HELVETAS
Swiss Intercooperation

SUMMARISED version

MRM GUIDANCE

Putting Theory Into Practice – Experiences from market system development projects on 'right-sizing' MRM Systems

MarketMakers, Bosnia & Herzegovina, ICT intervention

Coping with Common Challenges when Preparing and Implementing a Monitoring and Results Measurement (MRM) System

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Introduction

Monitoring and Results Measurement (MRM) is a fundamental part of good project management. It enables projects to obtain up-to-date information that allows adapting intervention strategies, making good decisions and maximising impacts.

The purpose of MRM is three-fold:

1. **Steering**: enable project staff to manage interventions and take informed decisions.
2. **Learning**: to what extent do events and results unfold as planned? And why?
3. **Accountability**: to donors, primary stakeholders, partners, government institutions, etc.

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance document is to provide concrete support and information that helps projects that apply the MSD approach[1], especially smaller ones, to prepare, design and use an MRM system efficiently and effectively. Many guidelines and manuals already exist that explain how projects should develop and manage their MRM system. The purpose of this document is different: the focus is not on what project should do, but on what projects **can** do.

Eight MRM principles are discussed in two main sections: (1) Preparing and (2) Designing & Managing the MRM system. Each principle is divided into three segments.

1) The Theory: describes what projects should do in order to apply the respective principle
2) Common Challenges: discusses common problems with putting the principle in practice.
3) In Practice: presents a number of ideas on how projects can overcome the common challenges and provides concrete examples from MSD projects.

Most projects that apply the MSD approach in HELVETAS use the standard developed in 2008 by the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED).[2] The principles discussed in this guidance to some extent refer to the DCED standard, but they also focus on additional experiences and good practices. Projects that do not (intend to) use the DCED standard should also be able to benefit from the discussions and practical examples presented in this paper.

'Right-sizing' an MRM system is understood as adapting the MRM system to the priorities/goals, size as well as the context of projects (staff capacity, sectors selected, enabling environment, etc.). It refers to making the system 'manageable' and 'fit to realities'. Right-sizing is not understood as 'self-selection' through downsizing essential elements of an MRM system (e.g. results chains, indicators) for designing and implementing the system. In short, it means designing and implementing an MRM system that is appropriate in scope and timeframe for achieving measurable results and impacts.

[1] MSD or M4P aim to tackle market failures and strengthen the private sector in a way that creates large-scale and sustainable change. See: http://blog.helvetas.org/on-systemic-approach/
[2] The DCED Secretariat. Measuring Results: http://www.enterprise-development.org/page/measuring-results

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GUIDANCE

In this summarised version of the MRM Guidance we have used extracts from the main guidance paper (bullet points) and included one project example only.

The main guidance paper provides much more detailed explanations of the Theory, Challenges and Practice –plus for each principle it includes numerous additional practical examples from projects worldwide.

Part 1: Preparing the MRM System

Principle 1: Allocate sufficient financial resources for MRM

1.1. The theory – what should you do?

- Allocate sufficient financial resources
- Tailor methodologies to available resources. Size and scope of surveys and research will be limited when project budget is small. [3]

1.2. Common challenges – what problems may arise?

- Little information exist about the actual costs of developing an effective MRM system
- Projects often have difficulties estimating MRM budget
- Small projects may not have funds to hire MRM person(s) or do solid research
- At other times projects may not prioritise MRM, even though budget is available, resulting in various adverse effects (staff not trained, results chains not developed and impact logic unclear, data not collected on time, unclear if interventions are on track and how to adapt).

1.3. In practice – what can you do to overcome the common challenges?

- Allocate sufficient resources and ensure MRM is integrated in overall management budget (see also principle 3)
- It may be helpful if donor-agreed MRM budget is not too detailed: allows for flexibility and option to respond to new opportunities
- A 'sketchy' budget may help to identify and use other (non-MRM) budget lines that may benefit MRM activities
- Be aware of (don't underestimate) MRM budgetary needs during tendering process
- Small projects need to be extra careful to prioritise their MRM activities

Experience from Southern Asia (Samriddhi project, Bangladesh)

