



# Composing a symphony or causing a racket?

## Intentional design for evaluation and learning among subgroups in multi-site, multi-organisation development initiatives

Kimberly Bowman and Anne L. Buffardi, with Sophie Freeman

December 2020



### Key messages

- Multi-site, multi-organisation implementing structures are comprised of many smaller sub-units that can vary along four key dimensions: the target groups whose behaviour they try to influence, intervention approach or strategy, issue area and context. This paper poses questions to help large initiatives characterise the different subgroups that may be situated within the overall group. Each type of subgroup has distinct information needs and faces particular monitoring, evaluation and/or learning challenges. This has implications for the who, what and when of information gathering, analysis and interpretation.
- A single approach to evaluation and learning is unlikely to be able to address the diverse needs of the many stakeholders involved in large initiatives. Valuable opportunities for evaluation and learning within smaller subgroups may be overlooked by managers or grant-makers whose focus is on the overall structure.
- Rather than assuming all information will be relevant and used by everyone, we recommend approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning be designed for specific users and needs. This paper identifies key ways in which different actors interact in multi-site, multi-organisation initiatives, to help initiatives thoughtfully tailor and prioritise their approach.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

---

# Acknowledgements

We thank Wouter Bolding, Carron Basu Ray, Claire Hutchings, Tiina Pasanen and participants at the 2013 American Evaluation Association conference for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper. We are grateful for thoughtful peer review comments provided by Simon Hearn and Julia Raybould and to Natalie Brighty, George Richards, Paola Abis, Giles Pitts, Garth Stewart and Sara Hussain for editorial and production support.

---

# Contents

---

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>List of boxes, figures and tables</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2 Approach and terminology</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3 Different types of relational configurations within large initiatives</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1 Characterising the (sub)group: key dimensions	9
3.2 Classifying the (sub)groups: the models	11
3.3 Comparing the models	13
<b>4 Integrating monitoring, evaluation and learning into different group types</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1 Monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches in each model	14
4.2 Comparing monitoring, evaluation and learning needs across the models	19
<b>5 Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>22</b>

## List of boxes, figures and tables

### Figures

---

<b>Figure 1</b> Examples of formal relationship structures among organisations or individuals	<b>7</b>
---	----------

### Tables

---

<b>Table 1</b> Typology of (sub)group configurations	<b>10</b>
<b>Table 2</b> Monitoring, evaluation and learning in different (sub)group configurations	<b>20</b>

---

# 1 Introduction

Large initiatives implemented by multiple organisations, operating across multiple sites, and aiming to effect change at multiple levels through multi-component interventions are becoming increasingly common. Many donors, including those in the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden and Canada, use consortium and multi-project initiatives to channel their development assistance. This approach may be driven by several factors: recognition of the interconnections across subnational, national and supranational levels and potential contributions of different types of organisations; an attempt to reduce the siloed nature of individual projects working in parallel; and the desire for efficiency, through smaller numbers of staff overseeing larger budgets. International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society networks have also expanded their structures to increase their reach, representativeness and potential influence.

Large initiatives multiply not just the number but also the types of relationships among different people and organisations. In an ideal scenario, multi-actor efforts can be imagined as a symphony: an elaborate instrumental composition in multiple movements, written for a large ensemble which mixes instruments from different families (an orchestra). However, with so many components and actors there is also a risk of creating a cacophony: a harsh, discordant mixture of sounds. In this paper, we use music as a metaphor to examine different approaches to learning and evaluation in groups.

As organisations and initiatives become more complicated, specific challenges for monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) emerge. What type of information at what level of detail is needed from whom, when and for what purpose(s)? What is/are the appropriate unit(s) of analysis? What level of (dis)aggregation is feasible? With increasing breadth, how can we

achieve the depth necessary for meaningful learning? What roles are most useful for MEL advisors to play?

MEL efforts should fundamentally be guided by the purpose(s) they aim to serve. In principle, form should follow function. That is, the purpose of a group should determine its members and structure, and correspondingly, a MEL system should neatly map onto this organisational structure. At the same time, the structure of a group also affects what is feasible, particularly in groups formed of existing organisations or where types of membership are strictly defined. Different (sub)structures are oriented more towards certain elements of monitoring, evaluation and/or learning – in part reflecting the composition of their members – and structure can facilitate or exacerbate data collection, analyses, interpretation and use in different ways.

Buffardi and Hearn (2015) identify eight potential functions of multi-project initiatives and corresponding implications for evaluation and learning, with a focus on programme-wide considerations. Complementing that discussion on function, this paper focuses on form. It examines the role of structure and the multiple subgroups – both formal and informal – that exist within larger structures. We pay particular attention to the information needs of implementing staff and the potential roles for internal MEL advisors. We argue that a single approach to evaluation and learning is insufficient to address the diverse needs of the many stakeholders involved in large initiatives, and that identifying the ways in which different actors interact can help tailor approaches to specific users and needs.

As practitioners grapple with how to design and embed monitoring, reporting, evaluation and learning into more complicated group arrangements, this paper offers a framework to characterise their operating structure and

---

provides guidance on what types of approaches may be most appropriate for different types of subgroups. Grounded in the experiences of initiatives operating in practice, we distinguish different group configurations based on variations in an initiative's intervention target,

strategy, issue area and context, which yields six distinct (sub)groups. For each, we discuss the purpose of and challenges to MEL and suggest what type of information at what level of detail should be gathered, analysed and interpreted, and with what frequency.

---

# 2 Approach and terminology

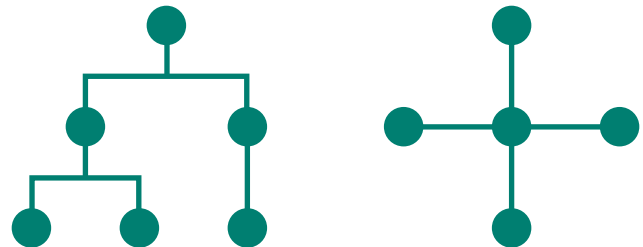
This paper is concerned with different relational configurations, the ways in which entities interact in practice, and the implications of these groupings for MEL. It takes single-site projects implemented by one organisation as a point of comparison and examines the unique features of subgroups within large initiatives operating across multiple sites, organisations, issues and/or levels (subnational, national, regional and/or global). These subgroups may be comprised of individuals from one or more organisations.

