



# **Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning Framework for the Africa Centre for Evidence**

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## 1. Introduction

The Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) aims to contribute to the reduction of poverty and inequality across the region by improving the use of rigorous evidence in decision- and policy-making processes. The centre's transdisciplinary work is structured around four inter-dependent portfolios, namely i) a greater understanding the art and science of using evidence, ii) building strong evidence capacities, iii) supporting meaningful evidence communities, and iv) producing rigorous and relevant evidence syntheses.

Driven by its commitment to transparent and reflective practices and reporting, methodological rigour, and innovative thinking, as identified in the 2019-2023 strategy, and in consolidating its reporting on results across different grants and projects, the Centre is now seeking to enhance its accountability and learning functions. The Centre is seeking to develop a comprehensive framework for monitoring the implementation and results across these four work portfolios, whilst learning for continuous reflection and improvement. In addition to organisation-specific monitoring and evaluation (M&E), a secondary aim of an organisation-wide Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework for ACE is the opportunity to share learnings and reflections on the use of rigorous evidence in decision- and policy-making processes within ACE and with the wider evidence community and beyond – through academic and practice-oriented publications. In doing so, ACE advances key debates around evidence-use on the African continent and globally.

## 2. Aims and requirements

This framework was developed in response to ACE's desire for i) improved accountability on what ACE does and what it achieves, ii) improved learning, internally and with key partners, from the work ACE is engaged in, and iii) a stronger foundation for ACE to be more adaptive and agile in complex and dynamic socio-economic and political contexts and therefore ensure that the organisation remains as relevant and effective as possible.

More specifically this means that the framework boosts and fosters ACE's monitoring and evaluative work in these areas as follows:

### **i) Improved accountability at implementation and results levels**

The framework outlines the tools, mechanisms, and structures proposed for improved continuous collection of data on ACE's activities and outputs, as well as in relation to the effects this work has in the domains that ACE is working to influence the improvement of lives, facilitate democratic processes, and enable

good governance. In particular, ACE wants to shift from an activity- and output-based reporting to more results-focussed, reflective, and evaluative reporting.

**ii) Improved learning, internally and with partners**

This framework lays the foundation for greater emphasis on learning and reflection, both internally within and between individual portfolios at ACE, and externally with ACE's key partners and the evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) community in Africa and globally.

**iii) Stronger foundation for ACE to be more adaptive and agile**

The framework responds to the need for ACE to remain influential and pertinent in upholding and strengthening principles of EIDM in very dynamic and complex socio-economic and political decision-making contexts across the African context. This need is emphasised not least through the rapid changes brought about through Covid-19 related developments. Regular review and reflection on the assumptions ACE makes about the contexts in which it operates, the partners the Centre collaborates with, and the opportunities or restraints these bring for the effectiveness of its work will facilitate the adaptation of ACE's strategy or work where needed.

In its application then, the framework serves two specific purposes: in the first instance, it provides detail on how ACE, as an organisation and across its portfolios, can measure and reflect on its work and ensuing results. Secondly, it guides the development of learning questions and monitoring areas for individual portfolios and projects, which in turn will guide the development of specific indicators. Lists of relevant learning questions are included which will assist ACE in the development of M&E plans for current and future projects.

### **3. Methodology**

This framework was developed through a range of consultations and workshop-like engagements during the period May to October 2020. Given movement restrictions related to Covid-19 and its consequent lockdowns, all engagements took place virtually. Brainstorming and the consolidation of ideas took place using Mural. Considering that team members were faced with competing priorities in their daily routines, and appreciating that individuals' workloads were already putting a strain on their work-life balance, all effort was made to engage team members in as asynchronous a manner as possible.

This framework built on strategic planning and restructuring processes that ACE undertook in 2019. It involved, at various stages and to varying degrees, inputs from ACE staff and members of the ACE advisory group. The process was also informed by periodic stepping-back and reflecting on both the process itself and

the ultimate purpose and anticipated use of the framework. This periodic process reflection allowed the team to integrate emerging learnings into both the process and the framework itself.

The framework builds on work by experts in the fields of M&E practice, evaluation, public management, and evidence-informed decision-making. Most notably, it was designed on guidance tools provided by Anne Markiewicz and Ian Patrick, Ingie Hovland, Tiina Pasanen and Louise Shaxson, Patricia Rogers, and others. In terms of debates around decolonising the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) practice, the framework took inspiration from authors and practitioners such as Bagele Chilisa and Michael Gaotlhobogwe.

#### 4. Principles and values

ACE is committed to upholding a set of strong values, underpinning what ACE does and how it operates. This is relevant to how the team conceives of and reflects on new ideas, how the team plans individual projects and programmes, how these are then implemented by the team, and how ACE facilitates and incorporates learnings from these within the Centre's teams and with their partners in the wider EIDM community (see [Five Year Strategic Plan 2019-2023](#)).

Drawing from the existing set of ACE values and incorporating a set of MEL specific considerations, the following principles and values underpin this framework:

- Commitment to building ownership and relationships of trust
- Dedication to sharing expertise, capacity, and opportunity
- Dedication to learning from and with others
- MEL focus on implementation *and* results
- MEL focus on reflection and learning
- MEL focus on the need for adapting to dynamic contexts with varying degrees of certainty

In addition to these principles and values, the MEL framework calls for explicit consideration of gender in project planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation and learning. For example, by developing disaggregated indicator sets and where possible separate targets, but also by explicitly considering the gender responsiveness of each project or intervention in its planning and learning phases.

## 5. Strategic objectives of ACE

In contributing to reducing poverty and inequality through an increase in the use of research evidence, ACE works towards a spectrum of objectives. From raised awareness of evidence-informed decision-making and enhanced capability to critically analyse and consider the evidence base in decision-making, to stronger systems for evidence-use in decision-making processes and overall more conducive environments for evidence-use. Ultimately, ACE partners with national and sub-national policy entities to support decisions informed by the most comprehensive and relevant available bodies of evidence. In turn, this increased support for evidence-informed decisions will contribute to improving lives, facilitating democratic processes, and enabling good governance.

## 6. ACE MEL Model

The ACE MEL Model (Figure 1) responds to the need for improved accountability, enhanced learning, more systematic use of ACE's own data, and more adaptive and agile management. This section describes the Model and its individual components and concludes by summarising how it can be used. Section 9 of this document will then elaborate on how we operationalise the framework and what the practical tasks emanating from it are.