The Samriddhi project evolved from two previous projects, which were mainly based on the livelihoods approach. The MRM system was initially based on the systems of the two previous projects. At the same time, Samriddhi shifted its approach towards MSD. Therefore, the project naturally had to ask whether its interventions led to any change in the market systems and result in changes in poor people's life. However, the challenge was that the cost for designing and running the MRM system was not carefully taken into account in redesigning the project. Many of the logical framework indicators were reordered, some of them were modified, and new indicators were added. Where needed, the targets, frequency and tools were adjusted. The targets were revised taking into account staff's experience and estimations as well as baselines. […]

[3] See also the DCED guideline on managing the results measurement system: http://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/8_Implementation_Guidelines_Managing_System_July_2015.pdf

Principle 2: Allocate adequate human resources for MRM

2.1. The theory

- Decide which MRM tasks to outsource and what to do in-house
- Clearly define MRM tasks and responsibilities and ensure staff is capable of carrying out those tasks.[4]

2.2. Common challenges

- Establishing an 'MRM culture' can be challenging, especially when staff and project managers have little experience with MRM.
- Staff with limited MRM skills will not be able (or understand how) to make good use of collected data for steering, learning and reporting purposes
- New projects must prioritise staff training needs – other areas of work (e.g. MSD training) may be given preference. And even if staff is trained, underdeveloped MRM capacities often remain a critical issue.

2.3. In practice

- As a first step all team members should understand the relevance of the MRM system. Thereafter the project manager (possibly with MRM expert) should take the lead in establishing an MRM culture.
- Head-office may play a role in raising awareness about the purpose and importance of MRM
- Clearly defined MRM tasks and job descriptions should reflect the notion that everyone is responsible for MRM (not just the MRM manager)
- Notwithstanding the above, staff should not be overloaded with MRM tasks. Outsourcing may be an option – as long as 'thinking' around MRM issues stays in-house.
- MRM training is often not enough: projects and development organisations should continue looking for more effective ways to develop MRM capacities.

Experience from Eastern Europe (anonymous)

Initially project staff were relatively resistant towards MRM. In an effort to reduce people's reluctance, the external MRM specialist continuously challenged people's attitude and ask questions about intervention plans (How do you think to make the expected change happen? Is this enough to trigger change? What else could influence the change? Did you check all other influences?). As a next step, the management of the project decided to change the office arrangement, so that the project MRM officer and one of the intervention managers would share an office (with a rotation every three months). […] Two years before the end of the project, the MRM specialist was able to reduce his involvement significantly, and in the last year the MRM specialist was able to completely redraw himself from the project

[4] See also the DCED guideline on managing the results measurement system: http://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/8_Implementation_Guidelines_Managing_System_July_2015.pdf

Principle 3: Ensure MRM will be fully integrated in project management

3.1. The theory

- Describe how MRM informs decision-making
- And provide an overview of the key instruments and processes used in both project management and the MRM system

3.2. Common challenges

- When an MRM system is not fully integrated in the project management system, there is a risk that interventions cannot be steered properly (and reporting on results will be difficult), as appropriate data will be missing.
- Some staff may not like to record data on a regular basis (instead they keep the information in their head) – this is not manageable with complex projects and is not conducive to exchanging information with colleagues (i.e. poor knowledge sharing).
- Many projects are not able to develop a harmonised data management system early on. But fixing this afterwards is costly and time-consuming.

3.3. In practice

- To ensure an MRM system is an integral part of project management it is fundamental that it is tailored to the type and scope of the project and available resources.
- Projects should distinguish 'nice-to-haves' from 'must-haves' and start with one or two interventions to test relevance and applicability of the key elements of the MRM system.
- The MRM system is key to the overall project design: starting from analysis (e.g. understanding market systems) to setting up strategies, designing interventions, implementation and reflecting on/sharing lessons by thinking through and validating the logic of facilitation
- Many people who are less familiar with MRM, tend to see it as something that they need to do in addition to managing their intervention (they might think that they can manage the intervention without MRM). To change people's mind-set it is important that the project manager (and MRM manager) can demonstrate what would happen if you do not use MRM as a management tool for your intervention.

