Learning from Monitoring & Evaluation – a blueprint for an adaptive organisation

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Aim and structure

Learning is an essential characteristic of an adaptive organisation. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) provide important data and experiences that can contribute to such learning.

In this paper we set out principles for learning from social forestry M&E within the Forestry Commission (FC) and its partners. Smith (2010) notes that writing on learning organisations is highly idealised and that there are few actual examples of organisations that have managed to put principles into action. This is not at odds with our objective to set out the principles of learning from M&E, and to investigate how they might be realised within the FC. To that end, we also outline a programme of research to test and develop these principles, the outcome of which will be guidance on M&E design and implementation for enhanced learning outcomes.

Learning from M&E will be dependent on activities and structures within three inter-related domains that are addressed in separate sections of this paper. In each section we present a summary review of key literature to present an idealised vision of practices and organisational structures for the promotion of learning outcomes:

1. The 'intra- and inter-organisational domain' refers to the structures, knowledge cultures and communicative practices <u>within</u> and <u>between</u> organisations that can promote learning outcomes.

2. The 'M&E domain' refers to the overall organisation, analytical orientation (aims and objectives), and to the data gathering tools (indicators) of a given M&E project that can promote learning outcomes.

3. The 'research domain' refers to the principles of participatory evaluation and how they may be operationalised to help realise the learning potential within domains 1, 2 and 3.

Finally, in Section 4 we set out a programme of participatory evaluation research within 'live' M&E projects to test and develop the principles set out in previous sections.

Background

This paper is an output of the research project 'Learning from Monitoring & Evaluation' (Study No. FR09031), which aims to inform best practice in M&E, and to develop and test models to improve the use of M&E data within the FC so that the organisation and its partners can become more responsive, adaptive and, ultimately, sustainable. The project started from the recognition that the FC and its partners could make better use of data that are gathered as part of evaluations of social forestry policy, programme and project delivery, and which have the potential to inform processes of decision-making, planning and design.

It is commonly said of evaluation reports that they have merely 'ticked the box' of fulfilling funders' requirements, or are 'gathering dust on the shelf'. A study of community forestry in Great Britain noted that although initiatives have been evaluated, they 'are often completed as a formality, or as an outward looking defence of public spending, and do not feed into internal learning processes' (Lawrence et al. 2009). As such, the FC, like many organisations, is missing important opportunities to learn from experience, communicate successes, and develop organisationally.

This focus on learning and adaptation mirrors an important shift within the general field of monitoring and evaluation, originally conceived within the international development sector as a form of '*evaluation for accountability*' or *'summative evaluation'*, whereby a donor or sponsor is given the necessary information to demonstrate that a funded intervention has delivered against its stated aims and objectives. The last 20 years has seen a gradual shift in practical and analytical emphasis to respond to the needs of development funders, planners and practitioners to learn from previous experience. Central to this development has been the increasingly strong emphasis placed on the translation of new knowledge into better policy and practice. This shift in emphasis has given rise to '*evaluation for learning'*, also referred to as '*formative evaluation*'[1].

Evidence-based practice
A variety of evaluation approaches have emerged that are aimed at learning and informing improvements to the practical dimensions of project and programme delivery. Patton (2002: 179) catalogues and references some key approaches, such as 'action learning' (Pedler 1991), 'reflective practice' (Tremmel 1993), 'action research' (Whyte 1989), internal evaluation (Sonnichsen 2000), organisational development (Patton 1999), and systematic praxis (Bawden & Packham 1998). With these approaches, the primary purpose of the evaluation is to yield insights that change practice and enable programme participants to think more systematically and reflexively about what they're

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[1] It should be stressed that evaluation for accountability and evaluation for learning are not mutually exclusive – the need to provide summative judgments about whether a programme was effective or not can, and often does, sit perfectly comfortably alongside the need for insights that can improve programme effectiveness.

doing.

Evidence-based policy

The concept of evidence-based policy has also gained currency in recent years, as has the strategic application of monitoring and evaluation within evidence-based policy making. In 2003 (updated in 2006) the Government Social Research Unit (GSR) published The Magenta Book - a set of guidance notes for policy evaluation commissioners, policy evaluators and analysts. A Defra-commissioned review of the role of monitoring and evaluation in policy-making across Whitehall highlighted the potential learning gains where evidence can help identify what has worked in previous policies, can improve policy / programme implementation, and can identify and measure the impact of a policy / programme (Yaron 2006).

