THESIS

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Towards monitoring that makes sense:

Action research design of a planning, learning and accountability system for a sustainable agriculture programme in Eastern Indonesia

by

Steff Deprez

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Supervisor: Dr. Clive Smith

ABSTRACT

This study is an account of an action research process to develop a *planning, learning and accountability* (PLA) *system* for the sustainable agriculture chain development programme of VECO (Vredeseilanden Country Office) Indonesia. Many monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes in development programmes are largely carried out to provide information for funding agencies, to meet external accountability requirements and for symbolic protection. This study generates insights into an integrated, learning-oriented monitoring practice which fosters reflective practice, provides feedback to programme stakeholders about performance, progress and results achieved, facilitates improved accountability, and generates information and knowledge useful for the programme stakeholders to take decisions for improved action. It is argued that M&E systems have the potential, if developed well, to serve as a framework or 'carrier' for organisational and institutional learning – an essential requirement to respond to the complex nature of development processes. Outcome mapping is presented as a possible approach to be used as the basis for such a M&E system.

This study was underpinned by a socially critical orientation to development (programmes) and by an action research method to guide the PLA system design process. The design process was organized around seven steps - which in themselves were a result of the action research process – including specific steps to ensure a learning-oriented M&E system. Based on the agreed purposes and intended uses of the monitoring and learning process, the resulting PLA system is focused around the organizational spaces and rhythms of VECO Indonesia which are central to sharing, debate, learning and decision-making. In this way, the PLA system becomes integral to the thinking and doing of the organization. It is built on the premise that monitoring does not end with gathering data; it also needs to include a process of understanding and deciding how data can best be used and analysed to strengthen concerted action and facilitate decision-making. It highlights the importance of *sense-making* – interpreting information to make it usable for action. Furthermore, it incorporates an approach to assess and consciously plan for the creation of the necessary organisational conditions to implement and maintain a learning-oriented M&E system.

The study is completed by critical reflection on the relevance of VECO's new PLA system for planning, learning and accountability, combined with the use of a future scenario technique to generate recommendations and identify critical future directions. Further exploration of 'intelligent' information-seeking methods and processes is called for; and a practice which moves beyond intra-organisational monitoring – focusing on VECO's own monitoring needs – towards a monitoring process that facilitates change based on the viewpoints of, and in collaboration with local actors, i.e., institutional monitoring and learning, is recommended. VECO is encouraged to continue developing a mindset and practice whereby the programme team and partners have the ability to leave the safe zone of pre-determined outcomes and actions, and to make sense of the world as they engage in action.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

B3	*Badan Belajar Bersama* – Shared Learning Forum
CD	Capacity Development
CoP	Community of Practice
SLA	Sustainable Livelihood Analysis
EVAPERCA	*Evaluasi dan Perencanaan* – Evaluation and Planning
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FGI	Focus Group Interview
IT	Information Technology
INGO	International Non Governmental Organisation
IM	Information Management
KBA	*Kelompok Belajar Alami* – Natural Learning Group
KM	Knowledge Management
LEISA	Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture
LFA	Logical Framework Approach
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MSD	Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue
MSP	Multi-Stakeholder Process
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
OC	Outcome Challenge
OL	Organisational Learning
OM	Outcome Mapping
PACA	Participatory Agriculture Chain Assessment
PLA	Planning, Learning and Accountability
PM	Progress Marker
PM&E	Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation
RELI	Regional Learning Initiative
SACD	Sustainable Agriculture Chain Development
SM	Strategy Maps
SO	Specific Objective
U-FE	Utilization-Focused Evaluation
VE	Vredeseilanden
VE HO	Vredeseilanden Head Office
VECO	Vredeseilanden Country Office

To what extent and in what ways can we be

deliberate and intentional about those things

that seem to emerge

without our control, without our intention?

