

COLLABORATING TO MEASURE PEACE?

Recommendations for Creating a Culture of Shared Learning in Monitoring and Evaluation Practice in Myanmar

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Background

Measurement and evaluation of the effects of peacebuilding interventions is very difficult in any context. Peace, coexistence, trust, social cohesion and related terms are intangible and hard to define, making evidence generation difficult. Change is also a long-term process that stretches beyond the life of most programs. Programmatic and operational challenges also impede good design, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), including a general lack of program level capacity, limited funding, competition and lack of resources to implement learning, and transparency about success and failure. Though significant, these myriad challenges are not insurmountable. Good DM&E practices are crucial. They contribute to a culture of transparency, learning, and rigorous understanding about what works and what does not in peacebuilding programming.

Supported by Mercy Corps, the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) and the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium, staff from local peacebuilding organizations working across Myanmar gathered to share learnings on peacebuilding DM&E, generate solutions, and build capacity in key areas. All agreed on the importance of galvanizing a culture of reflection, learning, and transparency related to program DM&E and that coming together at regular intervals to share honest reflection about challenges was essential. The group generate a set of recommendations that explore these challenges and provide creative, actionable solutions for donors, governments, and international and national non-governmental organizations that are looking to scale the impact of their programs, build local capacity, and improve sustainability.

Recommendations

Challenge 1: Measuring change related to peace and conflict is difficult

1.1: Intangible concepts and long term change.

Changes in concepts like tolerance, trust, social cohesion, coexistence, acknowledgement, peace, etc. are intangible, hard to measure and take a long time. Changes in policies, behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of 'the other' are also challenging to define. It is also difficult to know how changes will manifest at the individual-, group- and societal-levels. Many programs only evaluate impact on direct beneficiaries and do not evaluate impact at the community level. It is hard to demonstrate a direct causal link between one intervention and a desired change (as opposed to the cumulative influence of many interventions and factors), especially in fragile and complex environments.



Solutions:

- *Measuring intermediate contributions to peace:* Monitor and evaluate how interventions contribute to shorter term goals in pursuit of *increasing peace* or *decreasing violence*. Shifting expectations from attribution to contribution will enable organizations to see their work as one of many actions that contribute to longer term change. Be realistic about what you can achieve within the program timeframe.
- *Regular monitoring:* Do monitoring quarterly at a minimum, regularly reflect on findings, and make course corrections. Consider use of both formal and informal tools for monitoring, including informal observations.
- *Encourage transparency and shared learning:* Hold regular meetings for sharing and learning on M&E between organizations working on different peacebuilding approaches.
- *Move beyond project level impact:* When possible, train implementing partners on not only how to track progress towards their own activities, but also on how their work fits into the broader program logic.

1.2: Complex and fragile environments make targeting and prediction difficult, and it is even more difficult to determine how programmatic changes will affect larger social systems.

Solutions:

- *Sound program design with future planning:* Use scenario planning to be able to anticipate different potential future scenarios.
- *Proactive donor communication:* Be proactive with donors to help them understand the changing nature of the situation and establish mutual relationships built on trust to work together when adjustments need to be made. When possible, design programs that allow for adaptive management to accommodate changes in context.
- *Feedback mechanisms:* Hold regular consultations with communities to get vital perspectives on changing circumstances and how programs can be adapted.

1.3: Access to and sensitivity of data. Data collection is often constrained by access to beneficiaries and communities and by cultural norms. Peacebuilding data is also very sensitive, which makes it hard to safeguard.

Solutions:

- *No more paper:* When possible, keep data collection digital.
- *Ask first:* Ensure informed consent throughout a program.
- *Sensitivity to context:* Use local enumerators when asking highly sensitive questions.

Challenge 2: Organizational and operational limitations

2.1: High staff turnover is a specific challenge for DM&E because technical expertise is hard to find and develop.

Solutions:

- *Creative retention incentives:* Create opportunities for growth and capacity development to increase staff retention.
- *Creative capacity building:* INGOs should provide training opportunities for implementing partners, particularly on M&E as an investment in long term program success and sustainability.