According to Newman's (2003) definition, multi-site, multi-organisation groups could be considered as networks: a collection of objects or actors that are connected to each other through some kind of relationship. However, as Hearn and Mendizabal (2011) caution, not everything that connects is a network. Throughout the paper, therefore, we use the term 'large initiatives' to refer to the overarching groups within which the subgroups are nested.<sup>1</sup> These initiatives may be externally mandated or shaped by a funding agency. For example, multiple organisations may join together to create a consortium to respond to a request for proposal, and then the funding agency may group together multiple consortia under a wider programme umbrella – what has been referred to elsewhere as a multi-project programme (Buffardi and Hearn, 2015). Large initiatives may also be developed by organisations themselves – a selection of national affiliates and country offices of an international NGO working together on a multi-year global campaign, for example.

Compared to an established organisation with a hierarchical decision-making structure, these large

initiatives are typically time-bound, with more complicated lines of accountability, and involving some degree of interaction, although the extent can vary greatly. The primary identity or affiliation of its 'members' is to another entity (i.e. a staff member's organisation or national chapter of an international organisation), rather than the larger group. Individual and organisational members of the group do, however, work towards a similar overarching goal for a period of time. They typically pursue multiple activity streams to accomplish a broader objective. We refer to these activity streams as interventions.

**Figure 1** Examples of formal relationship structures among organisations or individuals



Source: author's construction.

Large initiatives, particularly those that are created in response to a funding opportunity, will often have a formal structure that can be depicted in an organogram. This may be a series of nested hierarchical relationships: organisations within a consortium within a wider programme. Or it may be a hub and spoke model where each organisation has an independent relationship to the managing entity or funding agency (Figure 1). In this paper, we examine subgroups within these

---

<sup>1</sup> Terms for these multi-site, multi-organisation groups are not used consistently, and have been called schemes, partnerships, collaborations and consortia.

---

larger, formal structures, including informal relationships among actors and organisations that may not be officially recognised or reflected in the formal structure.

Although these initiatives are more expansive and diverse than single projects and organisations, they are more bounded than portfolios or funds, which could involve hundreds of projects and initiatives, and oversee billion-dollar investments around a core theme like climate. In this sense, they represent meso-level structures. Other ODI publications examine evaluation considerations for portfolios (Mackenzie and Hearn, 2016; Buffardi et al., 2019) and for flexible activities led by national and regional associations of NGOs (Davies, 2016). Harvey et al. (2017) discuss how to foster learning across large programmes and portfolios.

This framework is based on an analysis of six large initiatives seeking to influence the behaviour of a particular individual, group and/or policy. These initiatives work in approximately 25–45 sites. Each involves dozens of organisations representing civil society, and

non-governmental, academic, public and private sectors. They address the following broad thematic issues: financing for essential public services, climate change, sustainable livelihoods, food security and community resilience. Four of the six initiatives are funded by a single donor organisation. We also use these initiatives to provide examples of how the framework can be applied in practice. As part of the review process, the framework was tested on three additional initiatives to further refine the categories and recommendations.

Since this paper was originally drafted, the number and types of large initiatives appear to have proliferated, which increases both the potential relevance of the paper and also the variation in models. The set of initiatives on which the framework is based likely does not represent the entire universe of options, nor are the (sub)group categories exhaustive. As more organisations and donors experiment with different structures and MEL approaches, we encourage others to add to, adapt and revise this framework based on their experiences.



---

# 3 Different types of relational configurations within large initiatives

## 3.1 Characterising the (sub)group: key dimensions

Within a large initiative, individual units may have some commonalities and some differences. The extent of variation creates distinct types of subgroups, within which actors relate to each other in different ways. Characterising the substructures within the overall group is an important first step in guiding what types of MEL systems may be needed and could be feasible. Identifying substructures can help to specify primary intended users, people or teams within an initiative who are intended to benefit from evaluation or learning processes.

Within a large initiative, individual units may vary in four main ways:

1. **Intervention target.** Who or what do they aim to influence (i.e. members of a small-shareholder female farmers' association in eastern Senegal, a senior official in the Ministry of Finance or the G8) and to what end? This dimension refers to specific individuals, positions or groups and their policy stances or behaviours, rather than generic stakeholder categories like public officials or the private sector.
2. **Approach, strategy and tactics.** How do they try to effect change, including the specific activities in which staff are involved, such as conducting research, providing training, financing or agricultural inputs, or meeting with policy-makers?
3. **Issue area.** Examples of this include climate change, agriculture and health. Issue areas are grounded in a particular discipline, which are guided by core conceptual frameworks and specific methods and use specialised terminology.
4. **Political, economic and social context.** Contexts might include a fragile setting, emerging economy, restricted civil society operating environment, or African Union member. The examples we provide here are based on differences at the national level, although context may also vary at a subnational level.

The first three dimensions – target, approach and issue – relate specifically to the intervention. Context refers to the broader operating environment in which the intervention is taking place. All four have implications for what is analysed and measured, and how.

Initiatives can characterise their own configuration by asking themselves the following questions:

1. Who or what is the intervention trying to influence? Who are the target beneficiaries or actors whose behaviour you aim to change? Is there a common policy, process or area of knowledge that the intervention aims to change?
2. What is the intervention, concretely? What activities are you conducting to reach the aim? Can you cluster them into groups of strategies? Are particular group members

leading or delivering similar, complementary or entirely different activities? Are there any expected links or dependencies between different activities or strategies? For example, is research conducted by one actor intended to be used in advocacy by another?

3. What is the problem, theme, or issue area you are trying to address?
4. In what type(s) of environment are you working? How does it affect what you do? For example, how free or democratic is the public space within which you operate? Are you based in a geographic area affected by conflict?