### Context

ACE operates in complex socio-economic and political contexts. These contexts while sharing some key aspects ultimately display significant differences. Decision-making processes differ significantly from one country to the next, and often from one sub-national structure or department to the next; the availability and quality of bodies of evidence differ significantly from one sector to the next; and skills levels for the generation and use of rigorous evidence differ significantly from one sector to the next, and indeed are often dependent on key individuals as champions of evidence production and/or use.

Societies are increasingly complex. So are the potential solutions to key challenges in society and the evidence-production and -use mechanisms informing these potential solutions. In addition, not only are political systems and decision-making processes different from one country to the next and from one sector to the next, but they are also always complex systems. This complexity stems not least because decisions around key development challenges are, first and foremost, political decisions based on compromises and at best take the available evidence base as only one factor in their decision-making processes.

ACE works through partners and indeed is very intentional about the partnerships it builds and engages in, and the values underpinning these. These partnerships are also complex on a range of levels. Different partners' ideas, ideologies and priorities could be in conflict with each other.

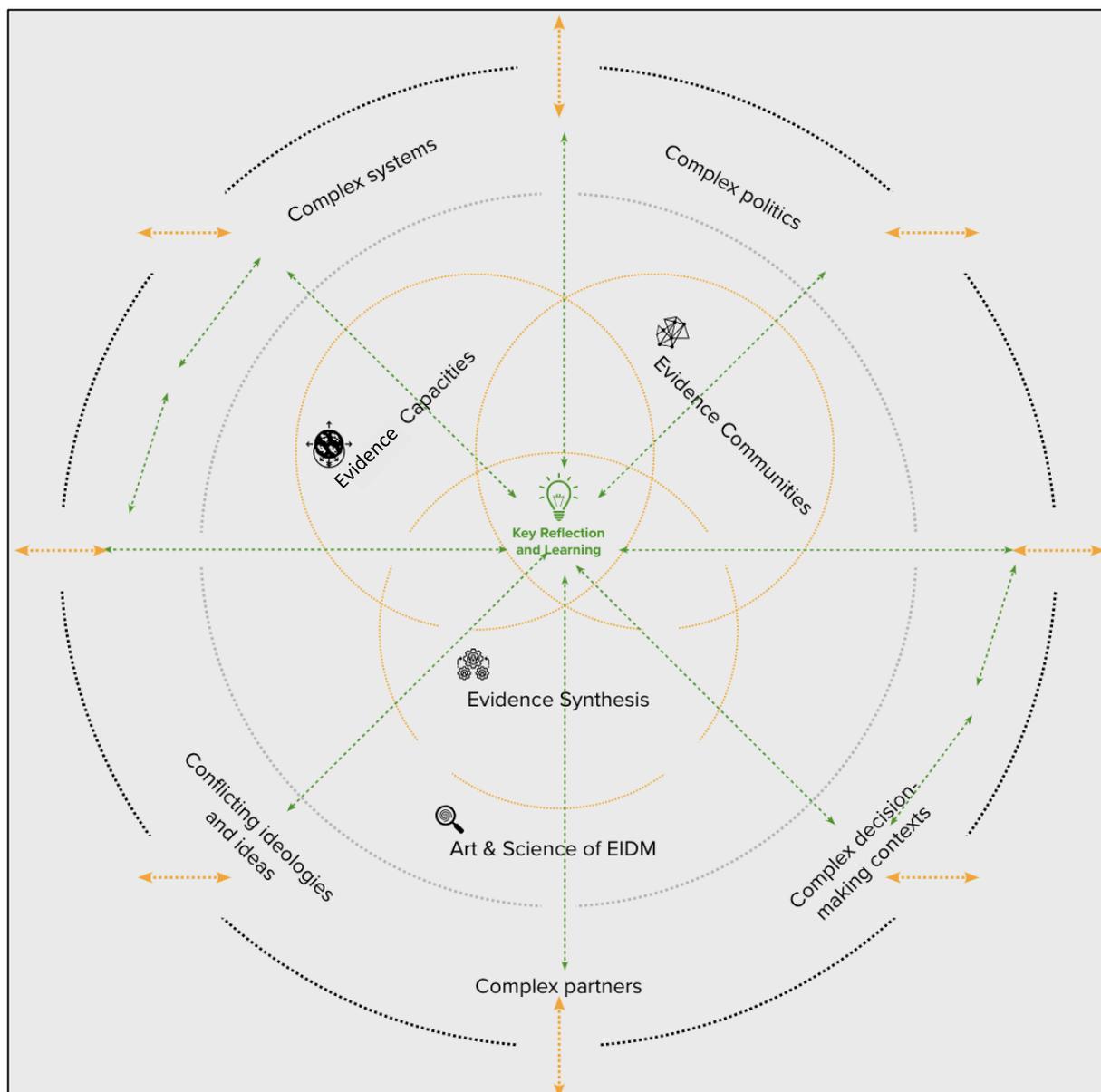


Figure 1: ACE MEL model

ACE is also cognisant of the fact that the individual components of these complex systems in their own right are in constant flux. Political situations and decision-making processes change, partnerships are dynamic, socio-economic environments are ever-changing. Changes brought about by Covid-19 during the course of 2020 – when this framework was under development – have emphasised the complexities in both the components that make up societies, and the political decision-making processes in political systems.

### Where ACE work happens

It is in this context that ACE works to actively shape how decisions are being taken, i.e., where ACE works to create environments in which decisions are informed by transparent and systematic engagement with the most comprehensive and relevant available bodies of evidence. Following its 2019 strategic planning process, ACE has structured itself in four portfolios of work. These four portfolios are evidence capacities, evidence communities, evidence synthesis, and the cross-cutting art and science of evidence-use. The latter portfolio is cross-cutting in that it brings together the learnings from ACE's work to improve ACE's own practice and share learnings with the wider EIDM community. Individual portfolio's work interact with, and impact, the complex systems within which ACE operates across the region.

### Key reflection and learning

The ACE MEL model is centred around its key learning and reflection purposes. Learning takes place within the individual portfolios of work and, importantly, when portfolio teams engage meaningfully with each other's work. When teams within or from different portfolios engage with each other in the planning, implementation, and reflection on individual projects, they create a reflection and learning hub which brings together perspectives from across the organisation. This learning hub is displayed in Figure 2 below.