Experience from Eastern Europe (anonymous)

Different views from the project manager, MRM consultant and donor, in particular during the first half of the project, meant that staff did not know what to do and whom to listen to. The project manager had ideas about the MRM system, but did not give clear instructions to the MRM team. Instead, the MRM consultant put pressure on the team to achieve full compliance with the DCED standard and the position of the donor side was not clear. Some data were collected properly, but for other issues the team did not have adequate information. This affected the reporting, and this resulted in lack of trust from the donor […].

Part 2: Designing and Managing the MRM System

Principle 4: Measuring changes for each intervention (in a detailed, logical and self-critical manner)

Principle 4 is divided in the following three sub-sections: results chains and indicators; measuring changes in indicators; estimating attributable changes.

4.1 Develop appropriate results chains for each intervention and define relevant indicators for each change

4.1.1. The theory – what should you do?

- Develop sufficiently detailed results chains for each intervention
- Review results chains regularly
- Identify indicator for each change described in the results chain
- Project anticipated impacts for key indicators[5]

4.1.2 Common challenges – what problems may arise?

- Projects sometimes struggle to agree on an appropriate level of detail when developing results chains: Sometimes results chains or indicators are far too general to collect meaningful information. Other times (especially smaller projects) projects feel pressured to develop very complex results chains at the start of the project.
- Inexperienced staff often have difficulties at the beginning of the project to define (SMART) indicators
- As not enough reliable information is available at the start of the project, it is difficult to define accurate projections. If not done carefully, however, projects may chase the wrong targets.

4.1.3. In practice – what can you do to overcome the common challenges?

- As results chains need to be reviewed regularly in any case, it is helpful to start with less complex results chains. More details are added as the interventions progress.
- Understanding local context is imperative; otherwise indicators that look good on paper may turn out to be unrealistic/inappropriate in practice

Experience from Eastern Europe (RisiAlbania project, Albania)
Many team members had not been involved in projects that apply the MSD approach. Therefore, results chains were a relatively new concept. The idea was to introduce complexity gradually and include details to the results chains over time. This approach fitted well with limited time resources, and allowed RisiAlbania to progressively build the capacities of staff. The team started with an overall intervention logic, which would be developed into early results chains that were not fully fleshed out. The staff gathered further information on each area, and results chains were then developed into further details. This way, results chains were progressively built over time. […]

[5] See also the DCED guideline on articulating the results chain: http://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/1_Implementation_Guidelines_Results_Chains_Apr_2015.pdf

4.2 Measure changes in indicators for each intervention (baseline and data collection)

4.2.1. The theory

- Collect baseline information to understand the situation before and after project activities have taken place
- Use a documented data collection plan that defines what, when, and how information is collected.

4.2.1. Common challenges

- A lot of qualitative information that one observes during field visits and stakeholder meetings is used for decision-making but is not documented consistently – and thus it does not support learning and reporting
- Data storage and analysis tools are often unattractive/time-consuming, which affects people's motivation
- Inexperienced staff often have difficulties to decide how to manage data collection tasks (e.g. what to outsource and what to do in-house) – this results in delays and possibly high costs

4.2.3. In practice

- Many data collection tools already exist (see also HELVETAS' intranet MSD space on pamoja: https://pamoja.helvetas.org/display/MSD/MSD+Manuals...). However, there is still a great interest to make these tools more user-friendly.
- To be able to make best use of 'observational information', projects should ensure staff collects this type of information whenever they go in the field or meet partners. A simple standardised template that projects use when meeting stakeholders, should include a section on observations (e.g. to record changes in partners' behaviour).

Experience from West Africa (anonymous)

This major project collected a huge amount of data for its various interventions. To manage its data needs, the project staff designed an Access database. While the new system was well designed and relatively user-friendly, the project had not properly anticipated the low IT literacy of staff and their resistance to use new tools like Access. As a result, staff would only use the database partially (when required). Instead, staff would keep a lot data in paper form or Word. The database system was therefore rather incomplete. This caused many difficulties; for instance, the communication with partners and donors was affected when reports had to be revised because previous versions did not entail all relevant data. […]

4.3 Estimate attributable changes for key indicators of each intervention

4.3.1. The theory

- Establish plausible causal links between the project intervention and the assessed changes at each step of the results chain using qualitative and quantitative evidence. In MSD projects scientific proof of attribution is normally not required, but the methods used should conform to good practice.

