in a comprehensive way. Many adaptation projects are unusually 'data rich', focused on – for example – the generation of new climatic data and the building of long-term monitoring infrastructure; adaptation projects also frequently work with groups and beneficiaries that invariably have deep insights into – for example – the functioning of ecosystems and the interdependencies between human populations and natural environments. To ensure that all this data and experience can be as valuable and influential as possible, MEL needs to become an integral part of adaptation project design, developed in parallel with – and indeed as part of – a project's 'core' operations, rather than as an 'add on' activity. Reconceiving MEL for adaptation also requires longer-term thinking: the lengthy time horizons against which many adaptation results will need to be measured demands planning and resources (whether for ex post evaluations or other long-term MEL processes) that goes well beyond a project's nominal implementation period.

If the current gaps in adaptation MEL are to be addressed and new concepts and approaches are to be developed, the effort will require the substantive involvement of MEL practitioners, the institutions that are designing and implementing adaptation projects, the groups and 'beneficiaries' that projects are working with and – crucially – the funders and investors that are financing adaptation interventions.

ANNEX:
Background to this publication

The Adaptation Fund Board (the Board) endorsed an Evaluation Framework for the Fund at its thirteenth meeting (March 2011 - Decision B.13/20.a). This framework was developed in accordance with international standards in evaluation; it includes evaluation principles and criteria and two overarching objectives. The final version of the Evaluation Framework[1] was amended as per decision B.15/23 including the insertion of the evaluation function entrusted to the GEF IEO for an interim period of three years. On March 11, 2014, the Director of the GEF IEO withdrew the GEF IEO as the interim evaluation function of the Fund.

Having considered the comments and recommendation of the EFC, the Board decided at its thirty-first meeting in March 2018:

a) *To approve the terms of reference of the Technical Evaluation Reference Group of the Adaptation Fund (AF-TERG) as contained in Annex III to the report of the Board (AFB/B.31/8);* [2]

b) *To approve the amendment to the terms of reference of the Ethics and Finance Committee (EFC) as contained in Annex IV to the report of the Board (AFB/B.31/8);*

   […]

(Decision B.31/25)

On June 4, 2020, the Board approved, through inter-sessional decision B.35.a-35.b/29, the strategy and work programme of the AF-TERG contained in Annex 1 of the document AFB/EFC.26.a-26.b/3[3] The AF-TERG strategy and work programme takes a longer-term planning perspective covering FY21 to FY23 for the work items, and FY21 to FY22 budget-wise.

As part of the development process of the strategy and work programme, the AF-TERG commissioned the following three studies related to evaluation practice, which informed the strategy and work programme;

- Evaluability Assessment: The study explored the extent to which the Fund's projects have in place structures, processes and resources capable of supporting credible and useful monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). In doing so, the assessment also aimed to identify gaps, opportunities and good practice for MEL across the Fund's portfolio;

- Approaches to Ex Post Evaluation of Climate Change Adaptation: The study aimed to identify gaps, opportunities and good practices for ex post evaluation across international development cooperation, particularly within sectors financed by the Adaptation Fund;

- Innovative Climate Change Adaptation Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: The study aimed to identify the latest thinking and best practice on innovation and complexity, and what this has to offer the field of MEL: what are the implications for more innovative MEL of climate change adaptation, and what does this mean for the Adaptation Fund?

The three studies resulted in deliberative working papers which were not – in line with the Fund's Open Information Policy (Annex VII of document AFB/B.21/8/Rev.1) – published, given their nature and their main purpose to inform the development of the strategy and work programme. In case of the evaluability assessment and the ex-post study the material is foundational and will feed into future work, which will at that point be published.

1. Available at: https://www.adaptation-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Evaluation_framework.pdf
2. Available at: https://www.adaptation-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AFB.B.31-final-report.pdf
3. Available at: https://www.adaptation-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AFB.EFC_.26a-26b.3-AF-TERG-Strategy-and-Work-Programme_final_4May2020.pdf