The sense-making and learning taking place in this hub, as well as in the portfolio, is essentially guided by three aspects. First, reviewing the available data (including external data allowing for triangulation). Second, reflecting on this data and making sense of it through open and transparent conversations. And finally, deciding on responses.

Notably, this engagement across the portfolios ought to ask critical questions that go beyond the sharing of activities and outputs. The engagement needs to facilitate critical interrogation of questions of purpose, progress or lack thereof and the underlying reasons, and the quality of outputs and results. At the same time, this learning needs to "do" something; it needs to inform a response. This "doing" could be to directly inform what ACE does and/or how it does it where/how this should be adapted. It could also be learning on a broader scale around the art and science of evidence-use which is then shared with the broader EIDM community. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive. The different learning purposes are spelled out in the following section.

The ACE MEL model emphasises learning as multi-directional. By reflecting on its work as well as its successes and challenges along its critical pathways, ACE contributes to a better understanding of the context and what works in the specific circumstances at hand. In turn, changes in the context inform the work that ACE undertakes and how the teams in the centre do this work. In addition,

ACE learns with partners in its wider ecosystem, be they implementing partners, clients, academics, or other practitioners and scientists interested in learning with and from ACE.

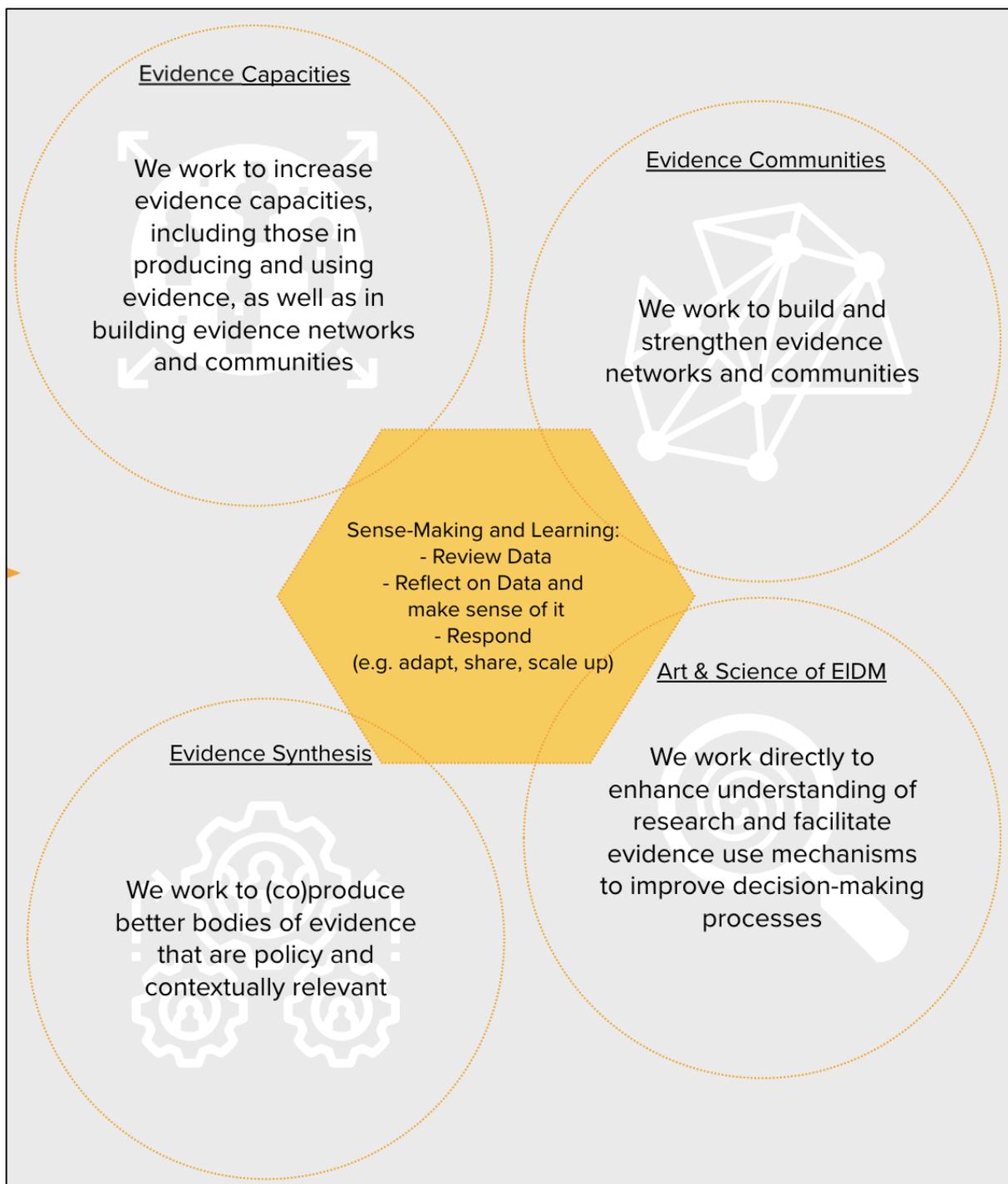


Figure 2: ACE portfolios with space for sense-making and learning

## 7. Learning questions

The ACE MEL framework incorporates a range of different areas of enquiry. Identifying and measuring the Centre's performance for improved accountability is highly emphasised. Questions to assess performance include:

- “Are we doing the right thing?”;
- “Can y work in this context?”;
- “Why is x not working?” or “Why is x working here but not there?”;
- “Who is a champion in x and how can we improve our collaboration?”;
- “How can we convince Department x that their decision-making processes can be enhanced through our services?”.

Identifying some of these learning questions early on in a new project or a new MEL process assists in ensuring that the data collected through the MEL system provides a sufficient basis on which to discuss the more analytical questions. In other words, the monitoring data being collected on a continuous basis ultimately serves as one component in answering one or more of the evaluation questions.

Ensuring the compatibility between the monitoring data collected and the evaluation questions explored is equally important in ACE's core projects as it is in ACE's more ad-hoc interventions and engagements. Some of these ad-hoc engagements could offer significant space for learning, higher levels of flexibility, and in turn more room for “experimentation” with new ideas/approaches or established ideas/approaches in new contexts. Irrespective then of how small or ad-hoc new initiatives seem, it is crucial that the list of learning questions is revisited prior to engaging in new initiatives and that all effort is made to reflect on these initiatives within the portfolios as well as across the organisation.