4.3.2. Common challenges

- Because of resource constraints projects need to strike a balance between rigour and costs. While it is important to start as early as possible (preferably before the treatment has had any effect) many projects struggle to do so.

4.3.3. In practice

- As most projects do not aim to demonstrate attribution scientifically (e.g. using control groups), other methodologies to measure/estimate attribution are being used, taking into account the type of intervention, maturity, available budget and importance of intervention.

  These alternative approaches may include:
  - Developing an attribution strategy: why and how changes happen at each step of the results chain, using mixed methods.
  - Use a quasi-experimental design, e.g. Difference-in-Difference approach
  - Conduct a qualitative survey to understand changes in people's opinions or behaviour
  - Only measuring contribution and not attribution

Experience from Southern Asia (Samriddhi project, Bangladesh)

[…] The Samriddhi project developed an attribution strategy. This was crucial in demonstrating the causal link between results/changes and interventions by the project. The objective was not to have 'airtight proofs'. The strategy simply tried to answer why and how changes happen at each step of the results chain. It relied on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for triangulating information. In the first method, the project used interviews, participant observations, case studies, focus group discussions and trend analysis with actors such as producers and service providers. The project used quantitative method in order to increase robustness of the causal link between intervention and results. Through this quantitative method, the project tried to use simple quasi-experimental design (before-after comparison). In relation to other quantitative methods, the project assumed that this was relatively cheaper and less difficult despite the requirement for careful design and measurement.

Principle 5: Measuring wider changes in the system ('systems-thinking' to assess sustainability and scale)

Principle 5 is divided into the following three sub-sections: setting systemic change indicators; measuring change in systems; and assessing attribution at system level.

5.1.1 Describe the intended systemic changes and define appropriate indicators for each change

5.1.1 The theory

- Describe the intended systemic changes and the possible pathways to achieve it using tools such as the AAER framework
- Identify indicators to monitor long-term changes and define 'leading' indicators to provide information before the final outcomes occur.
- Measure impact in terms of scale and sustainability [6]

5.1.2 Common challenges

- Many projects have difficulties to describe what constitutes a systemic change in general and how such changes would (in reality) happen in the market system.

5.1.3 In practice

- Team members should come to a common understanding of what they mean by systemic change and how the project's interventions aim to achieve system-wide change.
- As there is often a tendency to focus on short-term objectives (or people "get stuck in day-to-day work"), project managers should initiate regular team discussions to reflect on the projects' strategies and long-term goals and to encourage "system-thinking".

Experience from Eastern Europe (RisiAlbania project, Albania)
[…] The [right-sizing] principle helped with prioritising which investments (in terms of time and finances) are made in MRM, in particular with regard to measuring higher-level impact. Prior to measuring results, a project can still have a glimpse into whether an intervention has had a larger scale impact compared to other interventions; this can help guide decisions as to the depth and rigorousness of measurement. For example, in agro-processing, Risi determined that the scale of impact would be limited. Therefore, the project has decided to 'compromise' on data collection. Risi's media work, alternately, was showing great potential, and so the project decided to allocate resources for an in-depth case study to assess scale and depth of impact […]

[6] See also the DCED guideline on assessing systemic change: www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/Systemic_Change_DCED_Guide_August2014.pdf

5.2 Measure changes in systems (baseline and data collection)

5.2.1 The theory

- The same basic rules apply to measuring system changes as for measuring the intervention changes (see principle 4.2). But some additional good practices apply:
  - Anticipate unexpected changes by being flexible and investigative
  - Since views may differ widely, make sure to triangulate information
  - As many factors influence system change, it is important to examine trends

5.2.2 Common challenges

- Measuring systemic changes requires some additional skill-sets, e.g. the ability to analyse opportunities and risks; to effectively use findings to inform decision-making; to adapt to continually changing intelligence about a system. Not every person or project team will possess these skills and they are relatively difficult to acquire.
- It is often challenging to collect data and time-consuming to analyse it. Existing good practices (such as the DCED standard) may not necessarily be useful or appropriate in all contexts. Staff may also have difficulties of understanding the application of the methods and hence they are not equipped to apply them (e.g. SenseMaker).[7]

5.2.3 In practice

- Projects should first describe what short-term and long-term changes they expect as a result of the projects' facilitation. In most cases, projects can only measure the shorter-term changes within their lifespan. However, for long-term changes, there are now projects designs (funded by DFID) that allocate funds for ex-post evaluation.[8]
- As changes may not necessarily happen in linear ways, projects need to be open to adapting to unexpected changes and that they need to be ready to continually revise in the light of their learning.

