

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning for Systems Change

A Quick Guide for Education Changemakers

A Complexity-Oriented Approach to MEL

A complexity-oriented approach to MEL is one that analyzes emerging patterns, relationships, ripple effects, and changes in narratives within the system. This allows us to continually assess whether we are doing the right things, in the right places, at the right time.

What is important in a complexity-oriented approach to MEL is to:

Commit to long-term learning	Prioritize flexibility & adaptability	Share small & early wins
Plan regular checkpoints for reflection	Adopt evidence-based decision-making	Embrace methodological bricolage
Engage in collaborative sensemaking	Integrate evaluation with operations	Match expectations with realistic budgets
Embrace uncertainty and emergence	Conduct MEL continuously	Analyze the broad context and its actors

Complexity-aware MEL builds on the strengths of traditional MEL while expanding its reach to better support systems change. One strength of traditional MEL approaches is tracking predefined outcomes and ensuring accountability. However, when it comes to understanding and contributing to long-lasting, systemic change, we need approaches that go further and embrace emergence, adaptiveness, and interconnectedness of complex systems¹.

¹This information draws from IREX's programmatic experiences and a wide array of literature.

More than Approaches, Methods, and Tools

Complexity-aware MEL is not just a new tool or method; it is a shift in how an organization thinks and operates. It requires alignment across governance, operations, and leadership to support data-informed decision-making. Building a strong learning culture, collaborative relationships, and ensuring access to time, funding, and expertise are also essential. While some tools may resemble traditional evaluation methods, what sets complexity-aware MEL apart is the mindset: how approaches are selected, combined, and adapted to context. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; experimentation is key.

Here is a list of some of our to-go evaluation approaches for systems change:



Developmental Evaluation (DE): DE supports innovative efforts in the educational sector by prioritizing relationships and generating real-time data to decide what to do. One core strategy of DE is the figure of the embedded evaluator, a learning partner that sits with your team from day one, facilitating collaborative sensemaking and data-driven decision-making.

For example, DE is valuable when adapting a new teaching model from one region to another with different cultural and resource contexts. For instance, as a literacy program scales across diverse schools, DE helps monitor how local challenges and stakeholder priorities impact implementation while tracking how the system is responding.

To learn more about DE, check out:

- [Developmental Evaluation. Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use](#)
- [A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation](#)
- [The art of the nudge: Five practices for developmental evaluators](#)



Most Significant Change (MSC): MSC is a MEL approach that prioritizes incorporating diverse perspectives to understand impact. It gathers personal stories of change, which participants review together to decide which story feels most meaningful and why. This makes MSC a powerful way to address power dynamics in the system and helps redefine what matters most.

For example, MSC is great when an initiative involves lots of different actors operating at various system levels, such as schools, teachers, parents, local governments, and NGOs. Because each stakeholder brings different experiences and values, whether you're focusing on student confidence, community support, or policy change, MSC helps capture diverse perspectives and build a shared understanding of what success truly looks like.

To learn more about MSC, check out:

- [The 'Most Significant Change' \(MSC\) Technique: A Guide to Its Use](#)
- [Most Significant Change](#)



Ripple Effect Mapping (REM): REM is a participatory approach and a favorite among visual thinkers, as it involves co-creating a visual map of the actions that have led to changes in the system. While building and reflecting on the map, participants identify gaps, strengths, and entry points, helping them to define next steps.

For example, REM is well-suited for educational policy advocacy initiatives, such as a multi-year effort to influence national curriculum reform. In these cases, change is non-linear and difficult to measure directly, making REM's iterative and visual nature a strong fit for capturing system-level shifts.

To learn more about REM, check out:

- [A Field Guide to Ripple Effects Mapping](#)
- [Advanced facilitator guide for in-depth ripple effects mapping](#)



Outcome Mapping (OM): OM is a learning-oriented evaluation approach designed to track behavioral change among key actors in a system. OM is interested in how change happens through evolving relationships, actions, and collaborations in different spheres (control, influence, and concern) instead of looking at fixed end-goals. A key part of OM is progress markers; statements that show different stages of change and capture diverse capacities and shifts in the contexts, valuing multiple possible future outcomes.

To learn more about OM, check out:

- [Outcome mapping: Building learning and reflection into development programs](#)
- [Outcome Mapping Learning Community](#)
- [Outcome Mapping Thinking and Practices for Systems Change](#)



Outcome Harvesting (OH): OH looks for changes in behaviors, actions, relationships, policies, or practices in the system and then works backward to understand how an initiative contributed to them. It is very well suited for interventions where the criteria for what success looks like and how to get there are not clearly predetermined.

For example, OH works especially well in educational interventions that emphasize co-creation. When students, educators, policymakers, and community members come together to collaboratively design a policy reform or program, the changes that emerge are often unpredictable and evolve over time.

To learn more about OH, check out:

- [Outcome Harvesting Learning Community](#)
- [Outcome Harvesting](#)

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