A little later in this section, suggestions are made about how these learning questions can be used for implementation monitoring, reflection, planning, continuous learning, adaptation of projects, and/or to share learnings with the wider EIDM and/or practice community. Not every monitoring and evaluation effort and not every project's MEL indicators need to speak to all domains. Learning and reflection in different domains require different sets of data, happen at different times and intervals, require different levels of analysis, and demand different spaces where analysis and sense-making take place, with different people involved in analysing and using the information. These domains are spelled out early on in this framework so as to emphasise (and remind ACE teams of) the fact that learning and reflection are central to ACE's MEL efforts and are meant to inform all monitoring and evaluation efforts being undertaken. Foregrounding the learning domains now serves as a reminder that M&E data

is collected so that ACE with its funders and partners learns in and through all it does and achieves (or fails to achieve). The key learning domains are outlined below, followed by indicative questions for each domain.

### Assessing the strategy

Questions on strategy assess the context within which ACE operates, interrogates the assumptions ACE makes and assesses to what extent the theory of change and programme theories are (still) meeting the identified needs. These questions range from asking if ACE's training is relevant for the audience or if ACE's work in enhancing evidence capacities is effective to the larger questions about whether ACE's work is, or has the potential to, lead to the outcomes the centre hopes to achieve.

### Improving implementation

This domain assesses the nuts and bolts of what ACE does – the actual work that makes up everyday operations, deliverables, and services. Here, questions around the quality of services and products and also the efficiencies in producing and delivering these services and products are covered. For ACE, questions around which portfolio a specific piece of work should be located in for best possible delivery are relevant, as well as what collaboration and knowledge sharing is warranted between the individual portfolios to achieve the best possible implementation.

Three key reasons make reflecting on strengths and gaps in ACE's implementations modalities crucial. First, ACE is a relatively young centre that has already recently undergone a revision of its organisational structure. Second, ACE remains vulnerable to the risk of potential high staff turnaround linked to the fact that university employment contracts are seldom secure. And lastly, diversity in ACE's partners and partnerships.

### Deepening understanding of the context

To remain relevant and effective, ACE should undertake regular reflection on the socio-economic and political contexts in which the centre operates and through which ACE builds partnerships and collaborations with others in the EIDM landscape. At least twice a year reflections on changes in the context and what these mean for the assumptions ACE makes for specific projects and related risks need to be incorporated in portfolios' and projects' MEL, as much as in the annual organisational review.

## Strengthening capacity

Learning questions in this domain revolve around individual and organisational capacity. This capacity includes the resources are required within individual portfolios, guided by the activities, services, and products that make up a specific pathway. In other words, if we believe that x, y, and z along pathway a will lead to or contribute to the change we are anticipating, then what are the individual and joint skills required to effectively and efficiently carry these out? Mechanisms here for reflection and learning could include peer review, rapid skills audits for individual projects, or systematic ways in which team members share learnings with other members both within and outside their portfolios.

## Deepening understanding around the art and science of EIDM

The data collected through MEL efforts can shed light on aspects in EIDM that are unclear, experimental, or innovative as they link to the specific projects ACE implements. For example, ACE's shift from running workshops to developing mentorship partnerships has deepened the team's understanding of how to support EIDM. MEL efforts fed into the process of sharing this deepened understanding with the broader regional and global EIDM community. This illustrates how ACE's MEL activities link with the Art and Science portfolio in supporting greater understanding of EIDM.

## In practice: what questions do we ask to ensure we learn from and through our work?

### Key learning questions

#### Assessing the strategy

- Is the Theory of Change (ToC) appropriate for the context, logical, and reasonable in its expectations and its analysis of the problem? Were (all) relevant stakeholders involved in the development of the ToC? Has the ToC changed? Do the assumptions made in the ToC still hold?
- How well do individual portfolios align to the organisational strategy and ToC? How appropriate are individual project strategies for meeting project goals and ACE organisational goals?
- Are all the right stakeholders involved in re-assessing the ToC, its assumptions, its causal pathways, etc.? Are regular key stakeholder maps produced and used?
- Are individual portfolios' and the ACE organisational strategy aligned with national/sub-national/regional development priorities and aligned with funder strategies?
- What are key windows of opportunity that ACE can add value to in terms of political, socio-economic, and development shifts at

	<p>national/sub-national and regional levels, and in the regional and global EIDM communities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing that ACE has a range of donors and from time to time takes on ad-hoc projects, is there potential conflict?</li> </ul>
<p>Improving implementation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent is ACE or its portfolio implementing project plans as planned? Are deliverables being completed? On time? To what extent are deliverables, as far as can be observed, leading to/contributing to the anticipated changes?</li> <li>• Are there differences in success of implementation in different contexts/sectors/countries? What do we know about the possible reasons for varying implementation?</li> <li>• How well are internal systems working to implement individual projects on time and to budget? How well can implementation adapt to changed conditions? What level of flexibility do individual portfolios/projects display in adapting to changed conditions and/or changed budget?</li> <li>• How are collaborative partnerships established and fostered? How are decisions about strategic partnerships taken? How are partnerships and their value evaluated?</li> <li>• How do portfolios within ACE jointly deliver on ACE's strategy? What mechanisms are in place to foster collaboration, regular exchange, and joint learning?</li> <li>• How are decisions made, based on which criteria and which evidence? How are decisions documented and communicated? Are decision-making processes consistent, transparent, and inclusive?</li> </ul>
<p>Deepening understanding of the context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What opportunities and restraints exist in the external environments for ACE as an organisation and for each portfolio or individual project?</li> <li>• What political, economic, or organisational changes are taking place?</li> <li>• What impact do the changes in the external environment have on the current and/or future work ACE undertakes in that context?</li> <li>• Are there shifts in key individual champions or organisational adjustments that may have/have had an impact on ACE's work?</li> <li>• What are the policy developments in specific sectors/specific departments that are of relevance to ACE's current or future engagement in that sector/department?</li> <li>• Who else is working in this space? What are their agendas? Are there new role players? What relationship does ACE have with them/would ACE like to have with them?</li> </ul>
<p>Strengthening capacity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the strong value-adds that ACE as an organisation brings to the EIDM community and to specific partners/sectors/collaborations?</li> <li>• To what extent does ACE take stock of individual staff member's skills, interests, and development areas? How are strengths of individual staff members put to best-use for the benefit of the team and ACE as a whole?</li> <li>• How are peer assessments and/or other internal mechanisms used to enhance individuals' skills whilst strengthening and balancing the organisational skills set?</li> <li>• To what extent are formal and/or informal ways of skills-sharing, mentoring, peer support, etc. used?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In rendering ACE's services and producing its outputs, what does ACE learn about how it can do better, faster, or at a lower cost? What can ACE learn for a similar project in the future? How has this learning been documented? How did ACE draw on this learning to strengthen individual or organisation-wide capacity?</li> </ul>
Deepening understanding around the art and science of EIDM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the key questions the EIDM communities in Africa and globally are interrogating?</li> <li>• What are the specific and unique learnings and contributions ACE can make to the debates?</li> <li>• What are the similarities and differences in decision-making processes in different sectors/countries/departments etc.?</li> </ul>