Variation between individual units will likely be situated on a continuum representing degrees of similarity or difference. The degree of similarity or

overlap among individual units affects strategies for information sharing, in potentially opposing directions. In groups where members have similar backgrounds and areas of expertise, they will share common reference points and vocabulary. Information sharing between units that are dissimilar will require more explicit explanation of concepts, and more time to discuss and explain different perspectives.

At the same time, if the specialisation of each actor is similar, they aim to reach the same target groups, provide similar services and/or are funded by the same donors, this overlap may affect their perceptions of one another as potential competitors. These human and organisational dynamics can influence members' interest or willingness to share information and engage in evaluation and learning processes.

**Table 1 Typology of (sub)group configurations**

Model	Group characteristics	Target Whose behaviour does the intervention aim to change?	Approach What are the intervention activities?	Issue What is the problem or theme you are trying to address?	Context How does your environment affect what you do?
<b>Soloist</b> (single-site project)	<i>Well-defined project, core team clearly identified and co-located.</i>	–	–	–	–
<b>School of music</b> (the meta-unit)	One meta-unit comprised of many sub-units, configured in different ways; unit overseeing but not directly managing diverse, decentralised work in many sites.	Different	Different	Broadly similar	Different
<b>Tribute band</b> (replication project)	Single-site project intended to be adapted and replicated in other sites; separate teams in different locations.	Similar	Similar	Same	Different
<b>Orchestra</b> (tight global advocacy network)	Geographically dispersed actors pursuing the same goal in different countries, aiming to influence national targets and jointly influence the same international target, with a conductor coordinating individual efforts.	Different national; same international	Different or similar	Same	Different national; same international
<b>Commercial pop group</b> (consortium)	A lead organisation determining the mix of group members and their respective roles. Group members pursuing the same joint goal in the same context through different means.	Same	Different	Same	Same
<b>Jam session</b> (intentional experimentation)	Actors pursuing the same overarching goal through different means, unclear interaction modes.	Same or different	Different	Same	Same
<b>Drum circle</b> (informal community of practice)	Geographically dispersed actors using similar strategies in similar contexts (often holding the same position or function within their organisation), interacting informally.	Different	Same or similar	Similar	Similar

---

## 3.2 Classifying the (sub)groups: the models

Table 1 illustrates how the six initiatives we examined varied across these four dimensions. Based on the patterns across each of these dimensions, six distinct configurations emerge. Keeping with the music theme, we characterise the (sub)group types as: a school of music, a tribute band, an orchestra, a commercial pop group, a jam session and a drum circle. To help illustrate the contrast between multi-site, multi-organisational initiatives and single-site projects, we start by describing the single-site project as a ‘soloist’ and discuss the others in turn.

The **soloist** represents the simplest structure: a relatively straightforward intervention aimed at a clearly identified and unified target.<sup>2</sup> Like a soloist enjoying the limelight, this type of initiative wants to be seen to shine – to be able to generate convincing evidence that a given intervention led to a certain result. All actors work together to influence the same target on a specific issue, which is rooted in the same context. The group is collectively implementing a common approach to achieve their goal (although this approach may involve multiple activities). For example, a project may aim to improve employment prospects for out-of-work young people through training and mentoring. Another soloist project might aim to improve specific practices of a multinational institution by meeting with officials, organising public demonstrations and publishing media articles about the institution’s policies.

At the other end of the spectrum from the soloist is the **school of music**, the aggregate group in which all of the subgroups are situated. As noted in Chapter 2, these initiatives are typically bound together by the same broad theme (i.e. climate, health and education). Within the school, there are a wide range of activities implemented by multiple, diverse units that target the behaviour of different groups through different means in different contexts. While all music school actors share a similar overall interest, within this group there is considerable diversity in musical genre, instruments and roles. A core management unit typically

oversees this broad, decentralised group of actors and organisations, and may help to facilitate information exchange and compile activity reports for external funding bodies. However, the units are often line managed by people in other organisations; therefore, the management team may have limited authority to direct the behaviour of the units. Increasingly, but not always, the group may be initiated by an external donor.

A **tribute band** performs songs by a well-known, established artist – the same songs, similar style, with different performers. In this subgroup model, an intervention is developed and tested in one location, with the expectation it may be used elsewhere. While the specific target groups and context will differ, the overall strategy or intervention is similar. For example, one of the initiatives we examined was a cross-national campaign that aimed to increase national funding for education. The strategy sought to influence the content of national political party manifestos by mobilising community members, convening meetings with legislative candidates where they were publicly asked to sign a pledge card committing to increased resources for education if elected, and engaging radio and print media to cover these meetings. This approach was then replicated during national election cycles across different countries to advance Millennium Development Goal education targets. Tribute band projects may be reasonably commonplace in international NGOs, where managers or ‘above-country’ actors can clearly see opportunities to transfer an approach from one place to another. However, this transferability is easiest to spot in hindsight, after the intervention has been delivered and is perceived to have been a success.

In the **orchestra**, a group of actors work together to pursue a common goal, often through strategies tailored to their local contexts. The defining feature of the orchestra subgroup is the presence of a conductor, through whom the group members interact, who facilitates information exchange and leads the joint strategy. The group need not be large and actors may be geographically dispersed. This subgroup model is exemplified by advocacy campaigns intended

---

2 We acknowledge that single-site projects may have complex elements. Soloists sometimes improvise and allow a melody to emerge. Here we use the soloist example to illustrate a simple structure to serve as a comparison for the others.

---

to influence joint decisions made by multilateral groups (e.g. the European Union, African Union, G20, G8) as well as specific representatives (e.g. a member of the Pan-African Parliament). Without a conductor, individual advocacy efforts may influence change at a national level, but may be siloed and will not necessarily achieve joint goals. This is particularly pertinent to cross-national issues that require multilateral responses, like climate change and large-scale migration and refugee crises. Given the difference in national contexts, the advocacy approach may vary – the influencing strategy in Brazil may be different to that in China, for instance. We have only observed examples of this model related to advocacy campaigns, rather than development programmes that are primarily oriented towards capacity-building and service delivery.

