Feminist and participatory approaches to co-creating theories of change and indicators

Sarah Nannyondo Okello, Akina Mama wa Afrika

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Introduction

Over the past decade, many Civil Society Organisations have experimented with Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). Interest in Feminist MEL has also reached the agenda of many Strategic Partners funded under the Strengthening Civil Society policy framework. Localisation and decolonisation have encouraged Strategic Partners to rethink how they do MEL. Both agendas share a focus on power shifts, with a common belief that this should also be reflected in our MEL practices. Discussions have shown a big difference between progressive Feminist MEL approaches and donor-driven quality criteria for MEL, the latter shaping MEL quality criteria under the Strengthening Civil Society policy framework. In response, we initiated a learning track on Feminist MEL, with several committed consortia members.

We began by exploring the key principles of Feminist MEL, which has led to this publication. To delve deeper into the practical implementation of these principles, we hosted three additional learning sessions, focusing on planning for a summative evaluation, a Feminist approach to Outcome Harvesting and Feminist approaches to co-creating Theories of Change and indicators. With the rich knowledge and experiences shared during these sessions, it is now crucial to ask ourselves: where do we currently stand in relation to Feminist MEL?

In this three-part blog series, we reflect on this question and share our hopes for the future of international development in the light of Feminist MEL.

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A participatory approach to ToC

Globally, there is an urgent need to reconstruct the existing MEAL architecture to better reflect the lived experiences of the organisations and communities it is meant to serve. The Theory of Change (ToC) model, which evolved to address the limitations of the traditional Logical Framework approach, offers a promising pathway[1]. However, many organisations still develop ToCs and measure impact without critically addressing the unequal power dynamics that shape outcomes right from programme development. Early in my career, it was common for programme managers and leadership teams to unilaterally develop ToCs, a practice prevalent in many development organisations. This top-down approach often entrenches systemic and structural inequalities based on class, race, social status, and sex, further marginalising the very voices the programmes seek to serve. It also overlooks overlapping identities and systems of oppression that shape the lived experiences of participants and limit the transformative potential of programmes.

A shared responsbility

In 2021, under the Make Way Programme, we adopted a participatory approach guided by the Measuring Impact for Learning and Empowerment (MILE) approach, where all programme stakeholders defined what change would look like for them.

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[1] Hamdy, M. (2020). Theory of change and logical framework: a comparative measure for monitoring and evaluation practices.

Together, we mapped pathways of change and milestones aligned with their lived realities. This inclusive process transformed the role of monitoring and evaluation into a shared responsibility from the outset, resulting in unprecedented programme ownership.

Co-creation allowed stakeholders to routinely review the ToC based on contextual factors and varying unique identities, validating or challenging assumptions along the way. Existing tools were adapted rather than replaced, and marginalised youth, the primary stakeholders, had equal decision-making power. As a MEAL practitioner, I facilitated the process while stakeholders retained control over defining results and lessons to shape future programming. This approach enabled the recognition of incremental shifts, hard-won gains, solidarity, and instances of backlash indicators often overlooked in traditional frameworks. Through co-creating ToCs and MEAL indicators, we dismantle power structures that dominate knowledge production, programme management, and decision-making in tandem with global conversations on decolonising development, philanthropy, and social justice.

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An intersectional feminist approaches to MEAL

Historically, colonial powers maintained close ties with former colonies through non-governmental organisation (NGO) activities, perpetuating colonial power dynamics and biases in development

practices[2]. This historical context is crucial for understanding why current MEAL practices can be unjust and perpetuate colonial tendencies of top-down approaches and measuring progress using conventional linear processes. Hence, there is an urgent need to re-imagine MEAL frameworks through decolonial and reflexive lenses.

Feminist approaches to MEAL are intersectional – they consider how people experience multiple forms of discrimination and oppression based on different aspects of their identity[3]. They recognise contextual factors which may shape the response to programmes and progress on indicators. They challenge who holds the power to define knowledge, whose voices are heard, and who benefits from the development interventions. Many development agencies and international NGOs often use standardised indicators to measure impact. These indicators, which are often quantitative, fail to capture the nuanced stories and experiences of local communities. Feminist MEAL challenges this practice by advocating for the use of narratives/stories from diverse voices. This approach captures more meaningful data and empowers communities to use their agency to drive transformative change.

Additionally, a decolonial feminist MEAL approach emphasises that the methodologies, processes, and tools chosen for data collection must align with feminist intentions. Tools themselves, such as surveys or interviews, are not inherently feminist. What makes them feminist is how they are implemented—how data is collected, how findings are engaged with, and how these findings are used to promote justice and equality[4]. For example, indicators for a programme can be developed to respect "community" knowledge, ensuring that their experiences shape the expected outcomes of the programme.

MEAL indicators: 5000 years of monitoring and politics

It can be argued that, as a field of practice, its origin is as old as mankind[5]. The ancient Egyptians regularly monitored their country's outputs in grain and livestock production more than 5,000 years ago[6]. Similarly, caregivers used to monitor the growth trajectory of infants using waist and wrist threads and developmental milestones as opposed to numerical metrics of weight and height as prevalent today. In this sense, M&E is certainly not a new phenomenon. Although its current manifestation makes it seem like an innovation of the 20th century, specifically in the development sector. Given that history, organisations in the global south and communities have the ability to determine the change they desire and the best ways this change can be measured.

Secondly, MEAL is political and so it should not be approached as a homogeneous field[7]. It shouldn't be disconnected from contextual factors and the lived realities of the communities served.

[2] Cullen, Poppy & McCorriston, Steve & Thompson, Andrew. (2021). The "Big Survey": Decolonisation, Development and the First Wave of NGO Expansion in Africa After 1945

[3] UNICEF Gender Policy and Action Plan 2022-2025. Gender-Transformative Programming.

[4] Equality Fund, Feminist approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning

[5] Building Sustainable Communities: Monitoring and Evaluation, Module 4: Monitoring and Evaluation.

[6] Ten steps to a results-based monitoring and evaluation system: a handbook for development practitioners

[7] OXFAM Canada: Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

Most development programmes emphasise learning and accountability, but these goals can only be genuinely achieved through shared ownership of programmes, particularly in critical processes like MEAL. Moreover, mutual learning demystifies the technical nature of MEAL, challenging power dynamics related to class and gender, and questioning whose knowledge is valued and what evidence is deemed valid.

Let local organisations take the lead to ensure more meaningful and locally driven outcomes

With over a dozen countries[8] in the Global North adopting feminist foreign policies, my hope is that these policies will be adapted to align with each country's specific context. This will enable the development of contextually relevant programmes that address challenges based on the lived realities of communities rather than conforming to international development agendas.

Feminist MEAL has the potential to drive social transformation if we adopt a decolonial approach to development and aid. When embraced, it will reshape partnerships with local organisations by allowing them to take the lead in all stages of programme development, thus enhancing cooperation[9] and ensuring more meaningful, locally driven outcomes. This may contribute to significant shifts in the unequal power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South.

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[8] Focus2030, Feminist foreign policy: where do France, Spain and Italy stand? Summary of the latest Gender in Geopolitics Institute report.

[9] CORDAID, Feminist Foreign Policy Positioning in a fast-developing debate