Table 1: key learning questions

Typical approaches to answering learning questions	
Assessing the strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing reports and other key documents and strategies.</li> <li>• Reviewing programme theories, ToC, and the processes used in developing, reviewing, and reflecting on these.</li> <li>• Conducting workshops with stakeholders and key partners, reflecting on progress and gaps in implementation, and identifying where adaptation is needed.</li> <li>• Formal and informal discussions in the management team.</li> <li>• Stakeholder analysis to identify who is engaged in planning, sense-making, and adaptation discussions.</li> </ul> <p>Typical intervals: half-yearly or annually.</p>
Improving implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing monitoring reports, both implementation and results.</li> <li>• Reviewing progress reports submitted to the advisory group and reviewing the advisory group's inputs and how ACE responded to these.</li> <li>• Reviewing internal procedures and processes.</li> <li>• Consulting with partners, clients, and other stakeholders.</li> <li>• Assessing capacity of partners.</li> <li>• Stories of Change/Most Significant Change Approach</li> </ul> <p>Typical intervals: quarterly.</p>
Deepening understanding of the context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing socio-economic and political developments in key departments/countries/partners.</li> <li>• Reviewing policy debates in key departments/countries/partners.</li> <li>• Conducting stakeholder mapping for individual departments/countries/partners, including reviewing existing and potential evidence champions.</li> <li>• Knowledge, Policy, Power Approach (ODI).</li> </ul> <p>Typical intervals: half-yearly or annually.</p>
Strengthening capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing current capacity of key partners.</li> <li>• Registering and reviewing individual staff members' individual development plans, putting adequate individual and/or organisational development plans in place, and monitoring progress.</li> <li>• Institutionalising regular skills-sharing/brown bag events.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutionalising regular feedback from skills development programmes that individual staff participated in.</li> <li>• Institutionalising regular feedback from lessons learned in individual portfolios in collaboration and partnership with management.</li> </ul> <p>Typical intervals: quarterly.</p>
Deepening understanding around the art and science of EIDM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing across the team, in a systematic manner and on a continuous basis, key debates and emerging conversations in the EIDM community.</li> <li>• Reflecting on the meaning of key debates and emerging conversations for ACE's work in 1) advancing debates and conversations, and 2) in terms of the services and products ACE provides to clients, partners, and funders.</li> </ul>

Table 2: typical approaches to answering learning questions

## 8. Monitoring areas

Being able to answer our learning questions, engage with them critically, and do something with the resultant data requires a solid set of continuously collected data. Continuous monitoring, therefore, forms a crucial foundation for these discussions. This section outlines the areas in which monitoring data is to be collected, and provides a set of indicative questions that will guide the formulation of indicators.

### Outputs

In some ways, monitoring outputs are the quintessential ingredient of monitoring. For ACE, outputs consist of both services rendered to partners and clients and tangible products such as reports, briefs, workshop reports, academic publications, conference engagements. ACE's outputs can be client-focussed, academic, or practitioner-oriented.

### Results

ACE's services and products are intended to lead to a chain of results along intended pathways leading to improved decision-making processes based on relevant bodies of evidence. These results range from immediate and tangible results to more medium- and long-term outcomes, some of which may be difficult to monitor and may be intricate to establish causal links to ACE's work.

The monitoring of outputs and results will revolve around a selection of the questions listed in Table 3 below.

## In practice: how does ACE measure what it does and what it achieves?

### Key monitoring questions

Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What services have been implemented? What products have been produced?</li> <li>• How does this compare to what was planned?</li> <li>• Does ACE have a sense of the quality of these services and products? Were the partners'/clients' expectations met? How can individual services and products be improved?</li> <li>• Is there variation of similar services/products in different sectors/countries/departments? Does ACE have a sense of what's behind this variation?</li> <li>• Primary reach: Who is attending events, requesting advice and services? Who is expressing interest in learning from and with ACE, on the demand and the supply side?</li> </ul>
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have ACE's services and/or products been used by its partners/clients?</li> <li>• Which decision-making processes have ACE's services and/or products impacted? How did this impact materialise?</li> <li>• Where, how, and by whom are ACE's products and services used?</li> <li>• What feedback does ACE get from key stakeholders on the use and usability of its services and products?</li> <li>• How are key stakeholders engaging with evidence in their sector?</li> <li>• What does ACE know about the demand for evidence in decision-making processes? What are the shifts the centre is able to observe over time?</li> <li>• What differences is ACE observing in the use of its products and services, e.g. in different sectors, at different levels within decision-making processes, among different groups of people?</li> <li>• How sustainable are the observed changes likely to be? What evidence does ACE have on which to base these judgements?</li> </ul>

