

Research Application Summary

Monitoring and evaluating capacity development programmes: A conceptual basis and experiences from the RUFORUM M&E strategy development

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Abstract

In responding to the demand for tools, strategy and capacity for monitoring and evaluating (M&E) performance, the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) has embarked on development of a robust M&E strategy. This paper presents lessons from the process so far as RUFORUM rolls out its M&E strategy. It relates the principles and practices of M&E to the processes and lessons in a network organization. A conceptual basis driving the process is presented. Principles of both exogenous and endogenous accountability in capacity development programmes are also elucidated. The application of the framework to the design of an M&E Strategy is highlighted. The paper concludes that there is need for more debate on approaches to M&E of capacity development while efforts should be made to develop M&E capacity in the universities.

Key words: Conceptual Framework, M&E Capacity, Monitoring and Evaluation, RUFORUM

Résumé

En réponse à la demande d'outils, de la stratégie et de la capacité de suivi et d'évaluation (M & E) de performance, « the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) » a entrepris le développement d'une stratégie robuste en M & E. Ce document présente les leçons à partir du processus que RUFORUM déploie comme sa stratégie en S & E. Elle concerne les principes et pratiques de S & E pour les processus et les leçons dans une organisation en réseau. Une base conceptuelle qui conduit le processus est présentée. Les principes de reddition de comptes à la fois exogènes et endogènes dans les programmes de renforcement des capacités sont également mis en lumière. L'application du cadre à la conception d'une stratégie M & E est soulignée. Le document conclut qu'il est nécessaire pour un débat plus approfondi sur les approches de S & E du renforcement des capacités tandis que des efforts

devraient être faits pour développer les capacités de S & E dans les universités.

Mots clés: Cadre conceptuel, M & E des capacités, suivi et évaluation, RUFORUM

Background

Over the past two decades, there has been a movement within organizations and governments across the globe to reform and reshape the ways in which they function. Demands by stakeholders, donors and citizens for accountability for results and provision of more efficient and effective services echo now even across Africa. The demand for effectiveness and more responsiveness by universities in the face of limited capacity and resources for performance-based capacity development is in itself a paradox. These pressures are helping to drive a management paradigm shift through restructuring of frameworks, tools, strategies and systems of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) for organizations such as the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM).

The African Union's New Partnerships for African Development (AU-NEPAD) has developed the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) which set the goal of 6% per annum growth for the sector. A key component of the vision calls for improving agricultural productivity through enabling and accelerating innovation. CAADP Pillar IV constitutes NEPAD's strategy for revitalizing, expanding and reforming Africa's agricultural research, technology dissemination and adoption efforts. The need for advancements in monitoring and evaluation and a results-based agricultural capacity development and productivity management is self-evident as decades of poverty and socio-economic decline have pervaded development landscape in the continent. Elaborate and innovative M&E for capacity development is desirable.

While the tangible results through projects, outreach activities, networks, research and training programmes are promising, some key questions remain: how far have the capacities of universities been developed for long-term performance management and how has internal M&E system worked for performance management, learning and sharing goals at for example, the RUFORUM Secretariat and within its network an integral, internally consistent M&E system for regional

Programmes¹. The final product of the process guided by this strategy is a systemic Monitoring & Evaluation system that provides continuous learning and evaluation of the outputs, outcomes and impact of capacity building initiatives that support university engagement in sustainable agriculture and rural development. The system is intended to embed, into on-going activities, the need to manage performance through reflections, measurements, sharing and dissemination of organizational, institutional and individual capacity and system features including learning platforms, outcomes and impact evaluation, process, implementation and output monitoring as well as reporting of performances.

This paper is the first in a series of technical publications from the planning, monitoring and evaluation unit of RUFORUM to capture lessons and document new frontiers as the organization designs and rolls out its M&E strategy and system. The paper relates the principles and practices of monitoring and evaluation to the processes and lessons in a network organization like RUFORUM. It also presents a preliminary conceptual basis and framework that underpins this on-going learning at RUFORUM. Perspectives of other researchers who have scaled their M&E landscape are also provided as benchmark and reference for assessing impact of wide-scale investment in capacity development. It also synthesizes important contributions from systems thinking and innovation, pertinent to M&E for capacity development, and reviews some experiences from the on-going development and approach to operationalization of the M&E strategy.

