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TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE OF MOVING M&E FROM 'ME' TO 'MorE'



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INTRODUCTION

The theme of the 2019 National Evaluation Capacities Conference, in Hurghada Egypt, was “Leaving no one behind”. Ironically, I, as a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Specialist, often feel that M&E always gets left behind. Many M&E specialists/staff in international/United Nations organizations must at some point feel the same way – that is, M&E is just “ME” and no one else really cares.

These proceedings encapsulate how UNDP in Afghanistan has transformed the M&E system/work for the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) from “ME” to “MorE”, from a function to fulfil corporate reporting requirements and to please donors to a function that is central to evidence-based programming and decision-making as well as to organizational innovation. This transformation involved three crucial elements: (1) the “gadgets”; (2) the “voices”; and (3) the “fun”. While these three elements are fundamental to the transformational success, I would argue that it was because of the leadership that understands the importance of M&E, has the vision of how M&E and programming should relate to each other and sees M&E as creating substantial investment and not as a cost factor.

But first, how did M&E become something just about “ME”? M&E is a subject of fundamental importance to Governments and development organizations alike, but one that people so often find boring. M&E is seen as the sole responsibility of M&E staff, and given how data are often managed in complex databases and spreadsheets by M&E staff, many non-M&E colleagues may find M&E rather daunting.

Accordingly, M&E in many projects/programmes has become a stand-alone function, and programme staff are not involved in data collection and analysis, rendering results-based management a myth rather than an effective management tool for results. More troubling is the general perception that M&E is a boring job, a function to fulfil reporting requirements and please donors. This is because M&E is siloed from programme management and strategic decision-making processes, or M&E staff do

not understand programmatic nuances or participate in issue analysis and programme development.

With this rather unfortunate evolution of M&E in the traditional project cycle sense, M&E professionals wait to come in until the final stage of a project. M&E has become something of an afterthought and often gets left behind, with M&E staff feeling that no one is really giving the subject its due attention but “ME”.

MOVING M&E FROM “ME” TO “MorE”

I joined a police reform project in UNDP Afghanistan in 2015 as a Planning, Monitoring and Reporting Specialist. The project’s objective was twofold: (1) to support the Ministry of Interior Affairs to lead and manage police reform; and (2) to strengthen the foundations and training infrastructure for police development. It was a three-year project and commanded a sizeable budget of US\$30 million. As is the case for many M&E professionals joining a newly launched project, I often found myself reviewing and revising the results framework and indicators due to the fact that M&E is often an afterthought and left until last in the project formulation process. Simply put, many indicators were not SMART¹³⁰ and not very well defined. There was no proper methodological note to explain how data were to be collected or in what fashion the indicators were to be measured.

With the new results framework and revised indicators in place, I was determined to make sure that data and evidence would be duly provided and used to guide our programming and project interventions. I initiated baseline assessments of four police units and a survey to understand police complaint mechanisms in eight provinces across Afghanistan. As the only M&E staff member in this \$30 million project, I had to do everything myself, from literature review to designing questionnaires, training enumerators, printing questionnaires, supervising data-collection processes, compiling completed questionnaires and transporting them from the provinces to Kabul, entering data into Excel spreadsheets, analysing the data using SPSS Statistics software, drafting narrative reports and presenting findings to the project team, government counterparts and donors.

The whole process took around nine months. We had many interesting findings, and I genuinely hoped that they would lead to some decisions that would positively change the project design and activities that could help improve policing services and access to justice for people in Afghanistan. However, I soon realized that it was not going to be the case – nothing would change despite these efforts. In hindsight, it was not surprising that nothing did happen. The project’s theory of change and results framework were designed in a linear fashion. Although the project’s governance arrangements

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encompassed M&E as a key project implementation set-up, there were really no clear policy, mechanisms, roles and responsibilities or in some instances, capacities, among the project staff to learn and adapt using the data the M&E work had generated.

In 2017, a new head in charge of LOTFA arrived: Kunal Dhar, Chief of Rule of Law and Human Security Unit in UNDP Afghanistan. Along with him was a Senior M&E Adviser, Helge Rieper. I remember vividly how these two colleagues told me point-blank that the project that I was working with had no M&E. My immediate reaction was a feeling of being inadequate. After all, I was in charge of the project M&E and had started producing baseline assessments and surveys. Jokingly, I told them “at least M&E is in my job title, how could you say that the project has no M&E?”.