(Westley et al., 2006, p. 21)


MONITORING
learning
process
programme
PLA
system
information
development
data
VECO
MONITORING
Evaluation
processes
sense-making
management
activities
organisations
research
actors
analysis
results
Mapping
collection
needs
organisational
Accountability
planning
practice
people
staff
step
focus
action
partners
New
feedback
reflection
work
methods
changes
stakeholders
capacity
develop
meetings
local
relationships
developed
CONTEXT
spaces
useful
collected
steps
questions
programmes
use
approach
participatory
communication
reports
need
plan
tools
STUDY
framework
specific
key
conditions
facilitate
aims
creating
outcomes
many
VE
groups
ideas
purpose
section
Boundary
systems
critical
support
implementation
events
intended
decision-making
understanding
organisation
Outcome
financial
beneficiaries
see
improve
opportunities
practices
elements
approaches
strategies
actions
level
experience
farmers
theory
social
knowledge
design
used
future
progress
time
building
understand
partner
group
change
developing
possible

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. TOWARDS MONITORING THAT MAKES SENSE[1]

The processes of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential in the management of development programmes and have become a separate field of expertise within the development sector. Quite a substantial amount of the annual budget (two to fifteen percent[2]) of a development programme is typically spent on M&E related activities such as writing proposals, designing programmes, developing programme frameworks, compiling action plans, collecting data, writing reports, developing and maintaining information systems and carrying out evaluation studies. Although a vast body of M&E knowledge and expertise has been developed and institutionalised during recent decades, mainstream M&E practices continue to be critically analysed by development practitioners and researchers. New methods and approaches, alternative practices and changing paradigms are emerging from frustrations with certain M&E models, from M&E systems that no longer seem relevant or effective, from new insights and perspectives on social change and development processes, or as a result of innovations by those who like to experiment with new approaches.

This study aims to generate insights into the practice of M&E with a particular focus on monitoring and learning as an integrated process of the management systems of a sustainable agriculture development programme in Eastern Indonesia. The study aims to contribute to a programme management practice whereby the M&E process fosters reflective practice, provides feedback to programme stakeholders about performance, progress and results achieved, and creates information and knowledge useful for the programme stakeholders to take decisions for improved action.

'*Towards monitoring that makes sense*' has a two-fold layer of meaning and can be seen as the 'red thread' of this thesis. First, it refers to an M&E practice that is useful and relevant for the actors in the programme. As such, this is an assumed basic principle for any M&E system. However, many mainstream M&E practices tend to be isolated and disconnected from management and decision-making. Many programmes are driven by pre-set targets and actions, such that M&E is perceived as an additional burden by programme teams and their M&E practice is limited to the fulfilment of the reporting requirements of donors. Second, it emphasises a

[1] The word cloud on the previous page represents the most common words used in this study. The relative size of each word corresponds with the number of times the word is used in the text. Word clouds of any text can be generated at www.wordle.net.

[2] Source: IFAD, 2002, Chapter 7, pp 7-36.

crucial – often missing – aspect of M&E processes, namely, *sense-making.* It refers to the interpretation of information to make it usable for actionable options, revealing connections and patterns, which involves inner dialogue and formal/ informal debate among programme actors rather than merely focusing on data collection, data systems, information flows and reports.

1.2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

VECO Indonesia is the Indonesian country office of the Belgian NGO, *Vredeseilanden* (VE).[3] Vredeseilanden seeks to contribute to viable livelihoods for organised family farmers in the South and North through improved income from sustainable agriculture (SA). Through its development interventions, Vredeseilanden aims to empower family farmers throughout the whole agricultural chain, from production to consumption. In its new country programme – covering a six-year timeframe (2008-2013) – VECO Indonesia aims to support the development of sustainable agriculture chains (SACD), encompassing innovative sustainable agricultural practices for production, value adding of SA products to benefit family farmers, improved access to markets, and stimulating consumers to purchase products from SA chains. Furthermore, VECO Indonesia aims to support the advocacy of local and national level policies that favour the position of the organised family farmers practicing SA. Figure 1 visualises the core dimensions of sustainable agriculture chain development on which the VE global programme for 2008-2013 focuses, i.e., political and economic dimensions, consumer behaviour and organisational learning and management, in relation to the four specific programme objectives.

The vision and mission of VECO Indonesia can be found in appendix 1. The ultimate beneficiaries of VECO Indonesia are organised family farmers (male and female) in selected rural districts in Eastern Indonesia (South Sulawesi, Sumbawa, Flores, West-Timor, Central and East Java and Bali). VECO Indonesia makes special effort to involve the younger generation of farmers, promote gender equity and reconcile 'traditional' and 'modern' knowledge and practices.