Literature Summary

Monitoring of performance is being adopted as one way of assessing the efficacy of capacities that are being developed, and which need further development. Lavergne (2005) summarised the distinction between capacity and performance in the context of the Learning Network on Programme-based Approaches (LENPA), based on a definition of capacity as the potential to perform. The ECDPM definition, however, sees capacity as both a means - performance - and as an end in itself: 'capacity is that emergent combination of attributes, capabilities and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt and perform'. A growing body of literature is emerging on

¹RUFORUM is a Network of 25 African universities in eastern, central and southern Africa. It has a Secretariat, which serves as a coordinating unit. Activities are implemented at individual university and country(s) levels. (see www.ruforum.org)

monitoring and evaluation of capacity development processes from NGOs and other independent studies. In Africa, wide variations in the roles of M&E in relation to impact of capacity development processes are apparent. Various institutions and networks tend to design and plan capacity-related interventions in detail, especially in the broader agriculture and rural development sector interventions. The case of the various approaches to M&E for the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) is clear. The use of the project (or logical) framework as well as network analysis, as design tools, and for monitoring progress and evaluating effectiveness is growing in the continent. The main reason why these approaches are popular with institutions is that they provide the basis for meeting accountability concerns through reporting to policy makers, politicians and taxpayers. Across Africa, there exist persuasive evidence of the value and effectiveness - in contributing to agricultural capacity development - of 'endogenous' M&E approaches that: (1) are based upon participation through self-assessment of key players including farmers and students; (2) encourage feedback, reflection and learning on the basis of experience; and (3) promote internal and external dialogue between stakeholders. The CAADP processes at national and regional levels render themselves easily to this notion. Despite this, there is little evidence that universities and networks are reducing their reliance for their monitoring on conventional M&E and activity based performance appraisal approaches that emphasize 'measurement' of results - in a form defined by, and acceptable to, the external funding agencies. Informal approaches to monitoring - where 'feedback' generation is given greater prominence than 'measurement' - are a feature of systems-thinking-influenced approaches. Innovative application of systems thinking in M&E is paramount. Systems approaches - where no detailed objectives are specified at the outset, and more emphasis is put on generating feedback and learning as the intervention proceeds - are increasingly gaining credence in agricultural capacity development programmes (Boesen and Therkildsen. *et al.*, 2005).

Monitoring and Evaluation of performance can be an incentive for the development of improved capacities to deliver if accountability mechanisms are present or given serious attention. 'Endogenous' accountability appears to be more important as an incentive to performance than performance monitoring largely for reporting to 'exogenous' stakeholders.

The recognition of performance improvement by peers and clients is an important motivational factor in enhancing and maintaining the 'dynamic' of change in network organizations. This requires rigorous client-focused (farmer-focused) information generation, dissemination and feedback processes.

Measures that provide support to 'endogenous' monitoring of performance by agricultural capacity development service providers like universities are worthy of more attention than they appear to have received thus far in Africa. M&E and PM are integral tools for managing and assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of investments in agricultural training, research and extension (ATRE) systems. The key preconditions to the success of M&E capacity development are substantive government and sector demand, existence of a mandate for M&E units and systems in the research, extension and training organizations and networks for evaluation, and stability in staffing such that a very high proportion of trained personnel remain in tasks for which they were trained (Dart & Davies, 2003).

Universities, research institutions and networks like RUFORUM face myriad challenges with the operationalization of effective M&E systems. Agricultural capacity development programmes have diverse objectives which are difficult to measure especially so because they involve different stakeholders. Moreover, cause-and-effect attribution of impact due to diverse external factors and there prevails the dilemma of project versus programmatic M&E system and capacity as well as the balance between tracking both the institutional development and the impact on productivity or priorities. There is also a high level of pluralism characterized by multiple partners, including farmers, farmers' organizations, and various public and private sector actors.

A baseline survey on M&E for agricultural tertiary education in eastern, central and southern Africa involving 25 universities (RUFORUM and NIDA, 2009) established that there existed at varying levels rudimentary M&E systems. The systems were characterised by an increasing trend towards performance management and growing culture of being accountable to donors and stakeholders. This provides a demand for M&E information and capacity in the universities. The university level M&E mainly deals with monitoring activity implementation (resource utilisation, activities undertaken and to some extent translation

of inputs into outputs) with little if any focus on outcome and impact monitoring. There are no formalised systems for tracking placement and performance of past students. Many universities currently fuse and confuse M&E of teaching and learning processes with systems for quality assurance. The M&E of research processes and outcomes is solely the responsibility of individual research implementers in the universities. Although there are units for approving, registering and cataloguing all research projects and coordination of research projects and programmes, M&E of research activities is relegated to mere provision of progress reports that is largely activity-based and not so much against performance indicators.