Defining the terms

Learning

Here we are discussing the concept of learning in a specific context: the improved effectiveness of people, projects and organisations, through conscious processing of information gained from experience. This conscious processing of information and experience can be structured through M&E.

Learning occurs on at least two levels, giving rise to the concepts of 'single-loop learning' and 'double-loop learning' developed in the field of organisational learning (Argyris and Schön 1978, Bateson 1972).

Single-loop learning leads actors to modify their behaviour to adjust to goals within the status quo.
Double-loop learning challenges mental models and the policies based on those, and involves learning from others as well as from one's own experience[2].

There are two main routes to learning in the sense being discussed here:
- reflexivity or introspection – conscious reflection on one's own experience
- exchange - sharing experiences amongst different stakeholders.

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[2] A third, more profound level of learning and change, is sometimes mentioned as **triple loop learning:** when a complete transformation in world view takes place. This kind of learning is not likely to take place within organisational structures but is the kind that can inspire new social movements.

Reflexive learning is built into some kinds of research. The best-known example is action research where the conscious processing of research experiences becomes the data which informs behavioural change of the participants in the research.

Learning through exchange is sometimes referred to as 'interactive' or 'social' learning (Webler et al. 1995), although this term also refers to behaviour learned through social interaction. It can also be conducted within the framework of collaborative learning, which can take the form of teams working to build new understanding from experiences and data.

Both reflexive and interactive learning can be enhanced by participatory research, or participatory monitoring and evaluation. These forms of participation include a range of different stakeholders in planning the evaluation, gathering and interpreting data, and drawing conclusions. If the participants include those most affected by the research topic (sometimes called the 'evaluand'), they can be highly motivated to implement the findings, or to pressurise those in positions of influence to implement the findings.

Monitoring & Evaluation

Although the term 'Monitoring & Evaluation' tends to get run together as if it refers to a single research activity, it actually refers to two distinct, albeit closely related, sets of data gathering practices. The distinction between monitoring and evaluation is primarily one of analytical depth:

'Whereas monitoring may be nothing more than a simple recording of activities and results against plans and budgets, evaluation probes deeper. Although monitoring signals failures to reach targets and other problems to be tackled along the way, it can usually not _explain_ why a particular problem has arisen, or why a particular outcome has occurred or failed to occur' (Molund & Schill 2007, emphasis added).

The following definitions of Monitoring and Evaluation help both to reinforce and to carefully demarcate the distinction outlined above:

Monitoring:

'… the periodic oversight of the implementation of an activity which seeks to establish the extent to which input deliveries, work schedules, other required actions and targeted outputs are proceeding according to plan, so that timely action can be taken to correct deficiencies detected. Monitoring is also useful for the systematic checking on a condition or set of conditions, such as following the situation of women and children' (UNICEF, undated: 2) .

'… a continuing function that uses the systematic collection of data on specified indicators to inform management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing […] operation of the extent of progress and achievement of results in the use of allocated funds' (IFRC, 2002: 1-5)*.*

'… the continuous follow-up of activities and results in relation to pre-set targets and objectives' (Molund & Schill, 2007: 12).

Evaluation:

'… the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming' (Patton, 2002: 10)

'… a process which attempts to determine as systematically and objectively as possible the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact of activities in the light of specified objectives. It [evaluation] *is a learning and action-oriented management tool and organizational process for improving both current activities and future planning, programming and decision-making'* (UNICEF, ibid: 2).

'… the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed operation, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, as well as efficiency, effectiveness, impact (overall Goal) and sustainability. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons into management decision-making' (IFRC, ibid: 1-6).

Learning from M&E

Patton (2002) sorts M&E approaches into two broad categories, based on distinctions between those that merely measure whether goals and objectives have been attained (summative M&E), and those that enable stakeholders to learn and change in response to a given programme's successes and failures (formative M&E). A critical consideration here is whether a given M&E application moves beyond providing an account of *what* has happened, to offering explanations of *why* certain (positive and negative) outcomes have arisen. It is this explanatory capacity of M&E that is critical in terms of its contribution to learning and organisational change, and is a key focus of UK governmental guidance on the role of evaluation within evidence-based policy making (Government Social Research Unit, 2006).

This explanatory function of M&E works in two ways:
1. When M&E establishes the causal linkages between elements in the project cycle (e.g. inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts), allowing stakeholders to determine cause and effect and to identify where improvements can be made.

2. When M&E feeds into processes of collective reflection and analysis between stakeholders to determine the reasons behind success / failure.

