

Taking the “M” out of “MEL”

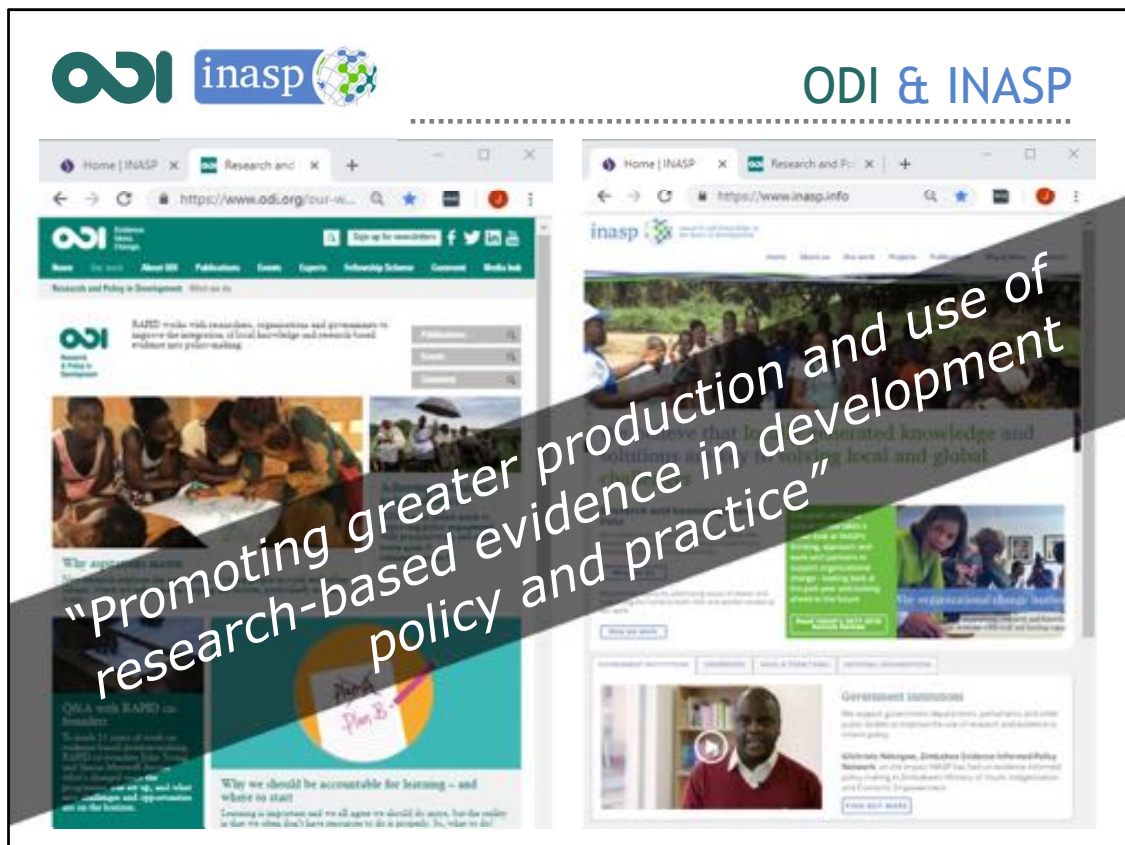
Participatory collaborative approaches to MEL in projects and programmes

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While learning for adaptive management is frequently emphasised by donors for monitoring, evaluation and learning activities within large programmes, monitoring, and accountability for planned outputs, frequently overshadows the evaluation, learning and adaptive management elements.

In this talk I will tell you a bit about me & where I come from, why people do MEL, and a systematic approach to MEL we developed in ODI. I will then talk about two approaches I have found useful: learning partnerships and performance stories illustrated with examples, and a few lessons & Recommendations.



- For the last 15 years I worked in ODI in the Research and Policy in Development Programme (RAPID).
- We did research, public affairs and advisory work with research donors, researchers and research organisations, operational agencies and developing and emerging country governments on a whole range of issues around research production and use.
- About a month ago I joined INASP which works on a similar range of issues, but focusing much more on support and capacity development for organisations involved in this in developing countries.
- Both organisations aim to promote greater production and use of research-based evidence for development policy and practice and evidence from monitoring , evaluation and learning are key part of this.
- So most of my work has been on projects seeking to strengthen the production and use of research-based evidence to influence policy or practice, rather than projects seeking to deliver direct benefits like health services, or improved agricultural practices, or small businesses.