Over the course of 2017 and early 2018, Kunal and Helge worked with the team to revise the terms of reference for LOTFA, which were expanded to cover the entire justice chain and not focus only on police payroll and reform. The new terms of reference also place M&E at the heart of LOTFA, describing clear roles and responsibilities as well as resources and capacities required to operationalize it. More importantly, the new terms of reference have a clear theory of change and well-defined strategic framework and objectives that were agreed by the government counterparts and donors. In the process, the LOTFA team also listened and received feedback from government counterparts and donors about how they would like to see a robust M&E function in LOTFA. They all agreed that LOTFA M&E should provide an evidence base and lead demand-driven programming; help in decision-making; guide resource allocations; and inform them of what works and what doesn't work.

The new LOTFA terms of reference were approved by the Fund's Steering Committee on 25 November 2018. Since then, we have spearheaded the LOTFA approach to M&E and managed to move it from just “ME”, i.e., an individual who is left alone to monitor and evaluate a programme or a project, with the information produced used only for reporting and not for improving implementation and results, to “MorE”, where data drives the entire process. The move from “ME” to “MorE” hinges on the following three key aspects:

1. **“Gadgets”**: LOTFA utilizes a suite of cutting-edge mobile data-collection tools including a centralized impact and results platform allowing integration of data from over 300 sources, interactive dashboards and data visualizations along with customized mapping tools to present the data.
2. **“Voices”**: LOTFA uses both surveys and citizen/beneficiary feedback mechanisms for “ground-truthing” and innovative tools to collect that feedback.
3. **“Fun”**: through our “Data Parties”, LOTFA invites stakeholders to engage with the data, soliciting their interpretations and generating dialogue for further investigations and actions to address development challenges together.

Figure 1. Three Elements to Transformational Success of Moving LOTFA M&E from “ME” to “MorE”

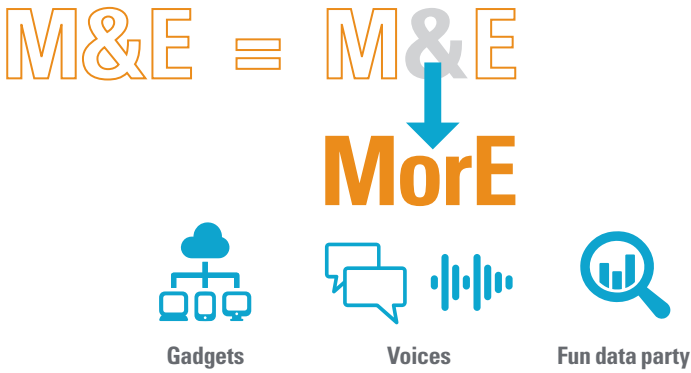
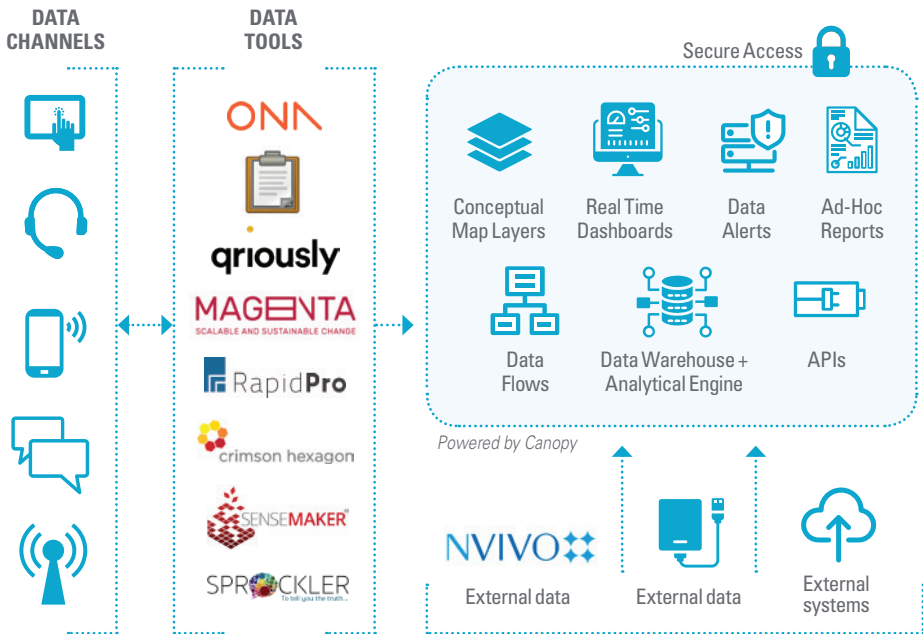