Study Description

Monitoring and evaluating capacity: A conceptual framework. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is a recognized management practice that allows for learning and change when implemented regularly (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2006). Specifically, M&E can help answer a range of questions about: (1) the *process* of capacity change (how capacity building takes place); (2) capacity as an *intermediate step toward performance* (what elements of capacity are needed to ensure adequate performance); and (3) capacity as an *outcome* (whether capacity building has improved capacity). At RUFORUM a conceptual basis that is underpinning the design of the M&E strategy assumes that the first step in developing a vision of African agricultural capacity development, and a plan to measure it, is to understand the role capacity plays in the rural sector. Key questions linger such as “what are the expectations and assumptions surrounding capacity and its relationship to performance of CAADP outcomes” This helps in defining realistic objectives for regional and university based capacity-building interventions as well as in expressing desired capacity outcomes explicitly and precisely. These parameters are relied upon in developing a capacity building M&E plan. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the basis of the conceptual framework used as a reference to develop and envision the role of capacity (and capacity building) in Africa. It has been found, from various consultative fora that directed discussion using the framework prior to M&E planning can stimulate strategic thinking within project, programmes and network or work teams, clarify individual and collective expectations and thereby improve capacity building for M&E. The conceptual basis takes a system-wide view of capacity, including all possible levels where agricultural capacity development might take place. The

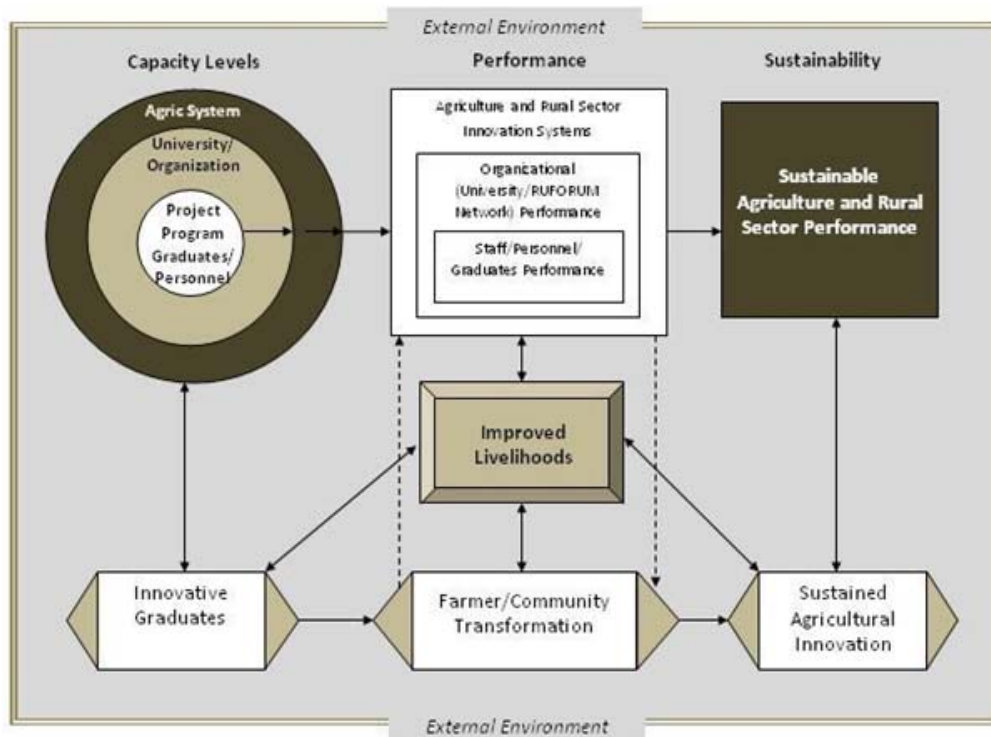


Figure 1. Overview of the conceptual basis for M&E for capacity development.