Why do MEL at all?

- To learn about what works
- To manage better
- **To account:**
 - to donors
 - to recipients
- To maintain commitment to investing in research



- There are three main reasons for doing MEL: to learn about what works, to manage better, to account to donors.
- We also think it is important to do MEL of research projects to ensure there is good evidence of the value and long-term impact of research to maintain the commitment of donors to fund research.
- And we believe that to do it well you need to integrate all three elements.
- The problem is that the incentives within most donors to generate information that the projects are doing what they said they would do, and reluctance to admit failure can distort the whole MEL system to generate information about outputs and outcomes, and it then becomes very difficult to do effective learning.



A systematic approach to MEL

1. Strategy and direction *–are you doing the right thing?*
2. Management *–are you doing what you planned to do?*
3. Outputs *– are the outputs appropriate for the audience?*
4. Uptake *– are people aware of your work?*
5. Outcomes and impacts *–are you having any impact?*
6. Monitor the context *- what else might be influencing the changes you observe?*



<https://www.odi.org/publications/10284-how-design-monitoring-and-evaluation-framework-policy-research-project>

While at ODI we developed a systematic approach to MEL to ensure you are doing the right thing and it is having an impact you need which involved assessing progress at 5 levels:

- Strategy and direction: The basic plan that the project/programme/institution is following in order to reach its intended goals.
- Management: The systems and processes that the project/programme/institution has in place in order to ensure that the overall strategy is carried out and that high-quality policy research is produced (e.g. systems of peer/user review, quality assurance, planning cycles, etc).
- Outputs: The tangible goods and services that a research project/programme/institution produces (e.g. pilot projects, events, workshops and seminars, publications etc).
- Uptake: Direct responses to the research project/programme/institution (e.g. it mentioned in government or donor papers and plans, on a range of websites, referred to in a newspaper article, etc).
- Outcomes and impacts: Changes in behaviour, knowledge, policies, capacities and/or practices that the research has contributed to, directly or indirectly (e.g. a change in government policy implementation, a change in working practices among NGO practitioners, a reduction of poverty in a certain area, strengthened livelihoods, strengthened civil society input into policy processes, etc)
- We have recently updated this approach to include “Monitor the context”. It is only by understanding how the context is changing that it is possible to assess how your work is contributing.

