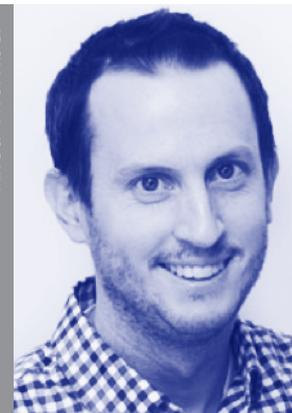


Evaluation that makes sense for learning and outcome accountability

Kirsti Thornber, Principal Consultant and Dr Matthew McConnachie, Evaluation Consultant at LTS International, explore how an evaluation process in Malawi supported and demonstrated impact through a user-focus and meaningful data analysis.



Kirsti Thornber



Matthew McConnachie

KIRSTI THORNER AND MATTHEW MCCONNACHIE

work with LTS International, a consultancy group with a strong focus on evaluating international development projects. Kirsti specialises in supporting the learning elements of these evaluations, taking an approach that builds on behaviour change communication thinking to ensure user focus, adaptive learning and uptake of evaluation findings. Matt's core work relates to the design and management of M&E systems, including programme theory and impact evaluation design.

As M&E agency for the Enhancing Community Resilience Programme (ECRP) in Malawi, LTS travelled a road of challenge, engagement and learning. This article shares a few highlights from that journey.

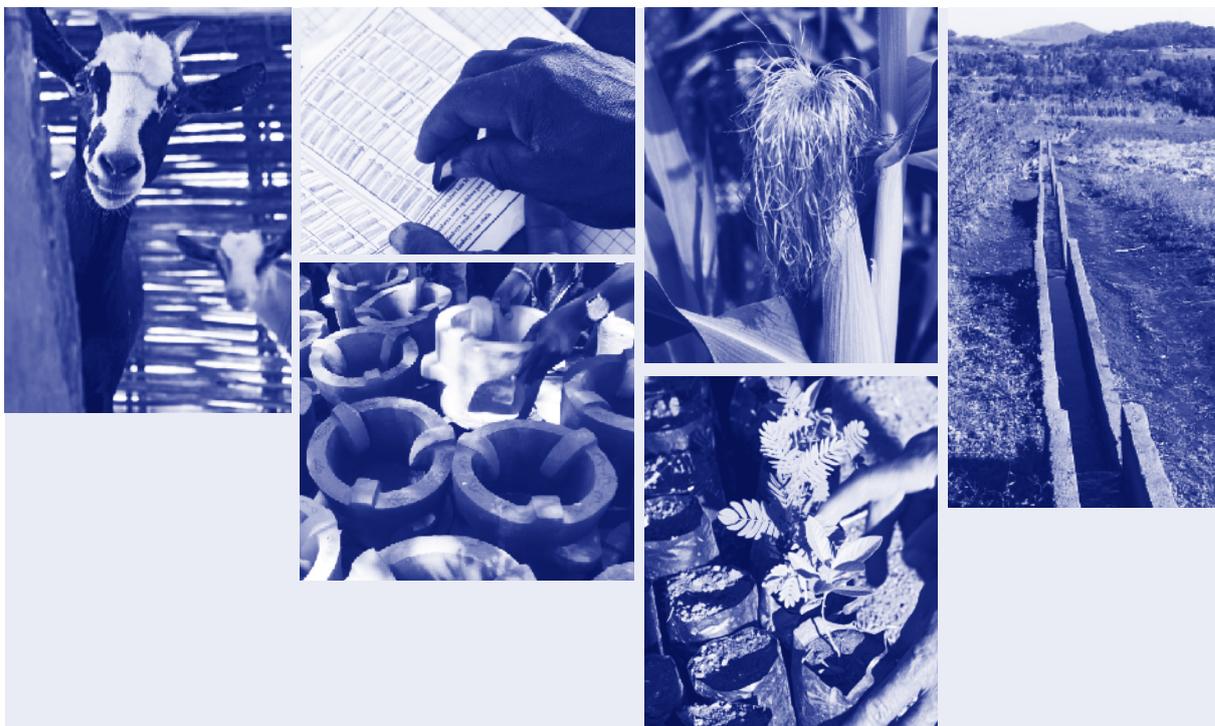
The ECRP (2011 – 2017) targeted 1.4 million people in one of Africa's poorest countries. The Malawian population is mainly rural, and one of the poorest in the world. The programme was designed to address the context of chronic

climate vulnerability, with:

- Severe climate change impacts;
- Chronic food insecurity;
- Fragmented approaches to solve the problems, and
- Limited sharing of information or experience between players.