Table 3: key monitoring questions

### Typical approaches and indicators

Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress against plan</li> <li>• Quality assessments (e.g., peer review, client/partner survey and/or interviews)</li> <li>• Post-event assessments (e.g., post-workshop survey, mentorship assessments)</li> <li>• Statistics (e.g., downloads, site visits, requests for assistance such as evidence maps, rapid synthesis reports, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type, number, and quality of products and services, disaggregated</li> <li>• Number of peer-reviewed articles published, including in open-access formats; number of accessed and referenced, disaggregated</li> <li>• Number, type, and origin of requests for assistance received, disaggregated (can also be a result)</li> <li>• Number, type, and quality of events organised, e.g., workshops, conferences,</li> </ul>
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		communities of practice, mentorship programmes, etc., disaggregated
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct feedback from stakeholders, formal and informal, including surveys</li> <li>• Web statistics, including downloads, references on uptake, etc.</li> <li>• Social media statistics and feedback, including shares and comments, including by whom, etc.</li> <li>• Attendance lists, feedback</li> <li>• Reflection in learning events, including external stakeholders and partners</li> <li>• Citation analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of downloads of documents, disaggregated</li> <li>• Number and origin of website visits</li> <li>• Number and quality of media mentions, and mentions by decision-makers and others in the broader EIDM ecosystem</li> <li>• Number, diversity, and origin (e.g., Africa vs global) of citations to peer-reviewed and other publications</li> <li>• Number of requests for assistance and speaking engagements</li> <li>• Quality of feedback on events, including Likert scale feedback</li> <li>• Usefulness and use of products and services, including Likert scale</li> </ul>

Table 4: typical approaches and indicators

## 9. Implementing the MEL framework

In order to set up an organisation-wide system that meets individual projects' MEL needs and helps ACE in reflecting, learning, and adapting for improved impact in the contexts in which it works, ACE has a range of tools and processes to its avail. These are discussed below; from with organisation-wide principles and approaches to project-specific details.

### BOX 1: A note on gender responsiveness of the framework

The ACE MEL framework calls for explicitly gendered analysis in project planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation and learning. This table highlights the key dimensions in achieving this goal. As ACE primarily works with partners, ACE is in a strong position to also influence their partners' perspective and practice in relation to gendered analysis in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Disaggregation	Disaggregating data to reflect different and all genders is crucial in guiding gender-responsive planning, monitoring, and reflection.
Gender-specific interventions	Asking in planning and reflection stages if there is a case for gender-specific interventions will guide ACE and partners in developing more gender-responsive projects and programmes. By carefully monitoring these, evidence on their effectiveness will be produced.

Specific gender outcomes	Developing specific gender outcomes will go beyond disaggregating data by gender and will increase the chances that needs of different genders are explicitly identified and tailor-made pathways are developed.
Gender-sensitive assumptions and risks	Identifying assumptions and risks through a gendered analysis, will strengthen the planning processes of ACE projects and programmes, strengthen their relevance and potential effectiveness, and avoid potential harm.
Gender in ACE	Reflecting regularly on the gender-responsiveness of ACE's ways of working, the culture underlying these, operational practices, and allocation of resources, the organisation will maintain gender equality within its teams whilst also practising routine gendered analysis <sup>1</sup> .

### MEL culture

An open and transparent approach to collecting and analysing monitoring data is the foundation to building a culture of learning. Staff feel confident to report on areas of underperformance if and when this underperformance is seen as an opportunity for learning as opposed to a judgement on their capacity or skills. Involving different stakeholders in reviewing data and making sense of it makes the data more robust and ensures that every voice is heard and valued.

MEL at ACE is 'everyone's business'. As opposed to MEL being the exclusive role of a dedicated MEL officer, principles of monitoring, evaluative thinking, and learning need to be on every single staff member's mind. The learning questions indicated above are of help in gaining clarity on the specific questions for portfolios, and individual team members within each portfolio, to look out for.

### MEL resources

Resource considerations include determining financial commitments made towards data collection, analysis, sense-making, and learning processes, as well as staff costs for dedicated monitoring, evaluation, and learning tasks. On the one hand, staff costs are composed of MEL specific tasks in individual projects (bearing in mind that MEL is 'everyone's business'). On the other hand, a dedicated and organisation-wide MEL role will comprise duties such as quality control of project-based MEL tasks, coordination, the formulation of analysis and learning reports, compilation of accountability reports to individual funders and partners, and the coordination of organisation-wide reflection and learning processes.

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<sup>1</sup> Given increased working-from-home arrangements linked to COVID-19 movement restrictions, frequently accompanied by school closures, a gendered perspective on ways of working could be, for example; 1) the specific needs of team members linked to additional childcare and household work, 2) safety of early morning or late evening arrival or departure at the office could play a role, or 3) exploring whether there are gendered dynamics in team discussions.

In the context of continuous learning and adaptation to shifts in context and/or implementation, it is crucial that where possible individual projects include a degree of flexibility in terms of project resources, so as to enable project teams to adapt budgets in response to shifts in schedule, priorities, or chosen approach. A strong working relationship, characterised by ongoing transparent communication with funders and partners, is key in ensuring changes in budgets and/or activities can be implemented swiftly and with as little administrative effort as possible. It is important to include discussions around these resource requirements at contracting stage; so is the inclusion of all important stakeholders, internal and external, in the learning discussions to ensure a common understanding of shifts in resource requirements.

### MEL systems and tools

Depending on the nature of a project, its specified short-, medium, and long-term objectives, its contractual MEL requirements, and the space it offers for organisational learning, each project will include its own unique monitoring plan. The remainder of this section outlines a framework through which each project will identify its specific MEL needs and the systems and tools required to meet these needs. It also provides some detail on organisation-wide systems and tools which will support ACE in meeting its MEL requirements.

#### a. Programme theories

Drawing on the 2019-2023 strategy and its anticipated medium- and long-term results, each ACE portfolio is in a good position to develop individual programme theories. The process here is to first develop a theory of the problem, followed by a theory of change, and lastly a theory of action outlining how the work is expected to address the problem.

The theory of the problem serves to analyse the problem in its specific context. What are the root causes of the problem? What are the key determining factors, both on systemic and individual levels? By understanding the series of actions, ACE teams are likely to – as indicated by available evidence or previous work – bring relief to the problem (theory of change). The team will ultimately be able to develop its own theory of action that outlines exactly what can be done to effect the desired change.

In the process of developing its theory of action, the team will be explicit about the assumptions made regarding the context and its complexities, and the likelihood of the proposed interventions' effectiveness.

Some of these pathways will be more obvious while others may appear vague or subtle. Some of these pathways will be based on strong assumptions about the work being done and the context within which it takes place, and the partners involved in the process. Other pathways may represent greater risks with regard to context, stakeholders involved, and/or the feasibility of the work. Some of these pathways will offer obvious and measurable milestones that provide a good indication of whether or not ACE is moving in the direction it intended to while others may have a longer time lag or require indicators for change that are more distant or less precise.

b. Data collection

Data for implementation monitoring will be collected on a continuous basis. Developing an indicator compendium will provide detailed guidance on how data should be collected and then analysed for each indicator. It is also important to set up minimum monitoring requirements to avoid cases of over- or under-collection of data.