Section 1: The intra- and inter-organisational domains

The extent to which an organisation learns from the experience of project, programme or policy delivery will depend in part on the nature of the structures, knowledge cultures and communicative practices <u>within</u> that organisation. Key principles relating to these factors are outlined below.

Many organisations (including the FC), however, work with a wide range of private, public and third sector organisations to achieve their objectives. A recent review of partnerships between the FC and Third sector organisations, for example, revealed the extent of partnership working, with more than 140 different Third Sector organisations listed as operating with the Commission in England alone (Ambrose-Oji et al., 2010.). In a delivery context characterised by partnership working, monitoring and evaluation of delivery will entail reporting performance against aims and objectives shared across organisations. In these cases the need to learn from M&E will also be shared – learning can be an inter-, as well as an intra-organisational phenomenon. As such, the principles outlined below apply as much to individual as to multiple, collaborating organisations.

Here it is helpful to re-emphasise the distinction between learning individuals and learning organisations. As indicated above, learning can be 'single-loop' or 'first order' learning: it helps individuals within an organisation to do their jobs more effectively through processes of conscious reflection on their own experiences. However some commentators have criticised this type of learning, exposing its limited potential to enable organisational learning which requires communicative exchanges between individuals so that experiences can be shared. They point out that organisational learning is inherently interactive (Voss & Kemp 2006, Senge 1990, Smith 2010).

Smith (2010) notes that writing on learning organisations is highly idealised and that there are few actual examples of organisations that have managed to put principles into action. This is not at odds with our objective to set out the principles of learning from M&E, and to investigate how they might be realised within the FC.

Donald Schon was an early advocate of the development of institutions that are 'learning systems', by which he meant systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation (1973: 28). Much of the subsequent literature on learning organisations has been a development of Schon's ideas. Three key criteria for learning organisations emerge from this literature: Systemic thinking, dialogue and social capital.

Systemic thinking: The conceptual cornerstone of Peter Senge's (1990) work on learning organisations, systemic thinking enables an appreciation of the inter-relatedness of sub-systems, of individual actors and actions, and an accommodation of sophistication and complexity within strategic thinking and decision-making. The ability to accommodate complexity is likely to be even more important when policies, programmes and projects are delivered through partnerships.

Dialogue: Senge also places an emphasis on dialogue, especially as a component of successful team learning. The concept of dialogue goes beyond mere communication - it involves individuals adopting a stance of openness and preparedness to accommodate the views and opinions of others - the concern is not to 'win the argument', but to advance understanding of the situation and, collectively, to draw out the appropriate lessons. As Senge has argued, learning through dialogue entails the capacity of team members to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together"' (1990: 10).

Social capital: Cohen and Prusak (2001: 4) refer to social capital as "the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible". The development of social capital constitutes a valuable investment for any organisation interested in promoting learning because creating opportunities for people to connect provides the medium for effective dialogue and fosters the appropriate conditions for genuine participation in collective thinking, analysis and decision-making.

As well as revealing the extent of partnership working within the FC, Ambrose-Oji et al. (2010) also identified some key characteristics of successful partnership working that overlap substantially with the principles of dialogue and social capital, namely:

Mutual communication - "the ability of the individuals within each organisation in a relationship or partnership being able to discuss, transmit and network information, responses and feedback about day to day situations, the progress of partnership working and other process issues." (ibid, 45).

Mutual understanding – "Real communication and trust between organisations is supported by a mutual understanding of the professional context and aims of the organisations involved in a relationship." (ibid, 49).

Mutual trust and respect – "trust and honesty between partners, built through communication and mutual understanding" (ibid, 50).

Summary - Key principles for organisations:

In order to enhance the potential for learning and adaptation, organisations and the teams within them should aspire to become <u>learning systems</u>. This will involve developing the capacity for <u>systemic thinking</u> within strategic planning and decision-making, fostering open and genuine <u>dialogue</u> between project team members, and fostering the conditions for cooperative action through the development of <u>social capital</u>.

Section 2: The M&E domain

The extent to which an organisation learns from the data it gathers about project, programme or policy delivery will depend on the organisation, the overall analytical orientation, and the data gathering tools (e.g. indicators) of a given M&E project. Key principles relating to these factors are outlined below.

Broadly speaking, learning outcomes are achieved through M&E in two ways:

- end of cycle learning - Learning forms the final connection in the project cycle, where the M&E data is used as the basis for appraisal and renewed planning.
- within-cycle learning - M&E structures the information that feeds into learning processes that form part of the project cycle.