Led by DFID, this programme was one of the first 'climate resilience portfolios' in Africa. It innovated by focusing on testing interventions to build resilience, and especially testing what *combinations* of interventions work best. This required exchange of experiential learning between two diverse implementing consortia of NGOs, each using different interventions. Consequently, LTS was commissioned at the outset as the M&E Agency to provide supportive monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) throughout the life of the programme.

FIGURE 1. THE ECRP 'INTERVENTIONS' INCLUDED CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE, LIVESTOCK REARING, COOKSTOVES, IRRIGATION, AND VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOANS



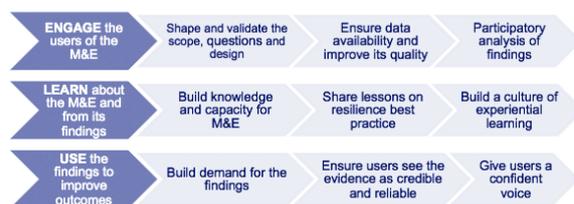
The initial focus on results-based management approaches and monitoring progress via the logframe targets was extremely useful in operational learning – important whilst the focus was on how to implement activities well.

The approach taken to learning around the M&E for ECRP recognised that implementers:

- Were diverse and numerous, operating from national to local levels. We wanted to ensure constructive engagement and learning between them all to ensure lessons were applied to ensure best practice and outcomes.
- Often have little chance to stop and reflect on how their work fits into emerging policy development or to consider new or evolving information. We wanted our approach to MEL to give them this opportunity to ‘look up.’
- Typically do great work on the ground, and provide traditional reporting on those, but focus less on effective generation and use of evidence. We wanted to help them see the value of good M&E and learn how to use it.

So our vision (Figure 2) for learning-based evaluation tried to address these issues, focusing a communication approach on how to help get great M&E findings and get them into use.

FIGURE 2. THE ‘ENGAGE-LEARN-USE’ VISION



Implementing the ‘engage-learn-use’ vision required an approach rooted in thorough knowledge of the stakeholders – the users. At inception we prioritised research and collaboration with the implementers that would ensure this. This collaboration helped build a positive and constructive relationship between the implementers and the M&E agents, clarifying the role and value of evaluation, and what it could do for the users.

Two early collaborative tasks were important. One of these was to unpick the implied theory of change from the NGO project proposals and to work on securing agreement to the most important common aspects of those theories

to structure the programme-level M&E design. The second was to embed the learning concept into a programme-wide communication and learning plan, which had four focal areas.

The four focal areas of learning

PROGRAMME LEARNING

- To check the scope and direction for adaptive management, and to generate learning for use in other programmes
- Collaborative MEL was built in from the start, with a one year review to reflect on progress and adjust plans, and with workplanning cycles aligned to the M&E
- Relationships were key (shifting from fault-finding evaluator to valued partner), and importantly DFID’s modality offered real opportunities for re-directing the programme on the basis of evidence and learning

LEARNING BETWEEN IMPLEMENTERS

- With many partners, there was risk of a scattergun approach if there was no shared learning
- Proactive learning opportunities involved thematic workshops, exchange visits, “learning journeys”
- The sharing of evidence based experience lead to increased capacity, positive competitiveness, pro-active learning

POLICY INFLUENCE

- Many sectoral policies mentioned CC/DRM mainstreaming, but government leadership/ coordination on getting it into practice was limited
- ECRP had an advocacy partner who led on policy research and a process of constructive policy engagement, using credible evidence (not just a ‘loud voice’)
- Collaborative M&E meant the implementors had confidence in self-assessed evidence, which gave them confidence to engage with Government

Practical and useful impact assessments of climate resilience building interventions are known to be especially challenging.

IMPROVING PRACTICE

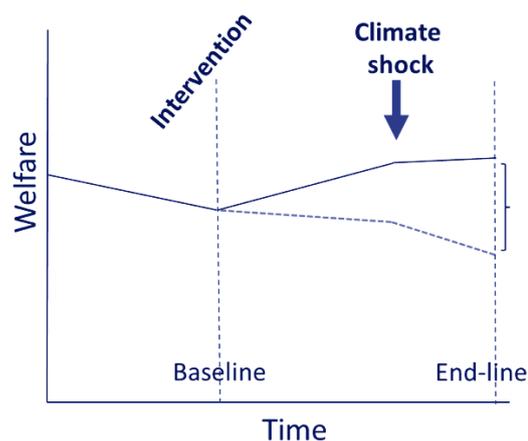
- At the outset, there was inconsistent understanding on how best to build resilience to climate change. The MEL process allowed learning & reflection which gave confidence in the evidence, supported by targeted communications
- A focus on learning meant that implementers went beyond protection of their own “funding turf” to integrating shared learning for more systematic impact at household level

The initial focus on results-based management approaches and monitoring progress via the logframe targets was extremely useful in operational learning – important whilst the focus was on how to implement activities well. Following the mid-term review of the programme – with stronger relationships, a shared sense of the value of joint learning and recognition of the importance of assessing outcome level change – attention turned to impact assessment.

