

Synthesis

KOFF Roundtable: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in Complexity: How to Capture Contributions to Peace



In November 2025, the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF hosted the Roundtable “Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in Complexity: How to Capture Contributions to Peace” to exchange on how different organizations define and capture their intended contributions to complex social outcomes, including peace and social cohesion, the challenges faced in capturing such outcomes with traditional MEL approaches, and reflect on the usefulness of evolving MEL approaches with adaptive and complexity-informed tools.

Speakers:

- **David Streiff**, Advisor Evaluation & Learning, Helvetas
- **Martina Belotti**, Program Officer Peacebuilding Analysis and Impact, swisspeace
- **Sarah Ferbach**, Program Officer Peacebuilding Analysis and Impact, swisspeace

Moderation:

- **Sarah Ferbach**, Program Officer Peacebuilding Analysis and Impact, swisspeace
- **Chatrina Schumacher**, Associate Program Officer Peacebuilding Analysis and Impact, swisspeace/KOFF

Organization:

- **Chatrina Schumacher**, Associate Program Officer Peacebuilding Analysis and Impact, swisspeace/KOFF

Summary

Actors across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus have been facing increasing pressure to demonstrate the results and impact of their activities, especially in the context of funding cuts. “Soft” outcomes or social change which include peace, social cohesion, trust and resilience, are some of the outcomes most difficult to capture, particularly with traditional – often quantitative – MEL approaches that donors usually require. This challenge calls for rethinking outcome and impact measurement, exploring adaptive MEL approaches and other efforts to better capture contributions to peace and social change at the project, programmatic and institutional levels. At the same time, this challenge also calls on practitioners to reflect on the different – and at times divergent – constraints

faced by donor institutions and by organizations leading the implementation of projects. Suitable MEL approaches to capture contributions to social change are necessary for monitoring the implementation of activities, learning, steering, and communicating about it.

Key Points

Several challenges regarding capturing complex social outcomes and avenues in overcoming them have been raised and discussed by the expert speakers and participants.

Tool gap for capturing specific impact of Nexus interventions

Reviews of HDP Nexus implementation systematically signal that current MEL systems fall short of capturing the specific impact of Nexus interventions. In literature and practice, the main suggested solutions so far have been calls for coordinated planning, monitoring and evaluation. This often results in heavily qualitative country-level logical frameworks focusing on “collective outcomes” as defined in planning processes and the achievement of certain coordination processes. This implies a stronger focus on structures and processes at the country level rather than on the impact on communities. Beyond a lack of coordination, the real challenges go beyond and are rather methodological, reflecting a “tool gap” especially among humanitarian and development actors. Many local and national organizations working within the Nexus acknowledge this tool gap and have interest in developing their use of adaptive MEL approaches that can genuinely support adaptive project management and learning. However, they are often constrained by limited resources and capacities to adopt such approaches as well as by donor requirements to adhere to more traditional MEL approaches – which themselves monopolize the already limited resources for MEL. Most donors also recognize the need to expand the MEL toolbox and adopt more qualitative and adaptive approaches. They themselves feel constrained by the pressure to aggregate and communicate results at institutional level and to make evidence-based, rigorous claims about the effectiveness and impact of their portfolio, especially in a context of shrinking funding for aid.

To overcome this challenge, swisspeace is researching this tool gap as part of a practice-based learning journey. It aims to both deepen its practice in adaptive MEL approaches and explore additional, innovative adaptive approaches suitable for projects at the HPD Nexus. The goal is to improve institutional uptake of such approaches among organizations working across the HDP Nexus. It is therefore central to co-develop and engage with other organizations to ensure the tools and approaches explored are genuinely addressing the needs of practitioners.