[3] Thus, the acronym VECO stands for Vredeseilanden Country Office.

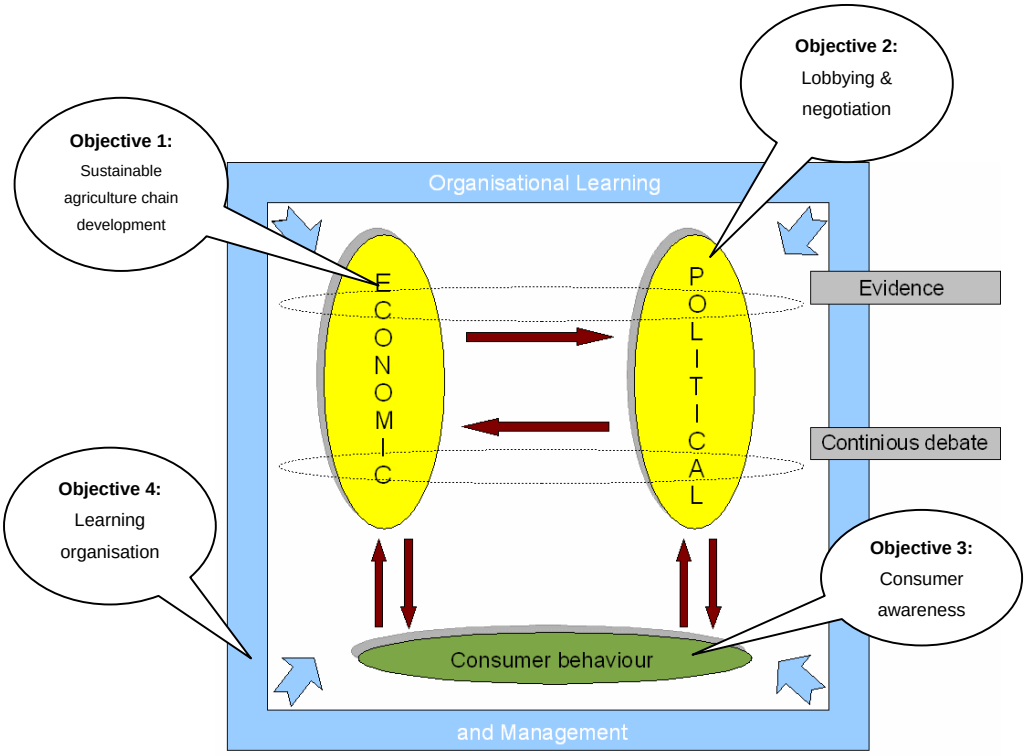

Figure 1: The four specific programme objectives of the VE global programme, 2008-2013