Figure 2. The LOTFA integrated Results and Impact Platform

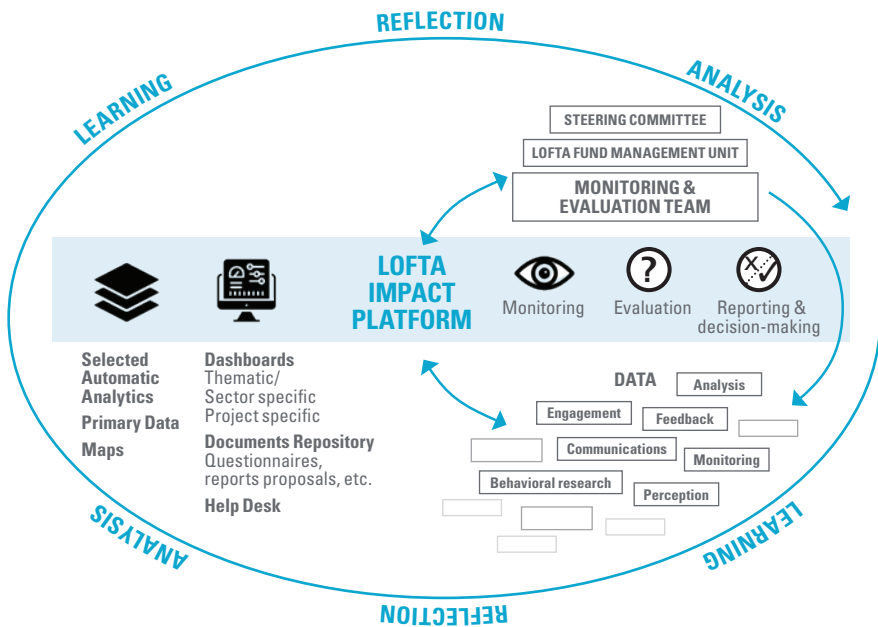


Ultimately, LOTFA needed an M&E system that:

- Goes beyond reporting or simply fulfilling corporate reporting requirements
- Is people-centred and well placed to “sense” and respond
- Is adaptive in the complex and fragile environment of Afghanistan
- Promotes/integrates learning and informs programme decisions and formulation
- Is evidence-based and can lead programming, and does not just follow projects or programmes without having a strategic role or usefulness in decision-making
- Not only reacts, but can anticipate needs and guide us to solutions for complex problems

As part of transforming LOTFA M&E from “ME” to “MorE”, communication plays a pivotal and integral role. In the past, LOTFA was not good either at communicating progress and results to its supporters and funders or at integrating communication strategically to improve its programme outcomes. However, this is about to change. In the same vein as M&E, communications must be incorporated in programme design, and actively engage partners in real-time adaptive management processes.