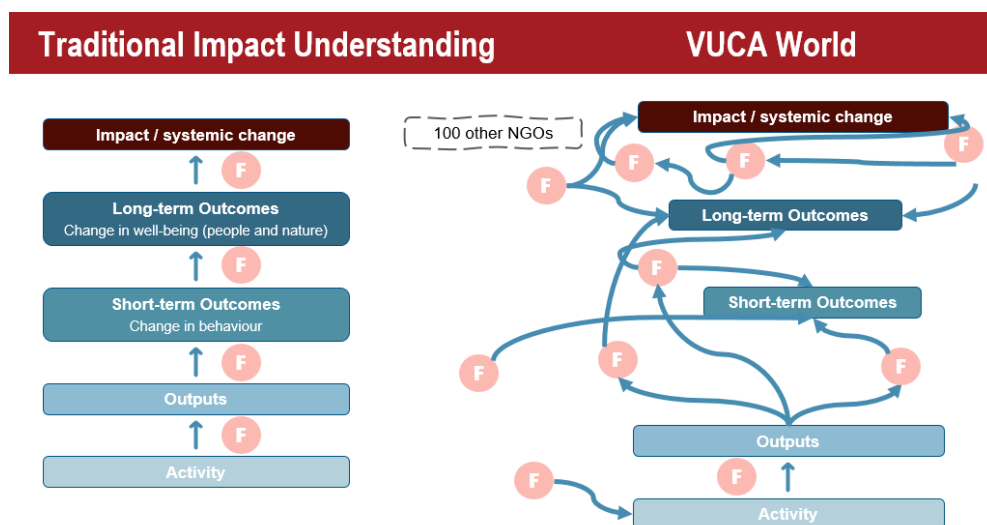
Peace in institutional results frameworks

Especially for organizations working primarily in development and humanitarian fields, capturing organization-wide impact on peace is challenging. In order to do so and to mainstream contributions to peace – including indirect and passive ones – across the whole organization, Helvetas has included transversal markers on conflict transformation in its institutional results framework (<https://helvetas.indikit.net/>). The indicators range from being community-centered to focusing on collaboration with partners as well as how Helvetas works itself. Some of these indicators are mandatory for all projects while others are not which allows for maintaining flexibility per project. Additionally, the institutional results framework also includes markers for cross-cutting themes such as gender and social equity as well as learning innovation as transversal themes, advocacy as intervention approach, and conflict sensitivity, inclusive systems, and partnerships as institutional approaches. The level of integration of these themes into projects and programs can be guided based on a spectrum from negative, blind, sensitive, responsive, and transformative. Helvetas aims for all projects and programs to systematically consider cross-cutting themes, namely that no project should be theme-negative or theme-blind as this risks creating or exacerbating existing inequalities, conflicts or injustices. At a minimum level, every program or project should integrate these themes in a sensitive way. If the project seeks to contribute to a systemic change on one theme, the project is considered responsive or even transformative.

To implement such a results framework on an institutional level, standard questionnaires for project managers have been developed. While there is the option to contextualize answers to the questionnaires, a balance needs to be found with as little deviation as possible since as much comparability and aggregation of data as possible is sought.

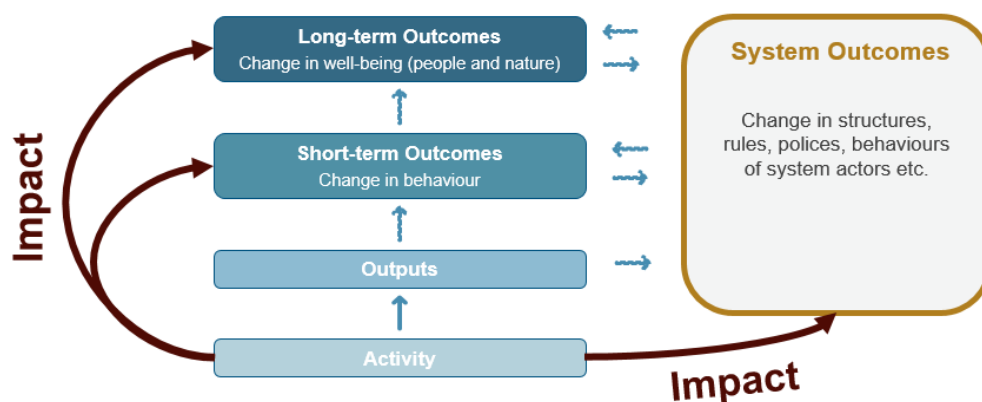
Rethinking impact in a complex world

Working in complex systems with an increasing number of transversal topics to integrate and a multitude of other actors working in and on a context, it becomes very difficult to understand and measure one's impact. Reality is far more complex and intertwined than a traditional understanding of impact and the linear connection between activity, outputs, outcomes, and impact may seem to portray. There is also a risk of confusing outcomes with impact.