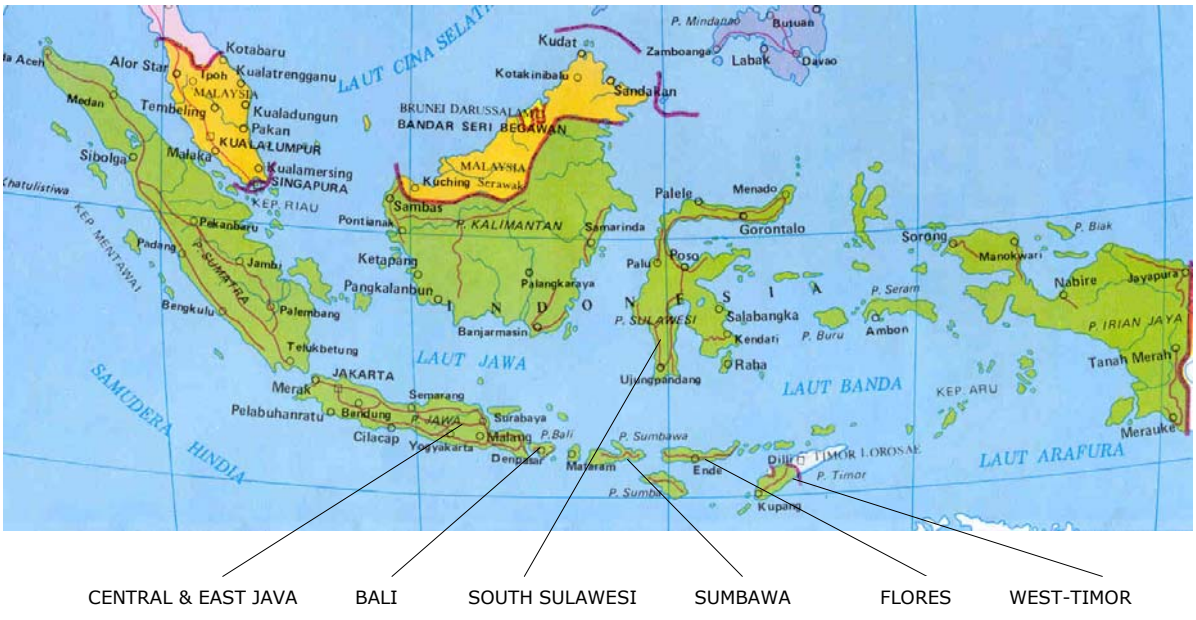

Figure 2: Map of indonesia indicating VECO's geographical programme areas

VECO Indonesia is not a direct actor in the development of SA chains and advocacy initiatives, but engages in long-term partnerships with local actors. It builds on its existing partnerships with *local NGOs* and *network organisations* and is currently developing new partnerships with *farmer organisations* and *private chain actors*. The role of VECO Indonesia can be described as supporting the organisational and technical capacity development of the partner organisations, and funding them – although non-funding partnerships do exist as well; facilitating multi-stakeholder processes for SACD and advocacy; and linking local, national and international advocacy efforts (for example, by disseminating lessons learned for evidence building). In addition, VECO Indonesia also strives to organise itself to improve its own effectiveness, efficiency and relevance in supporting its partners and ensure that learning is an integral part of the organisational culture and practice.

Compared to the previous programme, the new six-year programme (2008-2013) contains some new strategic directions. Aside from featuring more focused programme content (sustainable agriculture chain development and advocacy) and an extended partner-mix, it has enforced the idea of becoming a learning organisation by stating this as a separate strategic goal (specific objective). As part of this strategy, it was decided to invest in the development of a learning-oriented planning, monitoring and evaluation system for the management of the programme. Once the strategic planning process for the new programme was finalised, it was decided to opt for *Outcome Mapping* (OM) – a programme framework aimed at building reflection and learning into development programmes – as the guiding approach for the design of VECO's programme. The previous programme's design, monitoring and evaluation were based on the Logical Framework Approach (LFA). However, as will be explained in this thesis, whereas although this framework had some clear advantages, it did not facilitate the integration of continuous learning into the working processes and management systems of the Vredeseilanden programme. Therefore, as part of the strategies of objective four, VECO Indonesia decided to embark on an action learning process to facilitate the design of a learning-oriented M&E system for the VECO Indonesia country programme, later renamed as the *Planning, Learning and Accountability* (PLA) system.

In my position as the Learning and Knowledge Sharing Programme Advisor at VECO Indonesia, I am responsible for the development, facilitation and support of the (organisational) learning and knowledge management processes and systems at VECO. Between January 2007 and July 2007, I facilitated the VECO Indonesia management and programme team in the design of the 2008-2013 country programme and subsequently, the development of the new M&E system, which is the main topic of this thesis. An interest in management processes in/for development programmes and reflective practices – inspired by 'practice informed by theory' – encouraged me to initiate and finalise this study.

From this point onwards, I will use the acronym 'VECO' to refer to VECO Indonesia and 'VE' to refer to Vredeseilanden. Further analysis of the background and context of VECO and VE in relation to monitoring and evaluation forms part of the study and can be found in chapter 5.

1.3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The single objective of the study was to develop a *Planning, Learning and Accountability (PLA)* system for the VECO country programme. The outcome of this action research process was a PLA system designed to:

1. Support the *planning & management process* of VECO;
2. Facilitate *learning* in VECO and its programme;
3. Fulfil the *accountability requirements* of VECO;
4. Proactively develop measures to enhance *organisational capacities and conditions* supportive of the effective implementation of the PLA system.