The **commercial pop group** model reflects a consortium structure, in which a lead organisation designs the intervention and determines the mix of group members and their respective roles. Imagine here some of the young music groups that have been constructed and marketed by powerful music industry actors. The lead organisation is responsible for the group's activities and outcomes, even if it is not implementing all activities. Core actors involved in the consortium often work in the same context and aim to influence the behaviour of the same target group, but each member has a particular specialisation that they contribute to the group. For example, different organisations may provide technical training, negotiation and assertiveness, skill building, access to financial services, and business mentoring for rural female entrepreneurs in order to increase their economic status. Consortium members are identified and recruited by the lead organisation to fulfil a particular function, which often results in a power imbalance: the lead or pop group producer sets the vision and distributes resources, while individual contributors may be viewed as replaceable.

The intention of bringing together multiple specialists is to provide a more comprehensive response to a common, often multi-faceted problem. Each member's role and contribution is clearly articulated in proposal and planning documents, although in practice there may be some overlap in roles and perceived encroachment on others' 'turf'. The degree of

coordination can vary from light coordination to sequence their efforts (e.g. conducting outreach before training begins), to a more intensive plan of joint activities.

In the **jam session** subgroup, a group of actors is also pursuing a joint goal in the same broad context but through different approaches. The primary difference between this model and the commercial pop group is the emergent nature of the jam session and the more decentralised relational dynamic, with actors more interdependent on each other than directed by a central actor. It represents a loose collection of diverse and somewhat disconnected organisations that does not have a strong lead directing the group's activities. Members collectively contribute towards a broad common objective, but how to reach that goal, the nature of individual contributions towards it, and the group's modes of interaction may not be specified. Since members come from different disciplinary or functional backgrounds, they may initially be unfamiliar with the terminology and approaches of others. They may not see themselves as closely linked, understand the common problem(s) or may not have full sight of the emerging theories of change that sees them contributing to the same goal. For example, a group of organisations may aim to improve agribusiness practices in a large geographic region. In one location, an organisation aims to strengthen foreign direct investment policies, in another locale an organisation works with journalists to investigate practices at a community level, and a third uses litigation to change the behaviour of a specific company. These organisations come together on a periodic basis to share the experiences and reflect on the applicability and efficacy of different approaches. The jam session could be considered higher risk; convenors and participants are unclear if a new group will 'gel' or what it will produce. With disparate actors holding different theories of change, conflict could be more likely than in more homogeneous groups. This subgroup type was only present in one of the initiatives we examined.

The final model, the **drum circle**, is essentially an informal community of practice. The purpose of the drum circle is to share information among homogeneous but autonomous actors.

---

For example, practitioners might cluster themselves by professional specialisation or position: outreach workers, media officers, government lobbyists, MEL specialists. The drum circle is similar to the orchestra in that it involves a number of dispersed actors working on similar issues. However, a drum circle lacks a central focal point and does not rely on a formal coordinator. Actors self-organise to share information, both bilaterally and across the group. They may be the only person in their organisation fulfilling a particular function and so may be looking for a peer group to discuss how to approach similar challenges. Members may share or assign facilitation responsibilities, but interactions are predominantly informal and fluid. They are not collectively responsible for joint activities or outcomes. When actors are heterogeneous, the subgroup should be thought of as a jam session more than a drum circle.

### 3.3 Comparing the models

The single-site project, the soloist, serves as a reference for large initiatives with no variation in target, approach, issue and context. At the other end of the spectrum, the school of music is the most diverse, covering different targets, approaches and contexts. All models have some degree of issue similarity, and it is often this shared thematic interest that brings the group together. However, within a broad thematic area – public services, livelihoods or climate change – members may focus on different sub-specialties:

education, health, specific agricultural crops, or climate change adaptation or mitigation.

Except for the commercial pop group, all other models feature some degree of variation in the target groups whose behaviour they aim to influence, although the jam session musicians may target the same group.

The tribute band and drum circle models employ similar approaches, whereas actors' unique approaches are a defining characteristic of the commercial pop group and jam session. Except for the tribute band and remote orchestra, members in the rest of the subgroups work in the same or similar contexts. The music school has a management unit but has little direct control over the projects and programmes operating within it. In contrast, the orchestra's conductor and commercial pop group producer play active roles in directing group efforts. Those in the drum circle have sufficiently comparable contexts or approaches that they are able to easily understand each other's work and derive transferable lessons from it, without the involvement of an intermediary.

In the initiatives we examined, in all models except the school of music the size of the core group interacting on a regular basis was relatively small, fewer than 10 people, in some cases each representing a different organisation. This could suggest that large initiatives are comprised of fairly bounded subgroups which themselves may be more appropriate units with which to engage in monitoring, evaluation and learning, as we discuss below.

---

# 4 Integrating monitoring, evaluation and learning into different group types

Monitoring, evaluation and learning are often lumped together as ‘MEL’. While related, each represents distinct processes. Monitoring is the routine tracking and reporting of information about a project, used primarily for internal management. Evaluation aims to assess the overall relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability or impact of the project design, implementation and outcomes in order to support decisions about a project and future investments (Peersman et al., 2016). Learning involves gaining knowledge or skill through study, experience or being taught – and is often mentioned as a rationale for monitoring and evaluation. Together, all three are important tools for strategy, management and accountability. Therefore, rather than discussing these three processes in aggregate, this section explores the relative emphasis that should be given to each process for different types of group configurations.

## 4.1 Monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches in each model

Given the differences between them, each (sub)group faces distinct challenges, and has different monitoring, evaluation and learning needs, including a varying emphasis on these three components. These are discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections, and summarised in Table 2. The table details these factors for the soloist, school of music, tribute band, orchestra, commercial pop group, jam session and drum circle subgroups and identifies who is typically involved in gathering and

analysing what type and level of information with what frequency, and for which audiences. Identifying the relative focus and primary users does not necessarily mean that other elements of monitoring, evaluation or learning are not present or that information may not be of interest to other potential users. It does suggest, however, how efforts are predominantly invested and for whom that level of detail is more useful. We also specifically address the potential role of a monitoring and evaluation advisor, who may be asking themselves how they can best support the many needs of these types of large initiatives.