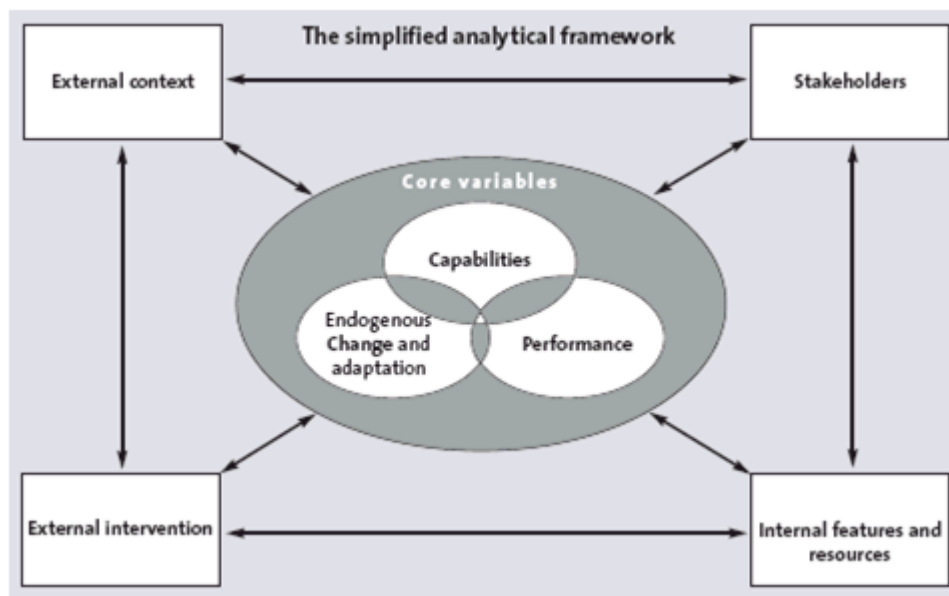


Figure 2. Simplified conceptual basis of core variables and context of M&E for capacity development.

frameworks provide a starting point for identifying the key variables that influence capacity and performance at that level.

From the RUFORUM experience, the criteria for choice of effective monitoring and evaluation framework include utility in the (1): Recognition of the complexity and non-linearity that characterize agricultural capacity development programmes and therefore seek to integrate variables at more than one spatial and temporal scale ; (2) Integration of both social and economic variables; (3) prediction, and identification of surrogates for resilience that help to identify when capacity building systems are approaching thresholds; and (4) monitoring both the outcomes (performance) of capacity development initiatives and the process of implementation. These conditions are mirrored by Horton *et al.* (2004), Morgan (2005) and World Bank (2005).

Research Application

RUFORUM is continuously improving its effectiveness and capacity development for impact. The Monitoring and Evaluation efforts are meant to find out what is and is not functioning, thereby enabling learning, feedback and sharing of lessons from past experiences and make improvements on project and programme delivery. RUFORUM's Monitoring & Evaluation strategy focuses on there being a learning instrument for performance management intended to be beneficial for all projects, programmes, units and engagements with partners. It proposes an inherent capacity to monitor projects and activities embedded in the overall M&E framework coupled with a culture of learning for improvement, trust, openness and honesty amongst all partners and units involved. The "Draft M&E Strategy" is an application of the conceptual basis presented in this paper.

Highlights of the Draft RUFORUM M&E Strategy. The organizational M&E priorities of RUFORUM centre around in-house and network capacity to track progress and inform organizational and network learning for impact. Within the RUFORUM Secretariat, there is a desire to build in-house capacities to define realistic programme objectives, outputs and impacts, and designing appropriate unit and project level M&E interventions. The principle role of the strategy is to guide the implementation of a M&E system that can track progress on outcomes of programmes, projects and activities involving diverse units, actors and aspects of higher education capacity

building such as regional postgraduate programmes, leadership and management, quality assurance, influence and impact on policy, poverty alleviation, governance, sustainable livelihood, gender equality and empowerment at various scales. This is being done while ensuring that M&E frameworks and indicators incorporate, and are sensitive to, issues of gender equality, environmental sustainability and other emerging cross cutting issues such as climate change adaptation. The M&E Strategy document serves as a tool to guide and facilitate collective and regular self-assessment of performance and outcomes by RUFORUM and all its partners in capacity building for agricultural development.

The RUFORUM M&E strategy has been conceived to have four inter-related components: (1) learning; (2) results; (3) participation; and (4) partnerships. The focus on *learning* is hinged on the assumption that monitoring and evaluation are essentially processes of reflection that can be built into the project cycle at various points and all operations of RUFORUM. This is envisaged, to facilitate a shift away from traditional approaches to M&E, which are premised on a policing or judgmental role on behalf of the donor agency and others. The apparent focus on *results* is aimed at ensuring continued centrality to the achievement of RUFORUM organizational outputs, outcomes and impacts. The strategic plan (2010 – 2015) and the RUFORUM Master Business Plan (2010 – 2015) both identify critical links between monitoring and evaluation processes at multiple levels, and management tools. The RUFORUM M&E Strategy is also ensuring the *participation* of all stakeholders, including member universities, other actors in the National Agricultural Research Systems (NARES), private sector, civil society, other higher education institutions, partner universities in Africa and internationally, donors and farmers organizations. The strategy is advocating the development of mechanisms to negotiate differences in perceptions and priorities while assessing the constraints and opportunities experienced in the process of achieving goals and results in joint regional interventions.