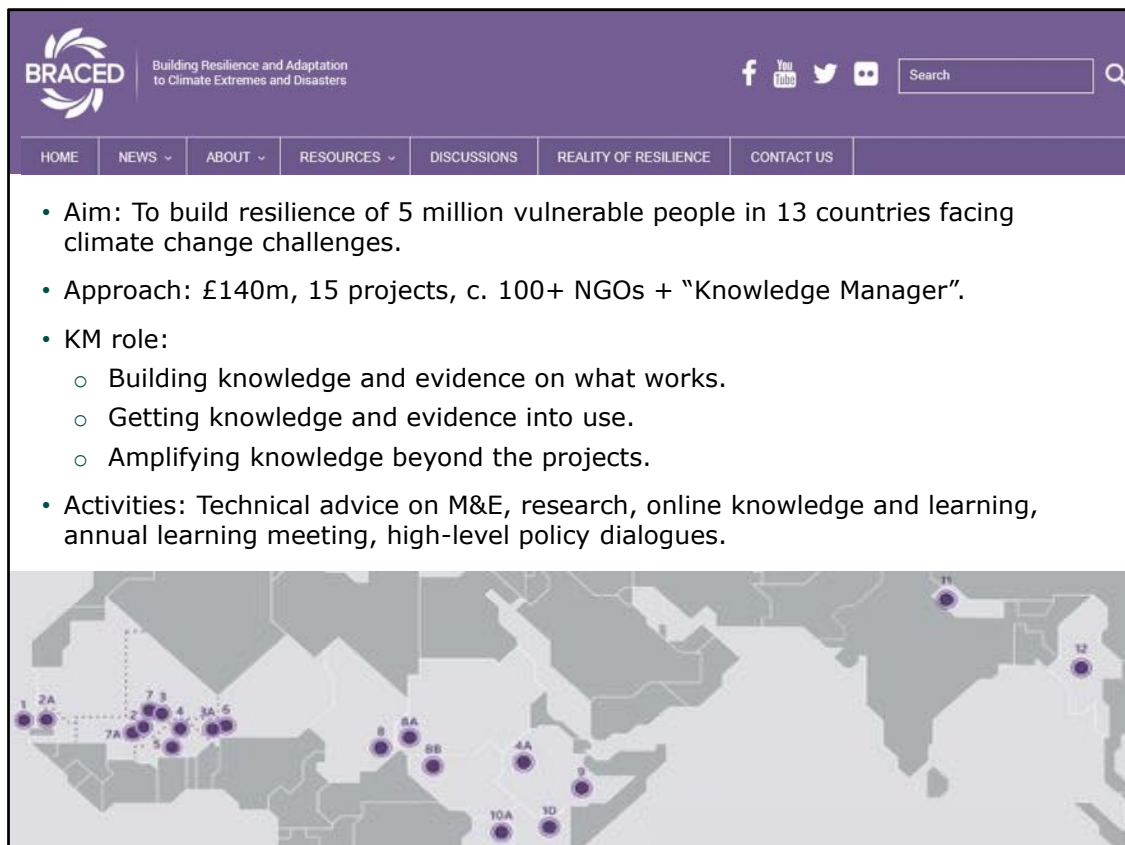


Learning Partnerships

Title: call for proposals for a Learning Partner to join CARE International UK's Resilience Programme in Syria – Understanding Resilience in the Context

A team or organisation funded to support the generation, access and use of knowledge among collaborating organisations in a development initiative for a specified period of time, with an aim of improving performance and/or outcomes

- The first specific approach I'm going to talk about are called Learning Partnerships.
- There has always been a strong emphasis on M&E in projects. More recently there has been recognition that learning needs to be a part of the mix and M&E has become MEL.
- Most projects have a MEL component built into them, but it is becoming increasingly common for donors, especially of large complex, programmes involving multiple projects and multiple organisations to commission an external organisation to do this – as in this recent call for proposals for CARE-UK's resilience programme in Syria.
- And here's a definition of what a learning partner is: *"A team or organisation funded to support the generation, access and use of knowledge among collaborating organisations in a development initiative for a specified period of time, with an aim of improving performance and/or outcomes"*.



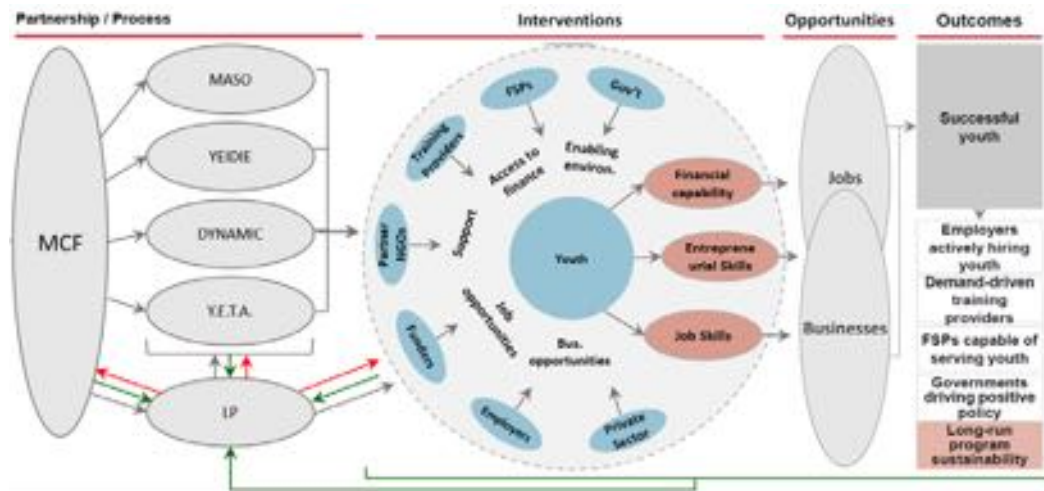
- One, which we run out of ODI is designed to support the DFID Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) programme which aims to build the resilience of up to 5 million vulnerable people in 13 countries across the Sahel, East Africa and Asia against climate extremes and disasters. From 2015-2018 it funded 15 projects with 100+ implementing organisations, predominantly NGOs.
- The projects include:
 - Small farmer investment in climate-smart technologies in Nepal
 - Market approaches to resilience in Ethiopia
 - Capturing urban floodwater for food production in Senegal
- The 'Knowledge Manager' consortium aims to generate evidence and learning on resilience and adaptation based on these projects.
- Three main roles:
 - Building knowledge and evidence on what works to build resilience
 - Getting knowledge and evidence into use in projects.
 - Amplifying knowledge and evidence beyond the projects.
- Activities include technical advice on M&E, action research, webinars and online discussion fora, an internal online 'Learning Lounge', writeshops, an annual learning meeting, public events, high-level policy dialogues in countries, communities of practice, on specific learning themes.