### 4.1.1 The soloist

The soloist is a well-defined project, its core team clearly identified and co-located. Its key features include:

- **Focus:** summative or impact evaluation. What changes have occurred as a result of the project?
- **Primary users:** managers, funders
- **Type of information needed:** external sources on outcomes, moderate level of detail, synthesised and often gathered at the end of the project, data collection may occur throughout
- **Challenge:** generating quality information and robust analysis to support credible claims. Address by specifying the intervention as implemented in practice, selecting an appropriate evaluation design to address a realistic set of questions, and ensuring sufficient triangulation of sources



---

As the name suggests, the focus of evaluation in a soloist project is fairly straightforward: to understand and demonstrate the extent to which the intervention has contributed to the desired change through summative or impact evaluation. Although information can be gathered throughout the life of a project, the overall findings are not available until after the project has been completed. In a development project, the final assessment will likely involve an external evaluator to incorporate additional data sources that may be biased if collected by the implementation staff themselves (i.e. feedback from intended beneficiaries) and to assess contribution.

The soloist demands credible evaluation: an appropriate evaluation design suited to answer a realistic (rather than innumerable) set of evaluation questions about a well-specified intervention based on sufficient evidence from reputable sources.

The soloist model requires an investment in both monitoring and evaluation to address challenges of time and quality – first, establishing efficient monitoring practices so that data is gathered throughout the intervention on the implementation of the intervention itself and interim outcomes; and second, triangulating multiple sources of information to examine changes over time and properly evidence claims of quality or impact, including minimising alternative explanations of observed changes.

Given the timing, the primary audience for this type of evaluation is managers and funders, since implementing staff may no longer be working on the project. It may also appeal to other decision-makers not directly involved in the project, who are seeking credible evidence on what works and why. However, MEL advisors in soloist projects may look for opportunities to share information and analysis that can be useful for managers and implementing staff to monitor interim progress.

#### 4.1.2 The school of music

The school of music is an aggregate unit comprised of many sub-units, configured in different ways; it is a unit overseeing but not directly managing diverse, decentralised work in many sites. Its key features include:

- **Focus:** monitoring and results-based management. What is happening across the units? Are there common challenges?
- **Primary users:** managers, funders
- **Type of information needed:** top-line activities, accomplishments and risks, gathered and analysed on a periodic basis
- **Challenge:** high volume of disparate information, challenging demands for inappropriate aggregation. Address by defining standard notation and categories, guidance on what is (not) important to document, explain limitations, characterise subgroups and identify options

Given the very broad scope of this aggregate group, the school of music is primarily focused on monitoring – understanding the range of actors and activities taking place. In a large initiative where the range of work is so diverse, complicated or decentralised and so does not allow for direct management, actors at the centre or the top do not have a clear picture of what is happening. Therefore, a key role for MEL advisors supporting the school is helping actors follow what is taking place across the large group through top-line updates on activities, accomplishments and risks.

In this model, information is provided by the sub-units to managers, which is subsequently used to inform funders or more senior managers. The level of information is not sufficiently detailed to be of direct application for most implementing staff. It can sometimes be helpful for signposting, allowing certain actors to find counterparts in another part of the initiative and pursue deeper collaboration and learning, for example, to start a drum circle or jam session. Information from very different projects or contexts, however, is unlikely to have much relevance to their daily work.

The challenges of monitoring with the school of music model are directly related to its scope: the sheer volume of information and transaction costs associated with working with so many people. For example, one of the large initiatives with whom we have worked receives approximately 150 pages of inputs from 25 subgroups for its biannual report. Recognising that technologies allow for more automated

---

collection and storage of large quantities of data, the challenge is less around information generation and more around constructing filters so that the right information and indicators are available. As Clay Shirky (in Juskalian, 2008) asserts: ‘There is no such thing as information overload. There is only filter failure.’ Providing pre-populated lists of outputs and indicators with common definitions and categories can help to standardise and focus what is reported, but may exclude unexpected changes. On the other hand, without clear guidance, long qualitative narratives may be so variable that analysis, particularly comparative analyses, becomes extremely difficult.

An additional challenge with the music school structure may be demands for inappropriate aggregation, combining dissimilar units to present many diverse projects in a simplified narrative. A reductionist approach risks ignoring important differences and nuances that may be valuable for learning, and can create incentives for competitive behaviour between sub-units. In these situations, MEL advisors may need to push back against artificial aggregation or comparisons.

Given the breadth and diversity, evaluation and learning will likely need to be conducted with selected projects or subgroups within the broader initiative instead of at the aggregate level. Monitoring data can provide a useful map of the school, which can help to identify opportunities for structured comparisons or guide case selection strategies, determining which sub-units to select for evaluation (i.e. typical, diverse, influential, extreme cases). MEL advisors can help to frame strategic questions that are broadly relevant to most members and identify lessons that may be applicable across multiple units. The depth of information necessary for meaningful learning is infeasible to gather and analyse across so many actors and activities. Core music school staff can also facilitate face-to-face and remote interactions among different subgroups (i.e. linking thematic or functional specialists who share common challenges) as well as the group as a whole, through an annual in-person meeting with breakout group sessions, for example.

### 4.1.3 The tribute band

A tribute band is a single-site project intended to be adapted and replicated elsewhere by separate teams in different locations. Its key features include:

- **Focus:** process evaluation and learning  
What are the key elements for successful implementation? What needs to be adapted based on context?
- **Primary users:** implementing staff elsewhere
- **Type of information needed:** detailed information on processes gathered and interpreted throughout implementation, synthesised at the end
- **Challenge:** validating perceived lessons, determining the influence of context. Address by documenting contextual factors to inform judgements regarding transferability

Since the purpose of this model is to guide replication elsewhere, the primary emphasis here is on learning in order to understand transferability and to guide planning and implementation elsewhere. Crucially, this means understanding not only if an intervention worked, but also understanding how the intervention operated, and what factors (contextual and otherwise) might have affected its operation or success. As such, process or implementation evaluation may be particularly relevant for the pilot site. Subsequent replications, especially those in much different contexts, can provide additional information about what types of adaptations need to be made. However, the biggest investment required is documenting the initial intervention to inform the first tribute band. Process evaluation of tribute band replications can help to assess the fidelity of the intervention, and the extent to which it was implemented as intended.