Below is an example of a data collection plan. This plan can be used for individual projects as much as for the portfolio as a whole. Variations of this plan can be developed for both implementation and results monitoring. Important considerations in adapted versions of this data collection plan will be the importance of disaggregating data by the relevant categories e.g., rank of participating official, sector, maturity of partnership etc.; the accessibility of the data; and the usefulness and actual likelihood of use.

Portfolio/project							
Contributes towards this result							
Learning questions to be addressed	Indicators selected to monitor the result/activity (e.g. output, outcome, or process indicators)	Means of verification				Disaggregation	Use of Information
		Data source	Collection method	Responsibility for collection	Frequency of collection		
Learning question #1	Indicator #X Indicator #X						
Learning question #2	Indicator #X Indicator #X						
Learning question #3	Indicator #X Indicator #X						

### *Baselines and targets*

In order to truly measure progress, an understanding of the situation at the outset of the operation must be determined. Where this foundational data has not already been established and programme work is already in progress, then a specific point in time against which change can be assessed or comparisons made in follow-up studies can be set. For major shifts in portfolios (maybe for all new projects), effort should be made to establish some baseline data on key anticipated results. This is relevant for short-term and ad-hoc assignments as much as it is for more long-term funding agreements (as is argued elsewhere in this report, the short-term or ad-hoc assignments often offer great potential for learning and reflection). For such instances, ACE should decide an appropriate timeframe within which all projects need to have established and recorded baselines in the project implementation process. In some organisations, all baseline outcome indicators in a project must be established no more than three months prior to and no later than three months after the commencement of any activity.

### *Data management and validation*

Ensuring that the data collected is of high quality is key in safeguarding the integrity of the MEL system, its reputation, and its value for reporting, decision-making, and learning. First-line data collectors are a critical link in ensuring highest data quality. There are, however, various independent measures ACE can put in place to ensure that quality data is captured. Quality data in ACE means three things:

- I. Data is complete: all questions and data points are completed
- II. Data is accurate: what is recorded on the system links up with what transpired at implementation and what is captured is on hard copy documents (i.e., registers, forms, etc.)
- III. Data is collected as intended: data is captured from the correct sources, using the correct methods and tools

As this first-line data is likely to frequently be collected not by dedicated MEL staff but by programme staff, facilitators, administrators or consultants, it is important that each one of them has an appreciation for the importance of these quality criteria and acts accordingly.

#### c. Data analysis

Clear plans for data analysis are helpful in assuring that data is used consistently for each indicator and that the indicator is not reinvented each time it is used. Data analysis guidance, in conjunction with the

design of the related data collection tool(s), should be confirmed. To make sense of data for ACE, its partners and its entire ecosystem, it is important that platforms which allow for free but critical and co-creative spaces be established. These spaces should allow for the presentation of results and reflection on their implications on each portfolio and on ACE as a whole (see more on sense-making in the following subsection). Decisions will need to be made about the level of disaggregation across the different indicators to allow for comparability and consistency over time. Data analysis plans would need to form part of the basic requirements of handling data.

#### d. Sense-making and reflection

An open and transparent MEL system that draws on a range of stakeholders, potentially representing different perspectives, is important when analysing and making sense of the available data. A MEL system with this nature will strengthen the learning from the available data and make the process relevant. Sense-making can make use of review meetings and learning workshops, which create safe spaces to jointly reflect on data, identify successes, and analyse shortcomings. Table 2 above provides a range of approaches that can be drawn upon in the sense-making and reflection processes.

#### e. Data use

The purpose of the ACE MEL framework is threefold: improve accountability, enhance learning, and facilitate more adaptive and agile management. Some of the learning questions speak to more than one of these purposes. Similarly, some of the monitoring data provide input into two or all of these purposes, whilst some of the data address one specific purpose. It is crucial to establish strong processes and systems which ensure that data are not collected in vain and find use in one or more of these areas.

In data use for accountability it is important to collect implementation and results level data that corresponds to the requirements of the funding agreement. At the same time, the same data will be useful for accountability reporting that ACE performs over and above funding requirements, e.g. in annual reports, funding applications, etc.

Data use for learning purposes have already been discussed extensively above. The key point to make as to the learning purpose(s) in ACE's MEL framework is the fact that learning is intended to go well beyond 'simply' improving what ACE is doing and how it is doing it. As is also expressed in the learning questions outlined earlier in this document learning purposes are meant to reflect on the context, the assumptions being made, and the values and principles informing both context and ACE's work within that context. Involving a range of stakeholders through transparent and open reflection in safe spaces created through ACE is the key to the double-loop learning processes. ACE, as a key role-player in the EIDM community on the continent and globally, is making an explicit effort – not least through its art and science portfolio – to share these learnings with the EIDM community at large.

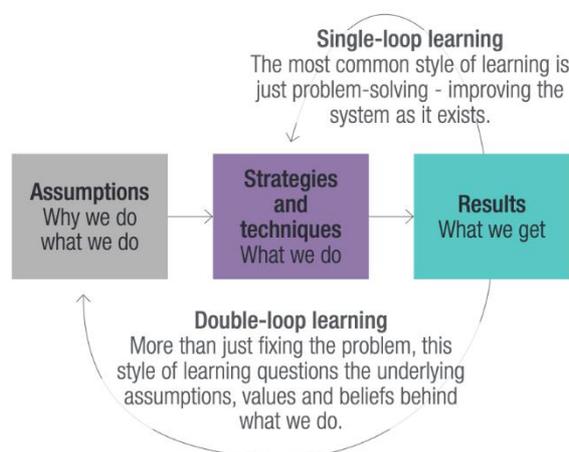


Figure 3: single-loop and double-loop learning (Source: ODI, 2016)

Data use for adaptive management has been mentioned before. To ensure that data provide a systematic operational evidence base through which decisions on specific needs to adaptation are arrived at, regular meetings for intentional review of and reflection on data are necessary. These meetings ought to go beyond a discussion about what has been done and achieved; the key learning questions outlined above will assist in critical and transparent reflection. Careful preparation of these learning questions are necessary, ensuring that all participants are ready to hear diverse viewpoints and respect these. Based on the different viewpoints, decisions for how to respond to the situation at hand will be made.