- Another example is the MasterCard-funded Youth Forward initiative is an \$80m, 6 year programme to “to empower economically disadvantaged young people to achieve sustainable livelihoods”.
- It is working in 2 countries: Ghana and Uganda, 4 consortia, 27 partners:
 - YETA: Sustainable on & off farm businesses through Youth Associations
 - DYNAMIC: Market-systems approach agriculture and off-farm services.
 - MASO: Youth in cocoa industry with Cocoa Board and academies
 - YEDIE: Youth in construction sector in Ghana.
- >200,000 youth (15-24) into sustainable livelihoods.
- Learning partner = ODI with PDA (Ghana) and DRT (Uganda) c.\$6m



YF Learning Partner Role



- Knowledge production: systematic MEL + research
- Knowledge sharing: meetings, reports & briefs, web platform
- Multi-donor dialogue: Youth Forward Committees

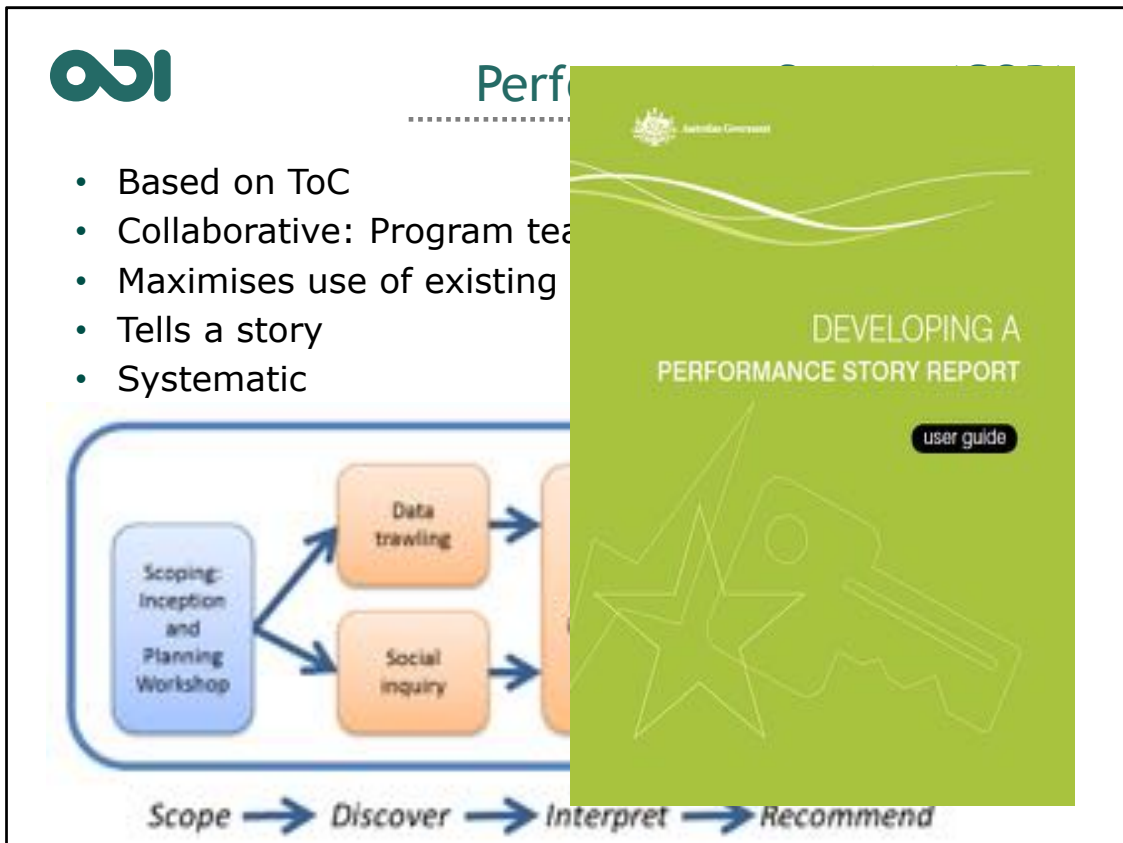
- Learning Partner role:
 - Knowledge generation through research and MEL
 - Knowledge sharing & capacity development of partners.
 - Multi-sector dialogue.
- Activities:
 - M&E through quasi-experimental impact evaluation across all 4 consortia.
 - Research studies of context, youth aspirations and transitions.
 - Sharing through biannual country-level and annual learning meetings + online platform + publications & briefs etc.
 - Multi-stakeholder engagement through “Youth Forward Committees in each country.
- Progress:
 - Initially unclear role of LP and reluctance of partners to collect even a minimal set of comparable data.
 - “Disintegration” into independent evaluations of each consortium + cross-cutting research.
 - Informal knowledge sharing more useful than formal.
 - YFC’s now working well.