The primary users of information in the tribute band model are implementing staff in another location, who may be using the information after a substantial amount of time has passed. Therefore, this model requires a high level of detail in the documentation, ideally coupled with consultation during the implementation process. Core music school staff may also be interested in top-line tribute band learning, and with their



---

initiative-wide perspective are often best placed to identify replication opportunities elsewhere, but the level of detail necessary for subsequent implementation staff is more than senior managers would require.

Where possible, automating data collection can reduce the time spent documenting information. For example, email updates with periodic reports, meeting notes and feedback from external stakeholders can be automatically stored in searchable databases. Administrative data, including information collected at intake and on participant progress and attrition, can help to validate how and with whom the project was implemented, so that the evaluation assesses what happened in practice, rather than what was planned.

MEL advisors can play a useful role in setting up such systems, training and supporting staff in using them, and helping to identify important contextual factors that may affect replication. With advocacy initiatives, for example, regime type, the number of political parties, the role of the media and public understanding of the issue may affect what approaches need to be adapted. MEL advisors can also help to ensure that lessons are grounded in evidence and not simply perceptions of what worked best.

#### 4.1.4 The orchestra

The orchestra comprises geographically dispersed actors pursuing the same goal in different countries, aiming to influence national targets and jointly influence the same international target, with a conductor coordinating individual efforts. Its key features include:

- **Focus:** strategy and practice-based learning  
How can we maximise our individual and collective influence?
- **Primary users:** implementing staff
- **Type of information needed:** detailed internal documentation and real-time information exchange, supplemented by external sources and multi-year trend analysis to contextualise changes over time
- **Challenge:** information often not publicly available, myopia. Address by establishing automated documentation processes, facilitate regular communication and

elicitation of lessons, analyse changes over longer timeframes

The primary aim of monitoring and learning within an orchestra is to generate real-time information in order to inform strategy and maximise the leverage of both individual actors and the group as a whole. Since this information is often gathered privately and thus is not publicly available, actors must document it themselves and then distribute it through a centralised mechanism to others in the network. As such, the success depends largely on the team members and the conductor to stimulate these interactions. It is reliant on trust, looking to individual actors to provide insights that can be used by others. While one instinctively imagines an orchestra to be co-located (sitting alongside one another on a stage), the nature of large interventions means that our orchestra may be dispersed, either operating virtually or coming together in person infrequently. The conductor helps the group to operate smoothly as planned (to follow the music), while also allowing for more individual expression on the part of some instruments, enabling a more complex performance of shared musical skill (and harmony) in real time.

Ideally, monitoring and learning in this subgroup would include both detailed, real-time monitoring and information sharing and longer-term trend analysis to place unfolding political shifts in a broader context. This analysis can help to avoid myopia and minimise other cognitive biases; for example, it can help group members recognise whether recent changes are similar to those in preceding years or whether they are substantially different to previous outcomes. Examples of this model in practice – efforts to influence multilateral bodies and their national representatives – were highly context- and time-dependent, with the end point of one phase shaping the next, so lessons were less directly transferable to subsequent phases of a campaign or to other settings.

MEL advisors can support real-time exchange by helping the conductor frame questions, plan ways to document information, or facilitate interactions so that the conductor is able to fully participate in strategic discussions. They can

---

also play a useful role in designing and analysing broader trends over time, supplementing the internal monitoring data with reliable external sources.

#### 4.1.5 The commercial pop group

The commercial pop group has a lead organisation determining the mix of group members and their respective roles; the group members are pursuing the same joint goal through different contributions. Its key features include:

- **Focus:** summative or impact evaluation. What changes have occurred as a result of the project? What was the role of different component parts?
- **Primary users:** central manager (the producer), funders, implementing staff
- **Type of information needed:** external sources on outcomes, moderate level of detail on sub-components synthesised and often gathered at the end of the project, data collection may occur throughout
- **Challenge:** determining the individual, interactive and collective impact, competition and desire for individual rather than collective attribution. Address by clarifying the theory of change and member roles, managing relationships to facilitate information sharing, selecting an appropriate evaluation design that considers the multi-component nature of this model

Similar to the soloist, the primary aim of the commercial pop group is to generate impact and credible evidence the consortium's contribution to change – in our example, to produce a great album that gets excellent reviews and good sales. However, the producer may also require monitoring information to help understand the activity and output of different performers. The multi-component nature of the group's work can make it more difficult to evaluate, particularly if the evaluation aims to determine the individual, interactive and collective impact. It is therefore important to clarify the overall theory of change and the role of its constituent parts. In consortia where group members perceive themselves to be competitors (which

may also include the lead organisation), the management unit and MEL advisor will need to establish processes to facilitate information sharing, such as clarifying intellectual property rights and creating confidentiality agreements.

#### 4.1.6 The jam session

In a jam session, actors pursue the same overarching goal through different means and unspecified modes of interaction. Its key features include:

- **Focus:** experimentation and learning to develop new strategies. What is the best way to address this issue? How can we take advantage of our different approaches to maximise our collective influence?
- **Primary users:** implementing staff, managers
- **Type of information needed:** internal sources to document implementation, external sources on outcomes, moderate level of detail gathered and interpreted throughout
- **Challenge:** communicating concepts and approaches across different disciplines. Address by translating concepts and jargon, facilitating joint interpretation, identifying broader relevance, benefits and implications

The jam session is convened in order to approach difficult or complex problems from multiple angles, with the assumption that bringing together people with different perspectives will generate new ideas for addressing seemingly intractable issues (either for individual contributors, or for the group). As such, the focus is on experimentation and learning, predominantly for members' own use. Findings may also be of interest to funders who are looking to pursue new avenues.