In summary, ACE needs to put in place or strengthen mechanisms and platforms that allow for regular engagement and interrogation of monitoring data and evaluation results. These mechanisms and platforms should align with existing reporting cycles and meetings as far as possible. Due consideration should be taken to include important external stakeholders so that learning is broadened.

These platforms should not only present results but offer space for reflection, innovation, critical interrogation, and increased collaboration across ACE's portfolios. The learning questions should form the basis of this engagement so that learning and results are embedded into decision-making and planning.

Indicative intervals for core MEL activities		
Activity	Interval	People
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implementation monitoring: ongoing basis</li> <li>Results monitoring: quarterly assessment, depending on results and project/programme timelines</li> <li>Compilation and presentation of data: monthly basis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff</li> <li>MEL officer, with project/programme staff</li> <li>MEL officer</li> </ul>
Sense-making and reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quarterly reflection, guided by learning questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff, with rotating discussion moderators and emphasising rotating learning questions</li> </ul>
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual review, incorporating discussion on               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delivery on results</li> <li>Key learnings, including internally-focussed, partnerships, programmatic areas and results, and ability to stay agile and relevant</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff, with advisory group (and additional individuals where relevant)</li> </ul>
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rigorous independent evaluation in a three-year cycle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff, advisory group, independent evaluator</li> </ul>

Table 5: indicative intervals for core MEL activities

### Budgeting for MEL activities

The monitoring budget is an important part of the overall approved project budget. The costs for monitoring tasks related to all individual projects plus the cost of assessed capacity-building need to be estimated. Planned data collection related to each selected indicator needs to be broken down into smaller tasks that can be individually costed. This breakdown of costs is basic work planning but with a special focus on monitoring roles, responsibilities, and related costs.

Costs incurred from data collection and analysis, reflection and reviews, reporting requirements, field support, staff training, partner capacity-building, and other monitoring-related costs all need to be considered. Advance planning

will ensure that all monitoring expenses are included in individual project budgets.

Milestone events, for example, a baseline survey or a significant capacity-building effort for partners or staff, will require additional resources and time allocation outside of daily activities. Other things to consider are transportation; procurement of equipment and daily subsistence allowances for field visits related to special monitoring activities and case studies; hiring of short-term consultants; and the hiring of temporary staff for data collection or data entry should the need occur. Sources of funding external to ACE may be required. For instance, a donor may agree to fund a consultant to complete a formative or summative evaluation. Various donors may also become available if the monitoring budget is clear and the need for a particular monitoring event compelling.

### Roles and responsibilities

It is important for ACE to define monitoring tasks. Clearly defining key monitoring tasks at the design phase of a project or preparation of a funding proposal will help to ensure that funds for these priorities are available and reserved for once a project is running.

When clarifying monitoring roles and responsibilities, specific coordination mechanisms need to be defined so that portfolios share with each other rather than monitoring and learning being restricted within portfolio silos. An open and transparent approach to collecting and analysing monitoring data is the foundation to building a culture of learning. Staff feel confident to report on areas of underperformance if and when this underperformance is seen as an opportunity for learning, as opposed to a judgement on their capacity or skills. Involving different stakeholders in reviewing data and making sense of it makes the data more robust and ensures that every voice is heard and valued.

The functions of ongoing monitoring, regular reflection, and regular reporting are not restricted to one particular job profile. Most operational functions have a part to play. Below are some of the indicative roles that can be defined within ACE in relation to monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

Staff	MEL roles
Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Liaise with heads of partners and collaborators and undertake strategic visits to affirm project outcomes when necessary.</li> <li>● Monitor programme performance, holding portfolio leads accountable for the achievement of their stated programme results.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Guide and oversee strategic prioritisation of allocated monitoring budgets and technical support.</li> <li>● Facilitate communication across the ACE partner universe and within ACE regarding monitoring initiatives and related requirements.</li> <li>● Negotiate with new partners/new initiatives regarding MEL requirements, with the aim to find the greatest synergy between partner and ACE MEL requirements and systems.</li> <li>● Support analysis of monitoring data and provide feedback for improving results reporting.</li> <li>● Facilitate the institutionalisation of regular sense-making and review events.</li> <li>● Provide oversight over the formulation and implementation of adaptive responses.</li> </ul>
Advisory group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support the institutionalisation of and contribute to regular sense-making and review events.</li> <li>● Support and contribute to the formulation and implementation of adaptive responses.</li> <li>● Support/facilitate the annual review and contribute to the formulation of key learnings and related responses.</li> </ul>
Portfolio leads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Approve project monitoring plans.</li> <li>● Validate ACE monitoring strategy, including the project monitoring plans and related emerging data collection tools.</li> <li>● Monitor portfolio teams' performance, supporting staff in achieving their stated results.</li> <li>● Support analysis of monitoring data and provide feedback for improving results reporting.</li> <li>● Support the drafting of annual and other funder reports as related to their portfolio.</li> <li>● Participate in all sense-making and review events.</li> <li>● Contribute to the formulation of adaptive responses and support/lead the implementation thereof.</li> </ul>
MEL role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Design indicator compendium, for implementation and results monitoring.</li> <li>● Monitor compliance and progress of regular data collection.</li> <li>● Support portfolios in the development of project pathways and programme theories.</li> <li>● Support portfolios in the formulation of project monitoring plans.</li> <li>● Draft project data collection plans and data collection tools.</li> <li>● Oversee/complete field-based data collection and data entry.</li> <li>● Exercise quality assurance of data and training of staff and partners.</li> <li>● Draft monitoring plans, budgets, and budget components of proposals submitted to partners/funders.</li> <li>● Analyse monitoring data and present analytical reports.</li> <li>● Support the preparation of annual and other reports across ACE reporting cycles and structures.</li> <li>● Support specific data requests from the portfolio teams and the director.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Build institutional MEL skills and capacity across ACE and with partners.</li></ul>
Portfolio staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Collect implementation monitoring data, where applicable.</li><li>● Review monthly monitoring reports produced by the MEL officer as they relate to their portfolio.</li><li>● Participate in analysis of implementation and results monitoring.</li><li>● Participate in all sense-making and review events.</li><li>● Support the drafting of annual and other funder reports as related to their portfolio.</li><li>● Contribute to the formulation of adaptive responses and support the implementation thereof.</li></ul>

Table 6: roles and responsibilities