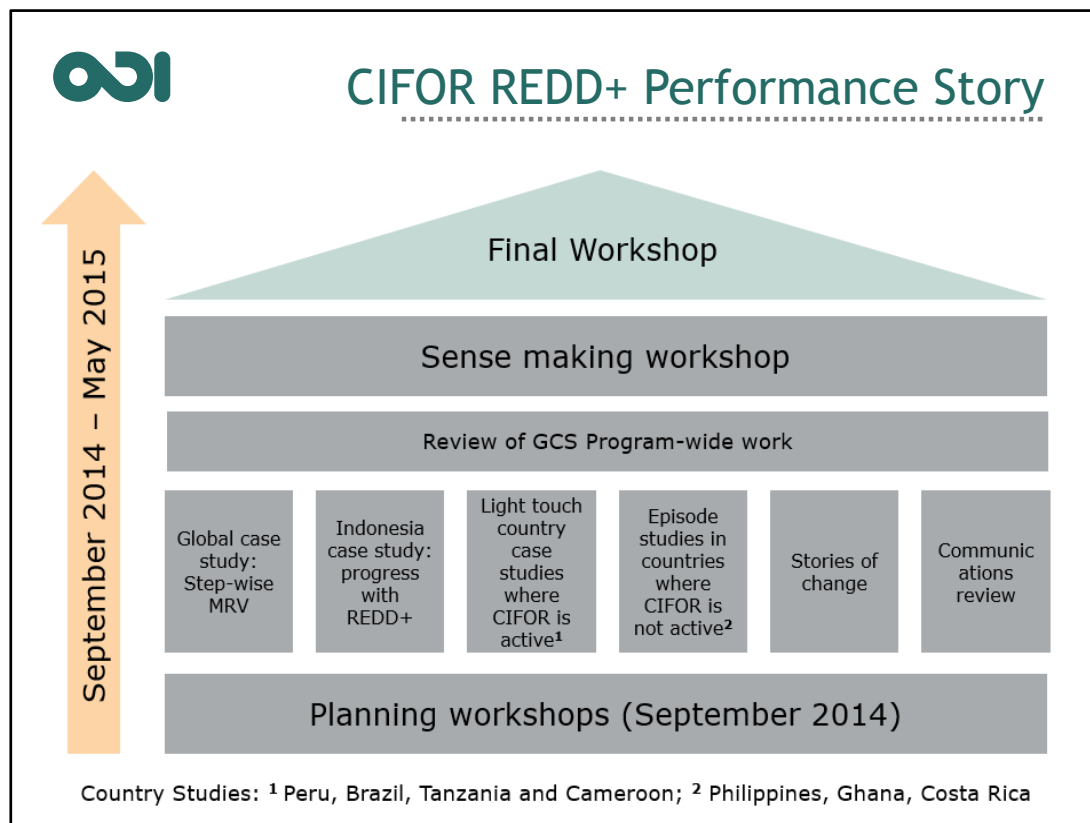
Learning Partnerships Lessons

Joint Enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not assume a collaborative mind-set at the outset;• Establish incentives for participation;• Set priorities and realistic outcomes.
Mutual Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage early and intensively in setting up learning processes;• Promote collective ownership of learning agendas;• Invest in facilitated, face-to-face engagement.
Shared Repertoire	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regularly revisit themes of shared interest;• Iterate and adapt learning mechanisms

- A colleague in ODI – Tiina Pasanen reviewed 4 initiatives providing “knowledge partner” services to 4 DFID-funded programmes:
 - The £4bn cross-government International Climate Fund.
 - BRACED - £140m
 - The Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA) (Co-funded by IDRC) - £43m
 - Pathways to resilience in semi-arid economies (PRISE) (also co-funded by IDRC) c.£8m
- They identified 3 key elements of effective learning partnerships:
 - Establishing a joint enterprise: shared understanding of the aims
 - Mutual engagement: especially to bring diverse stakeholders together
 - Shared repertoire: a common set of tools, stories and discourse based on experience



- The second example of participatory collaborative approaches I want to talk about are “Performance Stories”.
- First described by John Mayne in 2004. Performance stories aim to assess progress towards delivering the intended outcomes of a project, the processes which led to them and the factors which influenced them.
- Jess Dart of Clear Horizons in Australia, has developed an approach to doing them which she calls Collaborative Outcomes Reporting which use a participatory, collaborative approach.