Furthermore, this study was done with a view to:

1. Improve VECO's practice and performance as an intermediary development organisation supporting sustainable agriculture chain development in Eastern Indonesia;
2. Support VECO in becoming a learning organisation;
3. Contribute to the development of the planning, monitoring and evaluation processes within VE;
4. Contribute to the practice of Outcome Mapping, a relatively new M&E approach, particularly regarding the intentional design and respective monitoring processes.

As will be clarified in the next chapter, this study does not include the evaluation part of the PLA system.

1.4. OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

1.4.1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background of the study. It states the problem and clarifies the research objectives and outcomes. It also describes the context in which the study was carried out, i.e., VECO Indonesia and its sustainable agriculture programme in Eastern Indonesia.

1.4.2 CHAPTER 2: THEORY AND EXPERIENCE

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background to the development of the planning, learning and accountability system, drawing upon research literature as well as my personal experience in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of international development programmes in Belgium,

Zimbabwe and Indonesia. The chapter starts with an overview of the main characteristics and emerging critiques of mainstream M&E practice in the development sector, followed by a differentiation of the terms 'monitoring' and 'evaluation'. It continues with an exploration of the different purposes and uses of (participatory) M&E processes in the development sector. The main body of this chapter is a literature review of *planning*, *learning* and *accountability*, the three core elements of the term PLA and crucial processes in any development programme. I analyse the importance of each of these three elements for development programmes, the key challenges and emerging insights associated with each, and how each relates to the monitoring of development programmes. The chapter concludes with a short introduction to *Outcome Mapping*, the alternative planning, monitoring and evaluation approach which VECO Indonesia used as the guiding design framework for its new programme, and whose principles inspire and affect the monitoring practice of the VECO programme.

1.4.3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 describes how this qualitative study was underpinned by a socially critical orientation to development (programmes) following an action research method. It highlights the characteristics of action research, the positioning of this study, and how the action research process supported the development of the PLA system. The remaining sections of the chapter describe the data generation methods – including document analysis, focus group discussions/interviews, semi-structured interviews and observation – and the data analysis approach applied. The concluding part covers the validity and ethical considerations of the research.

1.4.4 CHAPTER 4: PLA DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Chapter 4 gives a detailed overview of the principles, approaches and practices guiding the PLA design process, with a particular focus on participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and Utilisation-Focused Evaluation (U-FE). The remaining and major part of the chapter explains the conceptual framework for the development of the PLA system, and provides details on the seven steps that guided the action research and design process: First, identifying and clarifying the main purpose, focus areas and scope of the PLA system. Second, identifying the key moments (organisational spaces) and their frequency for planning, learning & accountability. Third, defining and prioritising the M&E questions as well as specific information needs. Fourth, planning how the data would be collected, stored and synthesised. Fifth, planning for critical reflection, analysis and conceptualisation. Sixth, planning how the M&E results would be documented and communicated to relevant stakeholders, and lastly, planning how to establish the organisational conditions and capacities necessary to support the PLA system.

1.4.5 CHAPTER 5: ACTION RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLA SYSTEM

This chapter is an account of the action research process and its results, based on the focus groups, document analysis, personal observation and face-to-face interviews. It starts with an analysis of the M&E system used in the previous programme and describes how VE's and VECO's plans to develop a planning, learning and accountability system came into existence. The intentional design of VECO's new programme is briefly presented to permit a better understanding of the next sections. The main body of this chapter is a detailed, step-by-step presentation of the development process of the PLA design, focusing on the process activities conducted and design decisions taken.

1.4.6 CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 6 provides a critical reflection on, and lessons learned from both the process and the results of the PLA design process. The first part consists of a critical reflection on the PLA design process. The second part focuses on a first analysis of the PLA system itself and its relevance for planning, learning and accountability. The concluding part presents an overview of recommendations for the further development and implementation of the PLA system.