The stages of the project cycle are illustrated in Figure 1. The same cyclical concept is applied to programme and policy planning and implementation. In all cases, the 'monitoring' stage provides an opportunity for learning during implementation, and the 'evaluation' stage provides an opportunity for learning after project completion.

Figure 1: the project cycle (various versions are in use, but the basic concept is the same for all)

Evaluat-
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Needs
Identifi-
cation

Planning

Complet-
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Monitor-
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Implem-
entation
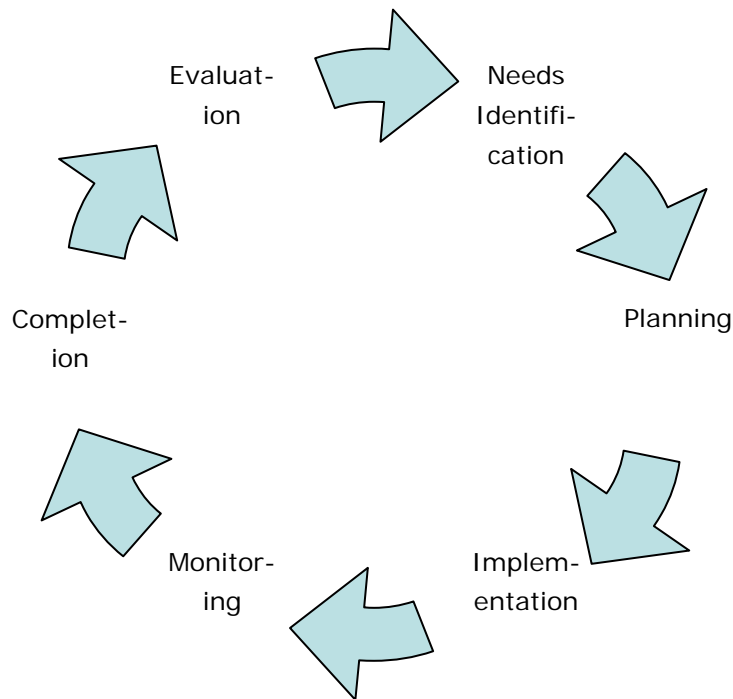
Is learning an intentional outcome?

Opportunities for learning do not necessarily arise of their own accord, however, and much depends on the way in which M&E is built into the project (or programme, or policy) process. If monitoring is equated merely with keeping track of spend, there will be few, if any, opportunities for learning during the project cycle. Where monitoring data is being collected as a matter of routine, to track change over time independently of any specific project or intervention, there may be no process associated with the generation, interpretation and use of the data for learning purposes. If, however, the project cycle has been designed to include internal feedback loops that allow project activities to be adjusted in the light of intermediate results, the monitoring stage can provide opportunities for adaptive management.

Similarly, evaluation does not automatically lead to learning. Evaluation can just be based on project outputs, research results, or policy implementation targets. The terms of reference for these may be set at the planning stage and can provide opportunities for first-order learning - they will inform evaluators whether the project has been completed successfully and, at best, may also provide some opportunity to learn under which circumstances this success can be achieved. If, however, the evaluation has been set up

as a means of drawing out key lessons that can be fed into the design of subsequent iterations of delivery, then learning outcomes can be realised.

The point here is that learning must be a <u>deliberate</u> objective of the M&E process. Learning must be 'written into' the M&E plan in the form of scheduled checkpoints at which data is formally analysed and reflected upon.

To achieve learning outcomes M&E also needs to produce a certain kind of data. Again, if the M&E only produces evidence of delivery, on budget, on time, and against specified objectives, then learning will be limited. In order for policy makers and practitioners to be able to make the necessary adjustments to the design and implementation of interventions, they need to understand the reasons behind the failings or successes of previous applications of policies, programmes or projects. This level of understanding necessitates a particular kind of evidence – one that enables the precise identification and description of the causal linkages between inputs and their outputs and outcomes – it requires data that <u>explains</u> why failings or successes occurred under a certain set of circumstances (ChannahSorah 2003).

Because project outputs lead, often indirectly, to project outcomes, and wider, less predictable or controllable impacts, M&E also needs to be <u>flexible</u> enough to accommodate and learn from the unexpected. It is possible to set indicators for these outcomes and impacts at the planning stage, but it is often more difficult to measure them and attribute them to the project alone. To rely only on 'pre-cooked' indicators would preclude learning from the unexpected. More open-ended forms of evaluation are also needed to inform stakeholders of the wider effects of a project, programme or policy. In summary, in project or programme cycles, learning can take place by comparing M&E findings with the expected or desired state. But if M&E data is structured in a rigid way that has missed potential outcomes, this structure can stand in the way of learning and more open research approaches will be needed.