Overall, the RUFORUM M&E strategy aims to integrate approaches, tools and methods to help answer some critical performance management questions. Some of these questions include those targeting assessment of outcomes and impacts under:

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- *Regional postgraduate training programmes* including whether their objectives are being fulfilled or achieved; course syllabi, student presentations at the RUFORUM meetings, masters and Ph.D theses of adequate quality; and the efficacy and use of financial, physical and human resources in graduate training
- *Research impact* including how effectively have policy-makers interfaced with research in universities
- *RUFORUM research and training networks* focusing in how inputs of the various partner universities are directed to a common goal
- *Quality of training* with regard to student recruitment and enrolment and calibre of graduate as well as the sufficiency of the modus operandi of the program review processes in maintaining a high standard

The M&E strategy details guidelines and tools for:

- Actualization of M&E and M&E capacity at the member universities and National Forums²
- The RUFORUM Logical Framework as the main foundation for both implementation design and M&E
- M&E Impact and Performance Pathways
- The M&E Framework as a generic matrix meant for use in guiding M&E data collection and management protocols
- Reporting flows and formats as well as M&E information feedback and review plan
- M&E capacity building design
- M&E of capacity development
- Risk management plan and strategy
- Role of ICT in M&E and building of organizational and network Management Information System (MIS)
- M&E for Cross-Cutting and Emerging Issues like gender and climate change
- “Foresighting” and “Monitoring the Future” through capacity development scenarios
- M&E operational plan and budget
- Role of universities and other partners
- M&E communication strategy

²National Forums are National Chapters of RUFORUM, a platform for engaging universities and other actors to provide guidance on university R&D processes and articulating demands for services from RUFORUM

Evaluating the RUFORUM networkembodies:

- *Networks of international donor supported programmes, projects and initiatives* within ECSA
- *A supra-network of its constituent national chapters, the National Forums* within each country from where member universities come, who have contact with each other, work with each other and who may also compete with and complement each other for regional opportunities
- *Networks of university staff (academic, administrative, research, technical)*, who are connected formally and informally - *Networks of activities* which form different kinds of RUFORUM operational and business processes that generate different types of services. Such as workshops, training events and communication
- *Networks of communities of practices* linked by overlapping membership, or by disciplinary and thematic relationships.
- *Networks of University Managers and Leaders*, through a regional platform for Vice Chancellors, deans, principles and other leaders
- *Networks of postgraduate students* undergoing regional training who interact formally and informally through collaborative research, student exchanges, conferences and academic fairs.

Measuring the significance of the network, demands a complex yet relevant framework that would simplify the effect of the network using indicators of contribution of the network to RUFORUM strategic goals, mission and vision. For instance, the new RUFORUM M&E strategy proposes to use the following simple indicators of network effectiveness in fulfilling the dream of university relevance to Africa's agricultural and rural sector development:

- *Existence of a relationship*: Described by using a numerical or qualitative value to the presence or absence and degree of a link in network.
- *Type of relationship*: Describing different categories of relationships of interest to capacity development
- *Frequency of interaction*: Indicating frequency of useful interaction between components units of the network over a given period or in total.
- *Value of the relationship*: Signifying a rating or ranking of the relative value or priority of different relationships

- *Sequence of the relationships*: Representing a sequence of events over time, or dates representing actual times
- *Details of a relationship*: A qualitative and quantitative narrative/account of relationship at different levels of the network

Recommendation

In conclusion, this paper recommends that:

- A discussion is needed on approaches to M&E for capacity development which themselves contribute to the enhancement of key capacities in the member universities of RUFORUM or systems, and how further application of appropriate frameworks, strategies, tools can be 'mainstreamed' at RUFORUM and in the universities, while preserving and enhancing their own accountability to their governments, communities, donors and small-holder farmers.
- M&E capacity be developed, availed and retained in support of university input to the Framework for African Agricultural Productivity (FAAP) principles on agricultural research, training and extension. This would strengthen the range of skills, resources, systems, and attitudes for performance of results-based monitoring and evaluation of agricultural research, training and extension in Africa.
- Initiatives to sustainably enhance the capacity of the agricultural capacity development actors and institutions in systems, tools, approaches and strategies for effective and efficient M&E and agricultural performance management and reporting be developed.

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