- They are based as far as possible on existing information with limited new information collection to fill any gaps.
- Aim to be easy for staff and stakeholders to understand, and help build a credible case about the contribution that a program has made towards outcomes or targets.
- The basic approach is very simple.....
- Now adopted as part of the Australian Government NRM Programme performance Framework (2009). There is a 122 page book if you want more detail.
- Increasingly used in development sector.



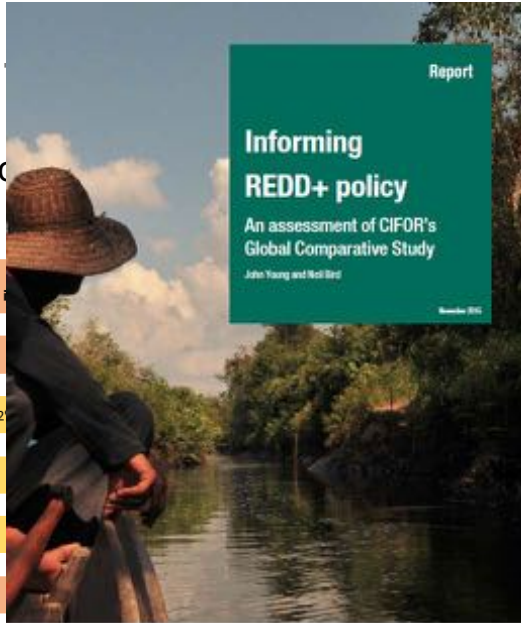
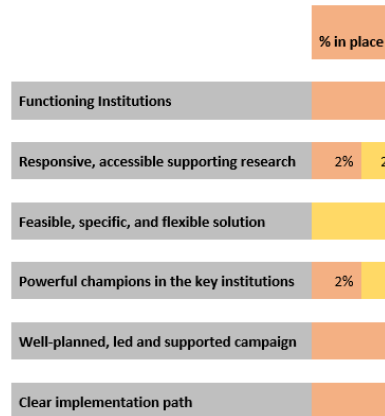
- We used the approach in a recent assessment of the impact of the CIFOR Global Comparative Project on REDD+ policies and processes at national and international level.
- It was a collaborative partnership between CIFOR staff, a team from Royal Roads University and a team from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- It included a collaborative planning workshop to develop an understanding of what the ToC was at the start of the project, and a series of specific studies to collect more information:
 - an international case study on the contribution of CIFOR research to the adoption of the step-wise approach in international processes;
 - a study of the contribution of CIFOR work to REDD+ readiness in Indonesia;
 - light-touch country case studies in countries where CIFOR has worked (Cameroon, Peru and Tanzania);
 - episode studies in countries where CIFOR has not been active on the ground (Costa Rica, Ghana and the Philippines);
 - and a review of communication activities.
- You can read more about it in the final report.