Graphic 1: Comparison between a traditional understanding of impact on the left and a complexity-informed one on the right¹

Given that many other factors and actors contribute to achieving outcomes and systemic change, it is better to report on a contribution to change than attribute outcomes to specific outputs or actors. Accordingly, an alternative, and more realistic understanding of impact, could look like this:



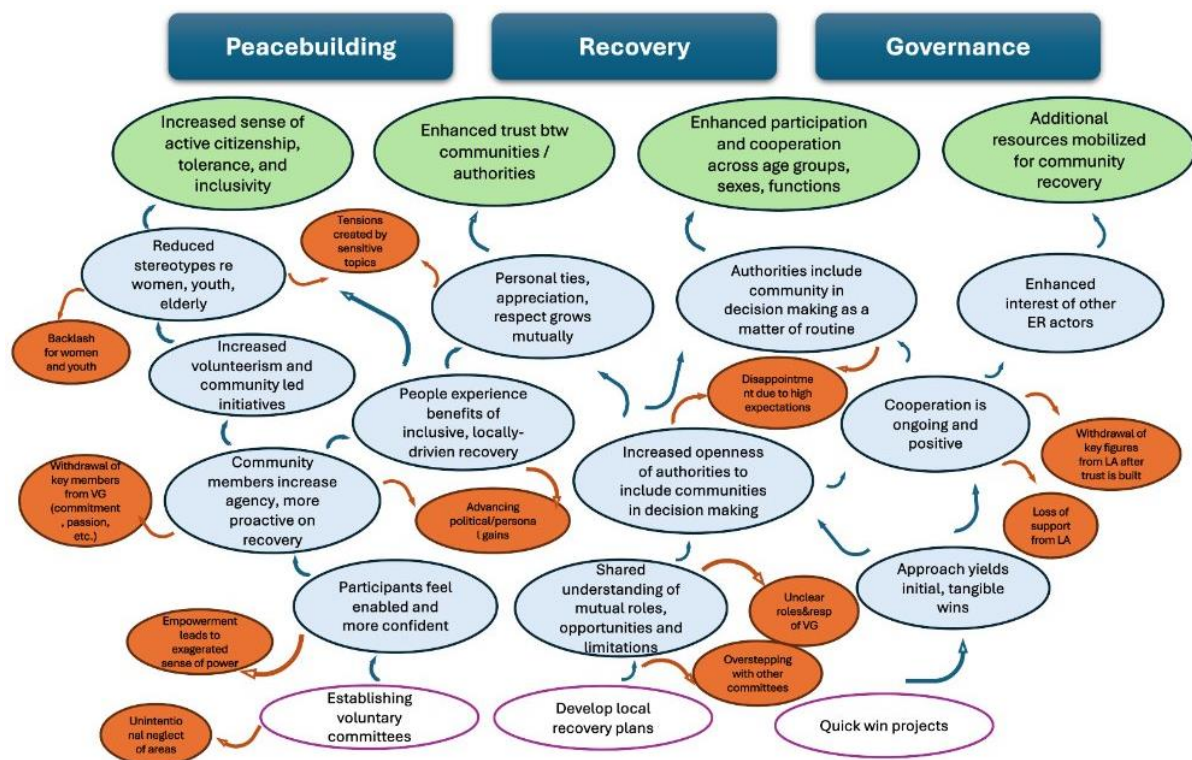
Graphic 2: Draft alternative way of understanding impact of activities on different levels of outcomes

¹ VUCA is an acronym and stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.