Organisation
The link between evaluation and changes in policy or practice is rarely strong (Bell and Morse 2003). Rigby et al., (2000) argue that:

"Much of the measurement of indicators, has, at the end of the day, largely resulted just in the measurement of indicators. The actual operationalization of indicators to influence or change, for instance, policy is still in its infancy" (cited in Bell and Morse, 2003: 51).

There are some who argue that real learning processes take place not in examining the results of M&E processes, but in formulating the indicators themselves.

"indicators that are influential are developed with participation of those who are to use them… the joint learning process around indicator development and use is far more

important in terms of impact than are the actual indicator reports. It is this process that assures that the indicators become part of the players' meaning systems. They act on the indicators because the ideas the indicators represent have become second nature to them and part of what they take for granted" (Innes and Booher c. 1999).

One area that has attracted particular attention is that of the social 'ownership' of M&E. Despite widespread attention given to the need for participatory M&E, the handing over of monitoring systems to local communities has rarely been successful (Garcia and Lescuyer 2008). Several authors from Canada have highlighted the gap between community M&E, and decision making – whether locally or nationally (Conrad 2006, Conrad and Daoust 2008, Faith 2005).

Where participatory monitoring does take place, it can be a key factor contributing to success (Hartanto et al. 2002, Wollenberg et al. 2001). Some positive examples are provided by North America. A case study of 'improving forest monitoring through participatory monitoring' focuses on four organisations who 'shared a common goal of creating learning communities to better address the complex array of forest health and forest livelihood issues' (Ballard et al. 2010). They highlight 'important changes in social and institutional relationships' between the community, the forestry department and environmental NGOs. The process helped local people to appreciate the complexity of forest management, and contributed to increased social capital. More open-ended approaches to 'learning from experience' include the recent emphasis on social forestry networks and 'writeshops', to help practitioners analyse experience and present it in written format for sharing (e.g. Mahanty et al. 2006).

It follows that M&E should not just be a means of generating technical data, but a means of bringing people together in the collective activities of gathering, analysing, and interpreting data and, critically, applying the lessons drawn from them in renewed cycles of delivery. In short, learning from M&E can be enhanced by an inclusive and <u>participatory</u> approach, with adequate resources allocated to improving communication between researchers, policymakers, operational staff, and community members and to facilitating their combined involvement in all stages of the evaluation cycle.

Summary - Key principles for M&E:

- Learning outcomes should figure as a <u>deliberate</u> objective of the M&E process;
- M&E should <u>explain</u> project successes and failures by clearly linking inputs, activities and outputs to their outcomes and impacts;
- M&E design should be <u>flexible</u> enough to accommodate and learn from the unexpected;
- M&E should be <u>participatory</u> because involving stakeholders in indicator design,

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data gathering, analysis and interpretation increases the likelihood that lessons will be applied.

Section 3: The research domain

The weak link between evaluation and changes in policy or practice highlighted by Bell and Morse (2003) can be attributed, in part, to a model of evaluation where the gathering, analysis and interpretation of evaluative data is treated as distinct from the delivery of the policy, programme or project being evaluated. This distinction is often organisational as well as conceptual – M&E is often contracted out to an external research company as a separate, bounded task that runs in parallel to project activities. Outsourcing M&E in this way is considered beneficial in terms of providing an independent and objective assessment of project successes and failures. However, this objectivity comes at a price because project staff themselves are not directly involved in the analysis or interpretation of data and, therefore, not best placed to react and adjust to evidence of good or poor performance. Under this model, the potential for organisational learning is limited and is highly dependent upon regular and detailed feedback and input from the researchers.

The broad school of **participatory evaluation** offers alternative models of evaluative research where the distinction between researcher and researched is de-emphasised, or abolished altogether. Rather than providing a detached, objective assessment over which he / she has ultimate control, the evaluator's role is to assist programme participants in making their own assessment and the research process is controlled by the people in the programme (these can be practitioners as well as community members). Their participation can be an end in itself, an expression of the right for people to have a voice in matters that significantly affect them. It can also be justified in instrumental terms, as it helps to mobilise local knowledge and helps to make the intervention more relevant and effective (Molund & Schill 2007).