Figure 3. LOTFA M&E System Architecture

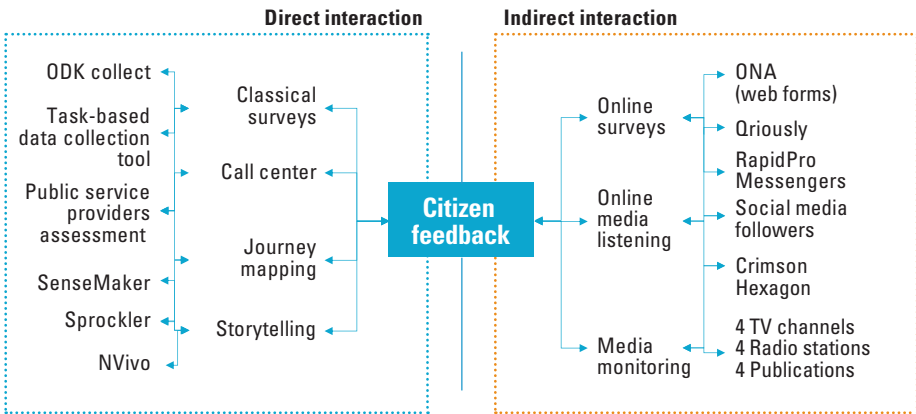


As part of the LOTFA M&E team, the communication function must go beyond awareness-raising and seek to promote behavioural and social changes leading to improved development outcomes; promote public dialogue and commitment to reform; and support the use of new information and communication technologies to strengthen programmatic interventions and citizens’ feedback.

Accordingly, communication will play a pivotal role in forging strategic partnerships, moving away from business as usual to identifying innovative ways to create positive change and impact for the Afghan people.



Figure 4. The LOTFA citizen feedback collection mechanism



Since the approval of new terms of reference for LOTFA, the M&E team has been operating at near full capacity for the past seven months. Over this short space of time, LOTFA has successfully established a bespoke and integrated M&E system. The system and our “Data Parties” are designed to provide an opportunity for LOTFA partners to collectively interpret the data, and share different perspectives on what the data mean and how to use the data/findings for programmatic interventions and decision-making processes.

The work of the LOTFA M&E team has attracted major interest from the donor community and government counterparts. Recently, the Government of Australia earmarked US\$2 million to fund LOTFA M&E activities and behavioural change communication research and campaigns to supplement the LOTFA M&E work.

Additionally, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which is the United States Government’s leading oversight authority on Afghanistan reconstruction, has requested that LOTFA M&E best practices be included in its 2019 M&E Lessons Learned Report. The SIGAR Lessons Learned Program was created to

identify and preserve lessons from the reconstruction experience of the United States in Afghanistan, and to make recommendations to Congress and executive agencies on ways to improve the efforts of the United States and development partners in current and future operations.

Programmatically, we have listened to more than 30,000 voices in the past seven months, completing the first-ever infrastructure survey for police stations in Kabul; the first community and police perceptions survey in Kabul involving the perceptions of both right holders and duty bearers (police) on safety and security; and a survey about access to justice in 12 provinces across Afghanistan. The findings are used as the evidence base for formulation of new LOTFA projects and programmes.

To improve its data collection, analysis and visualization tools, LOTFA has also partnered with two world-leading data-collection partners, Qriously and Sprockler. These survey tools complement other survey methods and take a more innovative approach to data collection.

Qriously is used to collect data through mobile applications, allowing quick, real-time data collection among people using smart phones, a majority of whom live in urban areas. The tool is particularly advantageous in the context of Afghanistan where the security situation can hinder the ability to access places and collect data on the ground. The LOTFA M&E team piloted Qriously with the same questions that had been used in our access to justice survey, conducted earlier this year. The pilot result is very encouraging; it shows that the Afghan public is ready to engage and willing to participate in an online survey through mobile advertisements. Within two weeks, we received more than 12,000 answers.

Sprockler allows researchers to see through complexity with story-based inquiries and collect actual experiences to generate meaningful data. LOTFA piloted the tool to understand interactions between the Afghan National Police (ANP) and local communities by asking, "Could you please share a story about a time when you interacted with the ANP in Kabul City in the past year?". Improved understanding of these interactions will provide insights on how to improve public trust in police.

Interestingly, positive experiences and interactions with police tend to involve instantaneous instances where police are present to offer help. On the other hand, negative experiences are often over disputes and instigated by the police's failure to enforce the law or to make people feel safe. More significantly, negative experiences with police are attributed more to "less trust in the government overall" than "less confidence in the police". This particular survey finding points to the need to address the low public trust in police as it undermines the legitimacy of the Government as a whole.

These pilots demonstrate that the new tools work well in Afghanistan and LOTFA will seek appropriate opportunities to use them in the near future to gather real-time feedback from citizens.

Lastly, with this initial experience of implementing the new M&E approach, the LOTFA team is moving towards a more exciting concept of A-SPRINT: Adaptiveness for Strategic Partnerships, Results and Innovation to reshape how adaptive management, monitoring, evaluation, learning and communications will be combined to generate a truly innovative environment for LOTFA and its manifold stakeholders.