LTS supported the programme in this firstly by carrying out two low budget ‘lessons learned’ studies which informed adaptive planning. One showed correlation between ‘best bet combinations of interventions’ and improved outcomes, and the other compared responses to climate disaster (massive floods which struck the country) between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries – concluding that the programme’s disaster risk reduction mechanisms were working. However these studies had limitations in terms of impact assessment – there were multi-directional causal relationships around combinations of interventions, and variability between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. This generated a desire for final evaluation methods that could attribute impact more confidently.

On the basis of an evaluability assessment, we opted to design a counterfactual-based approach to try and make more accurate estimates of the levels of impact which could be attributed to the programme’s interventions.

FIGURE 3. COUNTERFACTUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

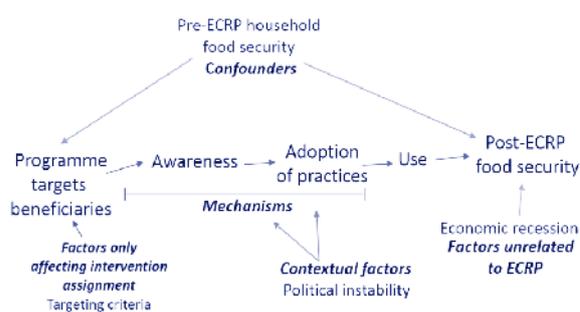


These measure the difference in outcomes (e.g. welfare) for people exposed to the intervention (the beneficiaries) and what would have happened in the absence of the intervention. Because the counterfactual is unobservable a comparison group needs to be identified from people not exposed to the intervention.

Practical and useful impact assessments of climate resilience building interventions are known to be especially challenging. We encountered a number of difficulties in measuring the impact of ECRP, and have had to be creative with solutions, as explained in the box below.

| Challenge | Solution |
|---|---|
| That a suitably large proportion of people for whom baseline information is recorded are actually exposed to climate shocks during the period of the evaluation. Smaller proportions make it harder to detect statistically significant impacts. Difficulties in establishing comparison groups of non-beneficiaries (before the project starts) who will have the same level of exposure to climate shocks as the beneficiary groups. | Instead of interviewing non-beneficiaries at baseline, at the end of the programme we targeted non-beneficiaries who had faced similar shocks and asked them to recall the baseline situation. Recall estimates were cross-checked with other data sources including beneficiary survey data and spatial data. Power tests were also conducted using a pilot study conducted last year. |
| The characteristics of areas which are targeted for climate resilience interventions are often unique and not well defined. This makes it difficult to identify comparison areas that have similar characteristics. | We used a two-step matching approach to identify similar intervention and comparison areas and households. We first matched areas using data generated by the Malawi hazards and vulnerability mapping project. Next, at the household level we matched households that had similar baseline characteristics. |
| It is often difficult to identify comparison areas where similar interventions do not occur. For example, in Malawi many similar NGOs and programmes work both within ECRP and non-ECRP areas. | Across all the districts in which ECRP operates we identified the areas within which other similar NGOs operate so that we could identify non-beneficiary comparison areas. |
| Traditional counterfactual impact assessments are often 'black-box', only reporting changes in final impact variables (e.g. assets owned) and not unpacking the mechanisms through which impacts occurred and in which context. This limits the ability to learn from and use findings for the targeting and implementation of new climate resilience projects. | We used a theory-based impact assessment approach which combines the strengths of theory and counterfactual based approaches. Based on interviews with the project staff we differentiated between mechanisms, contextual factors and confounding factors (Figure 4). This approach improved the credibility of our findings and the ability to learn where (or not) impacts were occurring along the causal chain. |

FIGURE 4. THEORY-BASED APPROACH



The impact assessment used a theory-based approach which drew on a rich stakeholder informed understanding of the project and context to design the impact assessment and interpret the findings. This improved the usefulness of the evaluation.

The final evaluation is currently still underway, but as the programme ends, it is possible to reflect on what made ECRP special. There have been a number of factors.

- The programme was given time to embed the M&E systems and to learn, enabling the growth of a shared programme vision between implementers and evaluators, and a collaborative attitude.
- Effective M&E focused on reflective learning, and the generation and analysis of trusted evidence, driving a confidently adaptive approach and credible advocacy.
- The learning system was based on a fit-for-purpose evaluation design that was both credible but good value for money, reducing costs by using recall and secondary data sources, whilst credibility was improved by cutting-edge statistical approaches combined with a mixed methods approach.

Kirsti Thornber

kirsti-thornber@ltsi.co.uk

Matthew McConnachie

matthew-mcconnachie@ltsi.co.uk