- The evaluation team included us – the independent evaluation team – and a team of CIFOR staff. We aggregated existing data and the new data into a “results chart” which was presented to and validated in a series of workshops with different stakeholder groups. This is one focusing on the Indonesia case study.

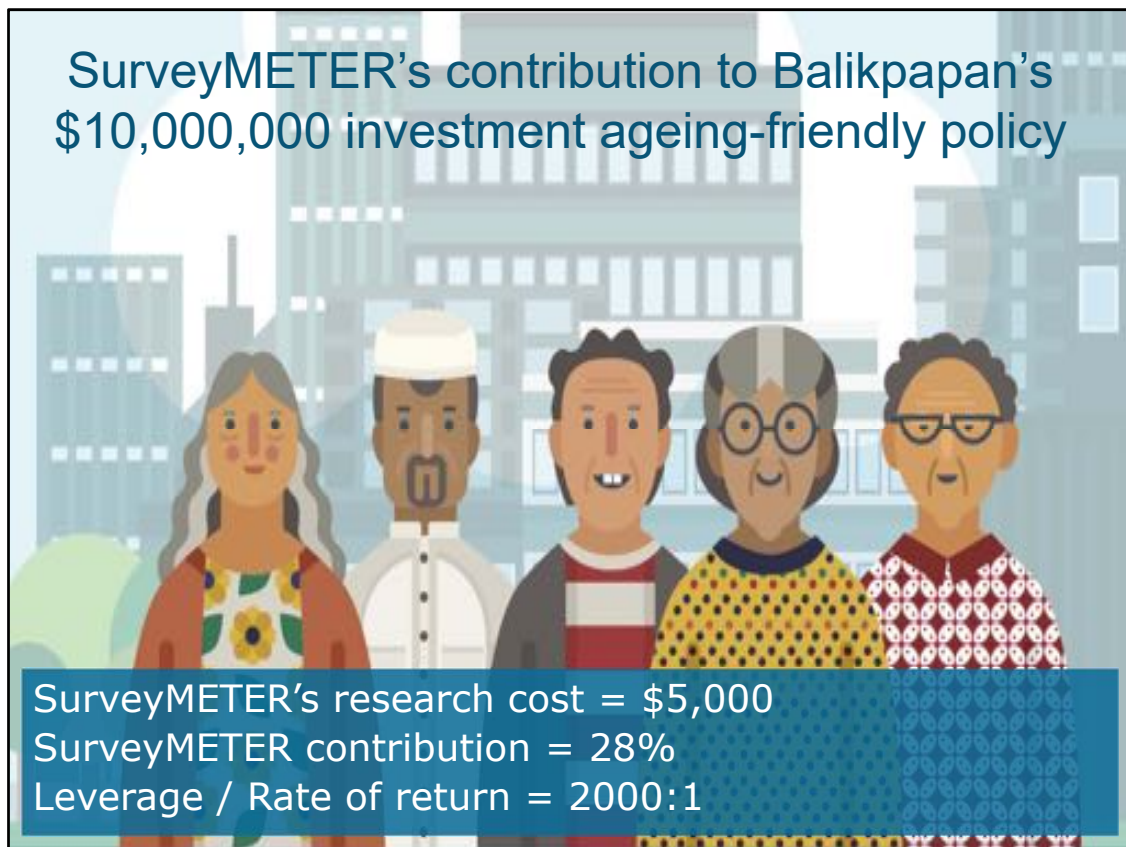


Q: How much did CIFOR's
contribute to REDD+ po
Indonesia?