Since group members in the jam session come from different backgrounds, they may not hold allegiance to the larger group, or see the overlaps or areas of mutual interest with other group members. Therefore, there is a much greater need for knowledge translation, rather than simply information sharing and group facilitation as in the other models. Particularly in the early stages, members may not fully understand the group's purpose or their role in it. The session facilitator or MEL advisor can play a role in shaping group interactions and identity, and translating

---

concepts among members. This may take the form of a facilitated problem analysis or theory of change process, so that group members can better understand the big picture. Intra-group communication is critical throughout in order to make sense of emerging strategies and, ultimately, to achieve the group's goal.

Since each group member has a unique role, the level of information required is less detailed than in the tribute band, orchestra and drum circle – simple activity and output information does not have obvious transferable value. The first course of action for a MEL advisor supporting a jam session might be to identify how and why experimentation, evaluation and learning processes can add value to that group. Subsequently, it can be useful to document what strategies have been tried and discarded, and for what reasons, to build institutional memory if members leave.

#### 4.1.7 The drum circle

The drum circle has geographically dispersed actors using similar strategies in similar contexts (often holding the same position or function within their organisation) interacting informally. Its key features include:

- **Focus:** practice-based learning. How can we be more effective in our individual work?
- **Primary users:** implementing staff
- **Type of information needed:** detailed information discussed periodically or surrounding particular activities or events
- **Challenge:** avoiding over-formalisation, linking functional specialists back to broader group to ensure consistent links with overall objectives. Address by ensuring group is practitioner-led, protect time and space for interactions but retain informality, facilitate links among groups

The primary purpose of the drum circle is to share information, tools and insights at a very specific and practical level. Actors in this subgroup want to know the details of how specific tasks were carried out, what worked more and less well – information that more often exists as tacit knowledge among specialists. The emphasis here is predominantly on learning, rather than extensive monitoring or evaluation,

which may take place with the projects or programmes in which drum circle members work. Group interactions are often activity- or event-based, with discussions convened in preparation for or around a particular challenge, so interactions may follow these timelines rather than a set frequency.

The drum circle is driven by practitioners. A MEL advisor may be helpful to encourage documentation for future use, facilitate linkages with other groups or the overall initiative, or suggest ways to more systematically determine what worked more and less well. Semi-structured learning processes such as action-learning may also be useful. However, drum circles are characterised by their grassroots quality and over-formalising the group can inhibit the very qualities that make this subgroup valuable to its members.

## 4.2 Comparing monitoring, evaluation and learning needs across the models

Across the different (sub)group types, the school of music is predominantly focused on monitoring, and the soloist and commercial pop group on evaluation. The other models aim to address specific learning needs in order to design, develop (jam session) and inform (orchestra) strategy, and implement (drum circle, jam session) and replicate (tribute band) interventions. Correspondingly, in these subgroups information is primarily generated and used by implementing staff. The broad themes may be of interest to senior managers, but implementing staff often require a level of detail that is much more in-depth than is necessary or feasible for people overseeing multiple programmes to use.

In most models, information is gathered on a periodic basis. In practice, it is often analysed and discussed much less frequently than it is collected. The tribute band, orchestra and drum circle participants require the most detailed level of information, the soloist and jam session musicians a moderate level, and the school of music the least. Each faces distinct challenges, which can guide the role of managers and MEL staff, and the type of information and the extent of external validation needed.

**Table 2 Monitoring, evaluation and learning in different (sub)group configurations**

Model	Primary focus of monitoring, evaluation and/or learning, and key questions	Primary user(s) of information	Type and level of information needed	Timing of information needed	MEL challenge	Strategies to address challenge
<b>Soloist</b> (single-site project)	Generate credible evidence of the intervention's contribution to change  Focus on summative or impact evaluation. How 'good' was the performance? What changes have occurred as a result of the project?	Managers Funders Implementing staff	External sources on outcomes  Moderate level of detail	Synthesised and often gathered at the end of project, data collection may occur throughout	Generating quality information and robust analysis to support credible claims	Specify the intervention as implemented in practice, select appropriate evaluation design to address a realistic set of questions, ensure sufficient triangulation of sources
<b>School of music</b> (the meta-unit)	Gather information on a wide range of activities for an oversight body  Focus on monitoring and results-based management. What is happening across the units? Are there common challenges?	Managers Funders	Activities, accomplishments, risks  Top line	Periodically	High volume of disparate information, challenging demands for inappropriate aggregation	Define standard notation and categories, guide what is (not) important to document, explain limitations, characterise subgroup and identify evaluation and learning options at different levels
<b>Tribute band</b> (replication project)	Gather information to replicate elsewhere  Focus on process evaluation and learning. What are the key elements for successful implementation? What needs to be adapted based on context?	Implementing staff elsewhere	Internal sources on how to plan, implement  Detailed	Gathered and interpreted throughout the project, synthesised at end, consultation during replication	Validating perceived lessons, generating quality information to support credible claims, determining the influence of context	Document contextual factors to inform judgements regarding transferability
<b>Orchestra</b> (tight global advocacy network)	Share real-time information to inform strategy  Focus on strategy and practice-based learning. How can we maximise our individual and collective influence?	Implementing staff	Internal documentation, external sources to contextualise over time  Detailed	Real-time information sharing, multi-year trend analysis	Information not documented externally, myopia	Establish automated documentation processes, facilitate regular communication and elicitation of lessons, analyse changes over longer time frames
<b>Commercial pop group</b> (consortium)	Generate credible evidence of a multi-component intervention's contribution to change  Focus on summative or impact evaluation. What changes have occurred as a result of our project? What was the role of different component parts?	Core managers (the producer) Funders Implementing staff	External sources on outcomes  Moderate level of detail on sub-components	Synthesised and often gathered at the end of project, data collection may occur throughout	Determining the individual, interactive and collective impact	Clarify theory of change and member roles, managing competition to facilitate information sharing, select appropriate evaluation design that considers multi-component nature
<b>Jam session</b> (intentional experimentation)	Develop new strategies  Focus on experimentation and learning. What is the best way to address this issue? How can we take advantage of our different approaches to maximise our collective influence?	Implementing staff; possibly convenors Managers	Internal sources on how to implement, external sources on outcomes  Moderate level of detail	Gathered and interpreted throughout	Communicating concepts and approaches across different disciplines	Translate concepts and jargon, facilitate joint interpretation, identify relevance, benefit and implications
<b>Drum circle</b> (informal community of practice)	Design and implement tools and practices  Focus on practice-based learning. How can we be more effective in our individual work?	Implementing staff	Internal sources on how to plan, implement  Detailed	Periodic, may be activity- or event-based	Avoiding over-formalisation, linking functional specialists back to broader group to ensure consistent links with overall objectives	Ensure group is practitioner-led, protect time and space for interactions but retain informality, facilitate links among groups