Patton (2002: 179) catalogues and references some key approaches, such as action learning (Pedler 1991), reflective practice (Tremmel 1993), action research (Whyte 1989), internal evaluation (Sonnichsen 2000), organisational development (Patton 1999c), and systematic praxis (Bawden & Packham 1998). With these approaches, the primary purpose of the evaluation is to yield insights that change practice and enable programme participants to think more systematically and reflexively about what they're doing. Specific findings about programme performance emerge, but they are secondary to the more general learning outcomes of the inquiry – a distinction that Patton captures through his differentiation of 'process use' from 'findings use' (1997).

Participatory evaluation's emphasis on breaking down boundaries and bridging gaps between all the stakeholders involved (including researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and community members) is sometimes reflected in the design of the indicators used. This is particularly relevant for social forestry M&E where the intangibility and mutability of many social and economic outcomes forces a recognition that there are sometimes no simple, objective indicators of social benefit.

Recognition of this has had two notable impacts. Firstly, it has given rise to the development of indictors that attempt to capture the more intangible outcomes and the processes of social change that bring them about. Canadian researchers, for example, describe the 'next generation' of (forestry) socio-economic indicators as "process" indicators. These deal more with causal affects than outcomes and include things like sense of place or attachment to place. Process indicators also include variables such as leadership, volunteerism, entrepreneurship, and social cohesion (Beckley, Parkins, and Stedman 2002). Secondly, and related to this, it has led to the development of participatory approaches to indicator development whereby the terms of reference of the evaluation are sensitised and tailored to specific socio-cultural and economic contexts. The International Centre for Forestry Research (CIFOR) has led work in this field, particularly in relation to the development of indicators of sustainable forest management (SFM). Because the ecological, social and economic are all interconnected in SFM they advocate qualitative multi-criteria approaches to developing indicators (Mendoza and Prabhu 2003). Methods include cognitive mapping, a tool that can help to assess the interconnectedness of indicators.

Summary - Key principles for research:

M&E research should be <u>participatory</u> and should bring researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and community members together in the collective enterprise of indicator design, data gathering, analysis and interpretation. This will create the conditions for shared ownership of the M&E process and increase the likelihood that lessons will be applied.

M&E research should only focus on outcomes and impacts, but also the processes through which social change occurs. Process indicators should be considered during evaluation design and planning.

Section 4: Testing the principles

Thus far in this paper we have set out key principles for learning from M&E that emerge from a summary review of the literature. These principles are listed in the text boxes at

the end of each section, for easy reference. We have purposefully 'de-cluttered' our presentation of the principles; they are presented as ideals of M&E design, application and organisational orientation without consideration for how they might actually be operationalised. In this section we outline a programme of research whereby these principles can be scrutinised, tested and developed through their 'real life' application in the context of social forestry policy, programme and project delivery in Great Britain.

This research programme consists of two phases, which seek to learn from experience (phase 1), and develop improved approaches collaboratively (phase 2). We describe these phases in more detail below.

Phase 1: Scoping interviews - A series of semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key social forestry M&E stakeholders within the FC to examine the extent to which learning and adaptation outcomes inform the design and implementation of M&E within the organisation; the extent to which M&E has led to learning and adaptation, whether planned or not; and to document examples of M&E applications that have been successful or unsuccessful with respect to learning and adaptation. The analysis of the interview results will enable us to formulate a number of 'learning efficacy' criteria (factors that have been present in a given M&E application and which enabled learning outcomes to be achieved). These criteria can be compared with the principles set out in this paper (Sections 1-3) to see how the FC has fared to-date against this idealised vision for learning from M&E, and can then also be applied and tested through the case study component of the research project (Phase 2).

Scoping interviews will address the following research questions:

RQ1: Why do FC staff gather data about the performance of policies, programmes and projects?
RQ2: Do FC staff members consider learning outcomes when they are thinking about M&E design and implementation?
RQ3: What factors lead to successful learning outcomes?
RQ4: What factors prevent successful learning outcomes?

Phase 2: Case studies – SERG is currently involved in three projects (see below) to develop and implement frameworks of social forestry M&E. These projects provide opportunities to put into practise, test and develop the principles set out in this paper. We propose to carry out this work between 2010/11 and 2012/13. Our research will be orientated around the principles set out in Section 3. We will adopt an action research approach, based around the integration of monitoring and evaluation activities into the wider project cycle, and the active involvement of researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and community members in M&E tasks, such as indicator development, and

data gathering, analysis and interpretation. Implementing a participatory evaluation approach will enable us to test whether, and in what ways, the active involvement of a range of stakeholders delivers opportunities for learning and adaptation.