Project contributions traditional MEL approaches cannot capture

During the discussion, one case illustrated how project contributions to social change can remain invisible when assessed through traditional MEL approaches. While the presented project contributed to social change, staff realized that their usual MEL tools were unable to capture and communicate these results as they went beyond what was reflected in the project's logical framework. In this case, this challenge was addressed by complementing the traditional MEL tools with complexity-informed and adaptive MEL approaches:

- A retrospective Theory of Change² approach was used, where staff identified the activities undertaken as part of the project, and the possible pathways of change leading to the desired outcomes.
- This approach was complemented by Outcome Harvesting, a tool focusing on outcome-level changes in behavior, such as change in practices, relationships, activities, or policies. Conducted with community representatives, this approach allowed to identify similar areas of social change that staff had already determined as part of the retrospective theory of change exercise.
- The combination of both adaptive MEL tools was useful to trace back the changes foreseen and identified by staff and to corroborate it. Beyond fulfilling the reporting objective, a participatory approach was adopted, actively involving local communities and partners in the learning process. Community members not only shared their perspectives on positive social change and challenges but also contributed to interpreting outcomes, reflecting on the project's pathways of change, and shaping lessons for future initiatives.
- While this approach has worked well at a project level, the challenge of bridging learning, especially qualitative, and organizational-level data aggregation remains open.



Graphic 3: Illustration of retrospective Theory of Change

² The retrospective Theory of Change was applied because the project had already concluded. Ideally, this exercise would be conducted at the beginning of the project to guide design, planning, and monitoring from the outset.

Striking a balance between MEL for donor needs and downward accountability to communities

While the considerations outlined above are increasingly being acknowledged by practitioners across the HDP Nexus, extensive reporting requirements by donors consume a lot of resources, leaving little to no resources for introducing complexity-informed MEL approaches, which can be time-consuming, but often more useful for program or project steering purposes and downward accountability to communities. More participatory and community-centered MEL approaches such as Outcome Harvesting are more inclusive and align better with decolonial approaches, however they risk not falling into donor requirements and being too resource-intensive considering the usually limited budgets attributed to MEL. Based on this, a balance has to be found between collecting data that is required for upward accountability while maintaining resources available for MEL that is more useful and adapted for steering projects and programs, as well as to support learning and downward accountability to communities. The following shared elements can guide this process of finding a suitable balance:

- For impact reporting, consider using storytelling methods to capture and communicate project or program contributions. In comparison to large, complicated results frameworks, storytelling might be sufficient for the reporting aspect of MEL and requires less resources. Such examples can help flesh out the numbers collected through the relevant quantitative indicators.
- Speak with donors about this tension of navigating standardized MEL requirements centered around upward reporting and the MEL approaches that would be more useful for steering and learning. Identify the red lines of donor requirements, specifically which outputs need to be reported on and where room can be made for integrating alternative MEL approaches. Generally, there's more openness on the outcome rather than output level and institutionally, there is often space for negotiating a balance. While these negotiations can be time-intensive, small progress and adaptations are useful both at project level and system-wide.
- Make the most out of the data that must be gathered for MEL and use them internally for learning and strengthening accountability to communities. Also consider for instance collaborating with local universities for whom such data might be valuable for research, too.

Recommendations to consider and explore further

The following overarching elements shared by peers can be useful in navigating the challenges around meaningfully capturing impact and suitable MEL approaches:

- No one-size fits all: Not all alternative, complexity-informed or adaptive methodologies suit every context. While certain adaptive MEL tools fit and are useful for one context, other tools are more effective in another context or project. Utilizing MEL approaches that are appropriate to the specific context of implementation and activities being implemented is also in line with pursuing a localized understanding of what peace is.
- Break down abstract concepts, such as social cohesion, resilience or peace: What do they really mean in a given context? What is it that a project really wants to achieve?
- Engage with donors to identify and negotiate what compromises in MEL approaches can be made to fulfill both donors' and implementers' needs. Looking for alternative approaches while critically reflecting on the approaches currently used and considering how to apply them more effectively.
- Find a balance between qualitative reporting (e.g. storytelling) at the outcome level and quantitative monitoring at the output level, adapted to the specific projects and (negotiated) reporting requirements.
- Center your MEL approaches around what is useful for your steering of projects and programs and valuable for internal learning. Only do what is absolutely useful and necessary for learning and adapting to the needs of the context, and for reporting purposes as it is close to impossible to report on everything.