Experience from Eastern Europe (RisiAlbania)
The project had identified indicators at sector level, but not at impact level. During the case study of the media intervention, the consultant helped to define how the project could also identify changes at impact level (e.g. impact of policy change). The project had expected mostly changes in the behaviour of young people, but there were also response level changes that were not anticipated. Conclusion from the case study: "The survey and case study work undertaken in 2016 has shown that it is in fact possible to identify and explore impacts and potentially to quantify this impact. To effectively undertake this, media development projects need to initiate a process of monitoring the content and following up potential impact examples. If this is undertaken, it is highly likely that more impacts such as Gladiola Dona's founding of the Hospitality and Tourism Academy would have been identified. Undertaking an impact analysis retrospectively on 2 years of broadcasting is likely to result in missing and not learning from key impacts stimulated by the media coverage." The study is available on HELVETAS Eastern Europe website:
https://easterneurope.helvetas.org/en/publications___blog/publication/leaflets...

[7] A list of some of the alternative tools include: Most significant change; Outcome mapping; Outcome harvesting; SenseMaker; Social network analysis; Systemic action research / participatory systemic inquiry; Standard measurement tools to capture key indicators

[8] For example, Samarth-Nepal Market Development Programme (NMDP)

5.3 Assessing attribution at system level

5.3.1 The theory

- Attribution is the establishment of a causal link between an observed change and a specific intervention. Projects are expected to (credibly) demonstrate if and to what extent results at the higher results chain levels are due to changes at the lower results chain levels that were facilitated by the projects' intervention strategy.

5.3.2 Common challenges

- The attribution of systemic change is particularly difficult because markets are changing constantly. It is therefore very difficult to distinguish the causal links between an observed change (at a higher level) and a specific intervention.
- No matter how much efforts projects invest in proving or assessing attribution, there is always someone who challenges it. Finding a proper control group is almost impossible when trying to assess systemic changes.

5.3.3 In practice

- The DCED standard lists four considerations to plausibly attribute a systemic change to a programme: develop clear pathways; evidence of expected changes at different levels; evidence of causal links between the changes; alternative causes of the observed changes (http://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/Systemic_Change...). While many MSD projects do take (parts of) these considerations into account when measuring their results, it remains a challenging task for MSD projects to assess attribution at system level.
- Rather than selecting one method, projects should aim to use a range of tools to collect and analyse the necessary data; information generated by mixed methods can help to establish the validity of the data and the reliability of the measures of change.
- There are also other ways of demonstrating the share of projects' role in accounting for changes: contributions and additionality. Compared to attribution, it is relatively easy to account for contributions, i.e. how much projects contributed towards results at each results chain level… or to what extent were others also responsible? This means, projects' interventions are a vital part of a "package" of causal factors that are together sufficient to produce the intended effects. Additionality is also a question to ask and is logically connected to attribution and contribution, i.e. to what extent would actors have grown, invested, and employed more staff if they were not part of the business models/ideas/initiatives facilitated by projects? Attribution, contribution and additionality methods/tools do not have to be sophisticated; just simple tools to enable projects to triangulate and estimate what is reasonable/credible to demonstrate to a level that would convince a reasonable but sceptical stakeholders.

Principle 6: Reflecting on MRM information and using it for decision-making and improving the project

6.1 The theory

- Use the MRM-system for decision-making in order to maximise impact over the life of a project. A documented system is in place, so that all staff understand how information from the MRM system informs decision-making: when is MRM info discussed; how decisions are documented and acted upon; who is responsible, etc.
- Use the MRM system to create a culture of learning. The culture of the organisation must support honesty and reflection, enabling staff to share and learn from failure as well as success.