In principle, the adoption of this participatory approach should deliver benefits in terms of learning. However, we are aware that it will require increased levels of commitment and responsibility for policy / operational staff and community members who, under more conventional models of M&E, would play a fairly passive role. As such, trying to implement a participatory approach will enable us to document the process and assess it in terms of practical feasibility and resource implications.

We now set out the approach to be taken in each case study:

Case study 1: An evaluation of the community impacts and key lessons from the Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme

The Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) is a five year programme of landscape and heritage based activities, seeking to maximise the value of the northern part of the Blackdown Hills AONB for wildlife conservation, recreation, learning and skills development. It is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and a partnership of local authorities and agencies, under the HLF's Landscape Partnership programme. The Forestry Commission (Peninsula FD) is lead partner, and the staff team are based with the Blackdown Hills AONB team. The LPS began in October 2006 and runs to 2012.

In August 2010, SERG were asked to carry out an evaluation of the LPS. Although the Neroche Partnership is not obliged to carry out a formal evaluation under the terms of its HLF funding, it is keen to maximise the learning value from the programme, both as a way of rounding off the LPS and providing useful data to underpin legacy activities.

The evaluation work led by SERG will have two main focuses. Firstly it will assess the impacts of the project on its participants in terms of their enjoyment, learning, skills and involvement. Secondly, and to offer useful learning value, the evaluation will try to document and explain positive and negative project outcomes.

Given the short time frame to carry out the work (3 months for primary research), and the fact that the evaluation is starting quite late on the delivery of the LPS, a 'belt and braces' approach to participatory evaluation with active stakeholder involvement in the design, implementation and analysis stages of the M&E is just not feasible. However, because the LPS case study is a good example of many delivery projects where time and resources for M&E are limited, and because of the LPS team's own stated need to draw out key lessons, we feel that trying to facilitate a level of stakeholder participation will

yield valuable insights that can inform our development of practical guidance for learning from M&E.

Framework development - Working with the LPS team, SERG have produced a plan for the evaluation that incorporates as much active involvement by stakeholders as possible within the obvious time and resource constraints, based around the two main focuses outlined above. SERG researchers will work with the LPS team to design short questionnaires for use by LPS staff (FC and delivery partners) to evaluate the impacts of the scheme on participants. These questionnaires are to be distributed to participants at forthcoming events and emailed/mailed to participants using the LPS contacts database. Critically, distribution and data input will be led by the LPS team, putting them in a position to experience directly the feedback given by project participants. Their experience of implementing the survey and gaining feedback will be drawn out during interview conducted by SERG researchers (see below).

Framework implementation – SERG researchers will conduct focus groups with selected project participants, focusing on two LPS activities (to be decided). LPS activity leaders will be encouraged to attend these focus groups, so that they can contribute to discussions about the impacts of the activity in question. Furthermore, this will provide an opportunity for them to gain first hand experience of the feedback provided by participants. Lessons that they draw from this feedback will again be drawn out in the interviews conducted by SERG researchers.

SERG researchers will conduct one-to-one and/or small group interviews with members of the LPS project team, partnership board members, and key members of stakeholder group to elicit their views on the success/difficulties/failure regarding the governance of the LPS, its processes/activities and the impacts on the project team, the Landscape Partnership (funding bodies) and the perceived impacts on project participants and the affected area. A focus group will also be conducted with the stakeholder group. A particular focus of discussion during these interviews will be the ways in which various data types (including M&E data) have been used to inform the design and delivery of the LPS. We will also examine how the structures, knowledge cultures and communicative practices within and between the various organisations involved in the governance of the LPS have inhibited or enabled learning outcomes.

Reporting of the SERG evaluation will be carried out in close collaboration with the LPS project team to ensure that we maximise the capacity of the evaluation outputs to identify the successes and challenges of the Neroche LPS so that lessons can be learnt by FC for other/future projects.

Case study 2: Woodlands In and Around Towns (WIAT)

WIAT supports the creation and management of accessible woodlands for individuals and communities in urban and post-industrial areas as a way to bring the quality of life benefits of forests closer to where people live and work. It is the flagship social forestry programme delivered by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) under the Scottish Rural Development Programme. WIAT was launched in 2005 and by the end of its first three-year phase it had made a capital investment of £30m in over 110 woods across Scotland. Now nearing the end of Phase II (2008-2011), FCS have undertaken to designate 12 existing and new sites to demonstrate the range of benefits delivered through the WIAT programme. These 'priority' sites will provide a strategic focus for the targeting of future resources to develop exemplars of sustainable urban forest management, laying the foundation for the delivery of WIAT Phase III.