A: Not very much, and not as expected.

- But of course that's the reality of most projects. Individual projects and programmes are just one of a number of stakeholders involved in a particular issue, and are unlikely to be the sole agent of change.
- But workshops can also be a good way to assess the "contribution" a specific programme makes.
- In the CIFOR evaluation we tried out a method developed by the Redstone Strategy Group in the US. That approach identifies 6 conditions which need to be in place for policy to change, and workshop participants are asked to identify how much of each was in place before the project started, how much at the end, and therefore how much the project contributed.
- The blue bits of the bars show the contribution made by CIFOR
- CIFOR's work made only a small contribution to the overall policy process. That is not surprising for a research organisation, that explicitly does not "do policy advocacy" – though it does engage closely with national researchers and policy makers to try to make sure they are aware of the results of their research.
- The biggest contribution was in supporting a "well planned and supported campaign" – ironic for a research organisation that doesn't do advocacy.
- The CIFOR scientists involved in this exercise were uncomfortable with this part of the evaluation.
- But the overall result contributed to convincing donors to continue to fund their research.



- It is possible to attach numbers to this: what is the likely economic benefit of the change, how much did the project spend on its contribution, and hence to calculate an internal rate of return.
- We used a simplified version of this in a different project to look at the impact of a think tank in Indonesia, SurveyMETER's work with the government of the Municipality of Balikpapan, on how they could make Balikpapan more elderly-friendly.
- SurveyMETER's work contributed to government plans to invest c.US\$10,000,000 from 2015-2020 in communication, community support, health services and transportation especially for the elderly.
- SurveyMETER only spent about \$4,500 on work to achieve this, and its contribution was estimated at 28% . This gives an rate of return of about 2000:1. Even if it is out by a factor of 100 it is still very impressive.
- I believe that if the research community could produce more results like this it would go a long way towards convincing research donors that investment in research can deliver very high returns.
- An in a “post-truth” world that is increasingly driven by ideological, often nationalistic concerns and public opinion, it is very important to maintain the commitment to research-based evidence.

- Increasing need for effective MEL.
- Participatory collaborative approaches can generate rigorous credible data and strong ownership and uptake.
- Learning partnerships and performance stories / COR seem to work well.
- Need to do more!
- Need convincing quantitative evidence of impact to maintain commitment.

- Increasing need for effective MEL. Especially for adaptive management and it is possible to avoid the dominance of “M”
- These approaches can work well can generate rigorous evidence, but many stakeholders still prefer more traditional approaches like RCTs
- LPs and PSs work well provided projects and programmes are designed to generate the right kind of data as they go along.
- Do more participatory “EL-focused” MEL and Learning Partnerships.
- Do more economic impact assessments (or more systematic qualitative MEL).

- RAPID Programme: www.odi.org.uk/rapid
- INASP: www.inasp.info
- M&E of Policy Research: <http://www.odi.org/publications/1751-making-difference-m-e-policy-research>
- BRACED: <https://www.odi.org/projects/2808-building-resilience-and-adaptation-climate-extremes-and-disasters-braced>
- Youth Forward Learning Partnership: <https://www.odi.org/projects/2787-youth-forward-learning-partnership>
- 'Learning partners': Overcoming the collective action dilemma of inter-organisational knowledge generation and sharing? Harden, Pasanen, Buffardi. [Development in Practice \(forthcoming\)](#)
- Redstone Strategy Approach: <http://www.redstonestrategy.com/reports/global-think-tank-network/>
- Performance Story/COR: <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resource/example/PerformanceStory>
<http://nrmonline.nrm.gov.au/catalog/mql:2162>
- CIFOR REDD+ Evaluation: <http://www.odi.org/publications/9932-informing-redd-policy-assessment-cifors-global-comparative-study>
- SurveyMETER Study: <http://www.ksi-indonesia.org/en/news/detail/is-measuring-policy-influence-like-measuring-thin-air--the-experience-of-surveymeter-in-producing-three-episode-studies-of-research-based-policy-influence>