---

# 5 Conclusions and recommendations

This paper presents four dimensions along which actors and subgroups can vary, the different configurations of which create unique (sub)group structures: soloist, school of music, tribute band, orchestra, commercial pop group, jam session and drum circle. The focus of each model is distinct, provides information for different types of people and faces particular challenges, which have implications for the who, what and when of information gathering, analysis and interpretation.

We have often been asked, what MEL system is most appropriate for a given group? As the paper attempts to illustrate, a single approach is unlikely to be able to address the diverse needs of the many stakeholders involved in large initiatives. Different approaches and relative levels of attention to monitoring, evaluation and learning will be needed for subgroups within the broader group. Moreover, the types of subgroups and information needs may shift over the course of an initiative, so different approaches may be more and less appropriate at different times.

This will require flexible application of the framework, both across groups and potentially over time. The person designing the MEL system and its multiple subparts will be unable to predict the needs of all those in the group, particularly in large and decentralised groups. This framework can help guide initial plans, which can then be adapted as needed.

As a first step, we recommend that groups characterise their structure and extent of variation and similarity, using the questions in Chapter 3. Identify particular information needs and specific users, rather than assuming all information will be relevant and used by everyone. Based on the examples from which this

framework was developed, all large initiatives will require some type of top-line monitoring data as in the school of music model. Without thoughtful consideration of multiple needs, there may be a tendency to default into bureaucratic, output-based reporting systems to fulfil the upward accountability demands of senior managers and funders. This type of information is less directly useful for implementing staff, although they are the ones who bear the largest burden of gathering it. Therefore, the school of music will likely need to be supplemented with approaches from the other models.

As discussed in the drum circle section, many communities of practice emerge organically in order to address a felt need by their members, and are sustained only as long as those needs remain. On the other hand, some actors in large initiatives may be reluctant to work together and to share information, particularly if there is substantial overlap in their work and they perceive each other as competitors. As such, they may need a clear and incentivised stake in a well-defined, shared outcome to motivate their engagement.

As configurations among different types of actors become more common, new types of models may emerge. More examples in practice will help to determine the prevalence of different subgroup types, and provide more nuanced practical lessons of aims, challenges and responses. Appropriate and adaptable monitoring, evaluation and learning systems can help to provide information to monitor progress, assess implementation and outcomes, and contribute to learning, with the ultimate aim of improving development programmes and the ambitious goals they strive to achieve.

---

## References

- Buffardi, A.L. and Hearn, S. (2015) *Multi-project programmes: functions, forms and implications for evaluation and learning*. Methods Lab Paper. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/10181-multi-project-programmes-functions-forms-and-implications-evaluation-and-learning](http://www.odi.org/publications/10181-multi-project-programmes-functions-forms-and-implications-evaluation-and-learning)).
- Buffardi, A.L., Mason, P., Hutchings, C. and Sharp, S. (2019) 'Monitoring and learning for country-level portfolio decision-making and adaptation'. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11351-monitoring-and-learning-country-level-portfolio-decision-making-and-adaptation](http://www.odi.org/publications/11351-monitoring-and-learning-country-level-portfolio-decision-making-and-adaptation)).
- Davies, R. (2016) *Evaluating the impact of flexible development interventions using a 'loose' theory of change: reflections on the Australia–Mekong NGO engagement platform*. Methods Lab Paper. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/10360-evaluating-impact-flexible-development-interventions](http://www.odi.org/publications/10360-evaluating-impact-flexible-development-interventions)).
- Harvey, B., Pasanen, T., Pollard, A. and Raybould, J. (2017) 'Fostering learning in large programmes and portfolios: emerging lessons from climate change and sustainable development' *Sustainability* 9(2): 315 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/su9020315>).
- Hearn, S. and Mendizabal, E. (2011) 'Not everything that connects is a network'. ODI Background Note. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/5137-not-everything-connects-network](http://www.odi.org/publications/5137-not-everything-connects-network)).
- Juskalian, R. (2008) 'Interview with Clay Shirky, part I'. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 19 December ([www.cjr.org/overload/interview\\_with\\_clay\\_shirky\\_par.php](http://www.cjr.org/overload/interview_with_clay_shirky_par.php)).
- Mackenzie, J. and Hearn, S. (2016) *Impact evaluation for portfolio programmes on policy influence: reflections on the Indonesian Poverty Reduction Support Facility*. Methods Lab Paper. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/10397-impact-evaluation-portfolio-programmes-policy-influence](http://www.odi.org/publications/10397-impact-evaluation-portfolio-programmes-policy-influence)).
- Newman, M.E.J. (2003) 'The structure and function of complex networks' *SIAM Review* 45(2): 167–256 (<https://doi.org/10.1137/S003614450342480>).
- Peersman, G., Rogers, P., Guijt, I., et al. (2016) *When and how to develop an impact-oriented monitoring and evaluation system*. Methods Lab Paper. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/10348-when-and-how-develop-impact-oriented-monitoring-and-evaluation-system](http://www.odi.org/publications/10348-when-and-how-develop-impact-oriented-monitoring-and-evaluation-system)).







**Evidence.  
Ideas.  
Change.**

---

ODI is an independent, global think tank, working for a sustainable and peaceful world in which every person thrives. We harness the power of evidence and ideas through research and partnership to confront challenges, develop solutions, and create change.

---

**ODI**  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300  
info@odi.org

odi.org  
odi.org/facebook  
odi.org/twitter