6.2 Common challenges

- There are numerous reasons why MRM data is not always used to steer interventions: MRM system is not fully operationalised; lack of knowledge about the system; belief that the system does not add value to what staff already know.
- The are also many reasons why projects have difficulties creating a learning culture: people are afraid of making mistakes; people are used to sharing only positive results; PMs do not fully appreciate the importance of learning; PMs do not have the skills or means to encourage learning; not sufficient time is made available to reflect on results and discuss them with peers, etc.
- Many projects do a lot on data collection, but data always come late for informing decision-making. This situation limits MRM's usefulness, i.e. only for reporting and proving impact, but not for steering.

6.3. In practice

- Using the MRM system for steering (decision-making) means balancing rigor with practicality. Designing the MRM system has to be guided by the question: "is each piece of information essential to decision making?" Indicators in results chains need to reflect an understanding of what is optimal given what is practical to ensure that information needed for decisions is grounded on evidence.
- Factors that contribute to developing successful learning culture include:
  - Communication: encouraging people to ask for feedback, advice and opinions, while following the principles of good listening
  - Leadership: leaders need to be aware of the importance of learning and encourage a culture of inquiry and feedback
  - Giving incentives for learning (not just for successes)

An interesting case study that describes how an MSD project in Fiji established a successful learning culture is available on the DCED website: http://www....building-a-learning-culture-mdf-fiji/

Principle 7: Regularly report and communicate on results

7.1 The theory

- Aggregate project-wide impact at least annually.
- Produce annual reports that include results and progress towards sustainability of these results. These reports (and other documents) are important to inform stakeholders about progress and to increase the credibility of the project

7.2 Common challenges

- Projects are under constant pressure to demonstrate that their work is relevant. For this reason projects develop reports (e.g. impact reports and stories). The quality of these reports are not always adequate, because: they are not based on the impact logic formulated in the MRM system; they are based on data that are inconsistent (and not checked/revised properly); they are not catered to the needs of different stakeholders; not enough financial and human resources are made available (budgeted) for communication purposes.

7.3. In practice

- With experience projects will successfully develop annual reports for donors. To be able to produce documents for other audiences, communication needs (financial and human resources) should be considered when the project is being designed.
- Project staff need to develop skills in using the outcomes of the MRM system for communication purposes. MRM should serve to generate key information and NOT to bombard audiences with 'clutter', ensuring stakeholders are able to retain the key message(s).

Experience from Southern Asia (Samriddhi project, Bangladesh)
A lingering question among staff of Samriddhi concerns the following: if the project is able to logically explain its work and can relatively show how it measures changes in the indicators, why it is necessary to ensure an expansive and complicated MRM system? The project has mainly given priority to the key elements of the MRM system for staff of the project to show how the facilitation for inclusive and sustainable market system changes are achieved. These practices are innovative which otherwise cannot easily be shown in detail using the conventional logical framework approach. Understanding and using the MRM system, for example in preparing the results chain, has broadened and deepened what is broadly included in the logical framework and hence in communicating results well.

Principle 8: Regularly review and adapt MRM system

8.1 The theory

- Constantly review and adapt the MRM system – the original design is often too complex or too simple.

8.2 Common challenges

- Although staff may be aware that their MRM system is inadequate, there may not always be sufficient resources or time to review the system. As a result important information is not collected or time is wasted on collecting/analysing data that is irrelevant.

8.3 In practice

- An external evaluator can help identify how to improve MRM system– this requires that sufficient MRM resources are allocated at the start.
- Project staff, do not always appreciate the need to review the MRM system. Head-office may need to intercede for them if it hampers the success of the project.

Experience from Eastern Europe (MarketMakers project, BiH)
The MarketMakers team and the four co-facilitators with whom the project has worked throughout the first phase are increasingly familiar with what is required of them, particularly for the main reporting cycles. Several qualitative and process-oriented changes to the MRM system are needed – both in response to the flaws of the MRM system during Phase 1, but also to reduce the burdens and increase the system's use for steering among the technical and management teams.

During 2016, MRM was a hot topic for the programme. A lot of discussion was held around the extent to which, or even at all, the programme should seek to apply and adhere to the DCED measurement standard. The programme's measurement system has been examined and commented on by a number of experts (from the consortium, freelance consultants, and reviewers) since the programme's inception. Yet, without strong leadership and/or a full-time dedicated member of staff sitting on top of programme-level MRM, the monitoring of interventions (both partner and market performance) across four initiatives with four different co-facilitators has proven a difficult […].