There is an ongoing need to evaluate the WIAT programme. For WIAT Phase II a number of evaluation resources were developed, including a set of indicators[3] and guidance on how to carry out monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of social forestry initiatives to be used by WIAT Challenge Fund grant applicants[4]. In addition, FCS have contracted OpenSpace Research to carry out an evaluation of three WIAT sites[5].

As part of wider objectives to develop good practice in community engagement, and the design and delivery of sites, projects and interventions, FCS intend to use the 12 priority sites to develop a broad M&E framework that can be integrated into the design and delivery of WIAT Phase III. To that end, FCS have contracted SERG to lead the development of bespoke M&E framework to be implemented and tested at the priority sites. The terms of reference for this work are as follows:

1. To develop a M&E framework that will produce evidence that shows how WIAT sites and interventions are helping to deliver against wider Scottish policy objectives;
2. To provide a M&E resource that can be used by those delivering and managing WIAT sites, as a way of informing the development of best practice;
3. To develop a M&E framework that enables processes of learning and adaptation at both operational and policy levels.

Framework development consists of indicator and methods design, and producing a number of protocols that provide instructions and guidance to those using the framework. Following on from this, the framework will be implemented at a number of

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[3] Forestry Commission Scotland (2008: 11) Woodlands In and Around Towns: Phase 2. Available at: http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fcfc120.pdf/$FILE/fcfc120.pdf
[4] Available at: http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7djf9c
[5] Copies of the baseline report can be downloaded at: http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/WIATBaselineSurveyFinal300307.pdf/$FILE/WIATBaselineSurveyFinal300307.pdf

priority sites. It is likely that SERG will be contracted on an on-going basis to provide M&E advice and support to WIAT stakeholders and to assist with data gathering, analysis and interpretation.

We will adopt a participatory approach to framework development and implementation in order to test and develop the principles set out in this paper, as follows:

Framework development – the development process will draw on the experience, knowledge and expertise of a number of key research, policy and operational stakeholders to ensure the appropriate selection and design of indicators and to facilitate the necessary buy-in and ownership for successful implementation. Preliminary indicator design and selection will be achieved through workshop meetings to agree a preliminary indicator framework structure that corresponds to key policy and operational delivery agendas (FC and partners). The resulting draft indicators will be subject to alteration and further development pending their implementation and testing at the WIAT priority sites. Indeed, scope for the proposal of additional indicators by FCS, community groups and partners will be written into the framework. This is to allow the flexibility to accommodate the data and evidence requirements of specific sites, projects and local contexts.

Framework implementation – at each site an 'inquiry group' made up of researchers, policy and operational stakeholders, partner organisations and community members will be formed to steer the implementation phase. Each group will select indictors, agree responsibilities for data gathering, and write a plan for the analysis and interpretation of data to include scheduled reflection 'checkpoints' at which M&E findings are discussed and plans for renewed phases of delivery are drafted.

Case study 3: Forestry Commission Thames Beat M&E Strategy

The Thames Beat team has recently drafted a strategy for the delivery of community engagement (CE) activities within the Forestry Commission Thames Beat (FCTB) for the period 2010 - 2012. The CE strategy encompasses a monitoring and evaluation strategy focused on the delivery of CE activities ('the social offer'). SERG is working with the FCTB to support the detailed design and implementation of the CE and M&E strategies.

Refining and improving the social offer (i.e. a better service to the public) is a stated objective of the M&E strategy, and there is a strongly stated intention to use M&E data to feed into processes of learning and adaptation:

"It is critical that any M&E serves a valuable function in the day to day running and strategic development of the TB. In order to ensure this relevance, any M&E package

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must focus on the aspects of the TB work that can be varied on a relatively short cycle (such as annually)."

Framework development – SERG are soon to meet with the Thames Beat team to discuss plans for the 2011/12 CE programme. At this meeting, a participatory approach to M&E framework development and implementation will be discussed.

Framework implementation – Where appropriate (depending on the nature of sites / projects being evaluated), inquiry groups made up of researchers, operational stakeholders, partner organisations and community members will be formed to steer the M&E framework development and implementation. As in the WIAT case study, inquiry groups will select indictors, agree responsibilities for data gathering, and write a plan for the analysis and interpretation of data to include scheduled reflection 'checkpoints' at which M&E findings are discussed and plans for renewed phases of delivery are drafted.

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