2.2: Limited budgets for M&E creates lack of transparency.

Often M&E is not adequately budgeted for, leaving it chronically under-resourced. Limited funding leads to competition between organizations, leaving little to no space for learning or sharing of failures and resources, and pressure to demonstrate success.

Solutions:

- *Adequate budgeting for M&E:* Build M&E activities, management, and staffing into program budgets.
- *Promote shared learning:* Create a shared learning platform for peacebuilding practitioners to regularly share what they are learning related to M&E with an emphasis on sharing failures and lessons learned.
- *Adequate budgeting for M&E:* Build M&E activities, management, and staffing into program budgets.
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Challenge 3: General lack of M&E capacity

3.1: Lack of dedicated M&E staff and evaluation expertise outsourced.

Many smaller organizations often do not have the resources for dedicated M&E staff. As a result, there is a reliance on international evaluators and a lack of local evaluation and research capacity.

Solutions:

- *Smart capacity development and collaboration:* When staffing is limited, ensure that program teams have M&E training and understand the importance of M&E. When there is dedicated M&E staff, foster linkages and collaboration between program and M&E staff. INGOs should include on-the-job training for local staff in M&E.
- *Evaluability assessments:* INGOs should seize every opportunity to train local staff in evaluation techniques, particularly in how to do evaluability assessments of programs, because often a formal final evaluation is not the right fit

3.2: Poor program design and analysis capacity.

Due to a lack of capacity, often programs are ill-defined, do not have sound theories of change, are not based on conflict analysis, etc. This makes evaluation even harder. Often organizations collect data but lack the capacity and/or expertise to analyze it and use it for programmatic decision-making.

Solutions:

- *Sound program design:* M&E systems are only as good as their usefulness to the implementing organization. Ensure M&E systems are designed for better programming, not just for donor requirements.
- *Fewer, smarter indicators:* Only design indicators that you have the capacity and resources to analyze and learn from.

Challenge 4: Donor-related dynamics

4.1: External priorities can cause a shift from core mandates.

Shifting trends can draw organizations away from their core mandates.

Solutions:

- *Set priorities in consultation with local actors:* Relationship building through partnership pre-positioning can help donors, INGOs, and local organizations understand core mandates and technical expertise. Donors and INGOs should take every opportunity to be in consultation with partners related to setting priorities and determining proposal topics and criteria.
- *Contextualize measures of change:* Donors should provide support to local NGOs to tailor predetermined indicators to programs and context, even at the cost of universal outcome indicators.

4.2: Limiting universal measures.

Preselected indicators are often not relevant to local realities and limit the effectiveness of program design.

Solutions:

- *Short program timeframes:* Make it difficult to link activities with longer-term peacebuilding outcomes.
- *Extend program timeframes when possible and encourage realistic measures of success:* Donors should work with local NGOs to create program goals that are achievable within the program timeframe.

4.3: Emphasis on successes, not learning.

Pressure to show results makes failure and adaptation hard to discuss.

Solution:

- *Encourage courage:* Donors should provide flexible funding mechanisms that allow local NGOs to experiment and adapt their programming based on what they are learning. Encouraging and supporting pilot ideas can lead to innovation and learning about what doesn't work and what just might work.

4.4: Short program timeframes

Solution:

- *Extend program timeframes when possible and encourage realistic measures of success:* Donors should work with local NGOs to create program goals that are achievable within the program timeframe.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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About the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (PEC)

The Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (PEC) is a project of Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) in partnership with CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Mercy Corps and Search for Common Ground (SFCG). The project is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) and is field-wide effort to address the unique challenges to measuring and learning from peacebuilding programs. The PEC convenes donors, scholars, policymakers, local and international practitioners, and evaluation experts in an unprecedented open dialogue, exchange, and joint learning. It seeks to address the root causes of weak evaluation practices and disincentives for better learning by fostering field-wide change through three strategic and reinforcing initiatives: 1) Developing Methodological Rigor; 2) Improving the Culture of Evaluation and Shared Learning; and 3) Fostering the Use of Evidence to Inform Peacebuilding Policy.