1.4.7 CHAPTER 7: EMERGING FUTURES?

For this concluding chapter, a future scenario technique was used to formulate additional reflections and recommendations in the light of possible (emerging) futures of the PLA system. It generates information about what might happen with the PLA system and the probabilities of future events. The chapter concludes with an overview of potential future research directions emerging from this study.

CHAPTER 2 THEORY AND EXPERIENCE

Development is a complex process.
It is by embracing the complexity rather than simplifying
that development practitioners will be able to use the power
that they have to achieve the goal of poverty elimination

(Hinton, 2003)

2.1 PLANNING, LEARNING & ACCOUNTABILITY IN/FOR DEVELOPMENT

2.1.1 INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and evaluation in development programmes

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has become a crucial aspect within the management processes of international development programmes. Donors provide funds based on programme proposals (planning) and require regular monitoring of progress and evaluation of development results and impacts. Most development programmes apply a project cycle management approach – a cyclical process of identification/design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Due to growing emphasis on M&E, it has become a separate field of expertise, and many international NGOs appoint specialists for the coordination of M&E processes and systems. Although a substantive amount of knowledge and expertise on M&E for development has been built up during recent decades, mainstream M&E practices are contested and critically analysed by development practitioners and researchers.

Based on an examination of four development case studies, Watson (2006) argues that M&E is mainly used for control, accountability and symbolic protection, and relies on formal result-based approaches which emphasise 'measurement' of results, in a form defined by, and acceptable to, external funding agencies (pp. 3-7). Horton (2003) confirms that evaluations are frequently carried out to provide information for funding agencies and to meet external accountability requirements (p. 83). However, it is an expressed concern that the information provided by M&E neither influences decision-making during project implementation nor during the planning of ongoing project development and new initiatives (Britton, 2005, p. 11). Monitoring is not informed by clarity about 'learning', or how it can be designed and how it occurs in relation to monitoring. By focusing on the construction of information, or data systems, the reflection and sense-making activities that make possible effective learning based on a reading of data are ignored (Guijt, 2008, p. 150). In addition, many development agencies seem to be orienting their M&E strategies mostly towards assessing the increased quality or output of the services of the

local partner(s) whom the programme is supporting (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 2) and paying less attention to the actual capacity development process itself.

The characteristics of the dominant M&E systems are connected to the dominant reductionist and positivist approach towards the process of development, especially the logic that views development as 'projectable change' (Reeler, 2007). Along with this approach come instruments, tools and procedures derived from the engineering sector. The most widespread framework used to plan, monitor and evaluate development programmes is the *logical framework approach* (LFA). This 'functionalist' tool (Crawford, 2005, p. 3) based on 'hard systems' thinking involves (Morgan, 2005, pp. 5-6):

- Breaking up a social problem into components/parts, and analysing and optimising the parts individually;
- A focus on planning, control, order, efficiency, standardisation and prediction;
- The planning of activities that are simple, sequential and linear;
- A closed systems view of the world.

The application of this planning, monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) management tool has been criticised by different authors.

Perhaps the most fundamental critique relates to the nature of development work itself. Any attempt to 'measure' development is hampered by the complexity of what must be assessed, inconsistencies among the assumptions of the aid system and about how sustainable development actually unfolds, and the tendency of development actors to over-simplify how change or 'development' occurs (Starling, 2003, p. 2). The underlying assumption of the LFA that development processes are 'projectable' and 'predictable' (Reeler, 2007) generates a focus on the achievement of results, and not, as such, on understanding and learning about the process. The often rigid application of the log frame undermines the flexibility that is needed to deal with the unexpected results and complexity of the process.

Indeed, the LFA is commonly experienced as a control orientation that discourages innovation and learning, and reinforces unequal power relations (Chambers & Pettit, 2003). Eade (1997) actually links the very existence and success of the LFA in the development sector to the power imbalances in that sector (pp. 191-205). The LFA responds to the needs of certain levels of management in the development hierarchy, such that in reality, changes are more likely to occur through pressures exerted by the agency's domestic constituency and donors, than through feedback from the often distant and unknown recipients of its assistance. Chambers and Pettit (2003) argue that the practice of such procedures is often used in a top-down manner and used rather ritualistically (e.g. as a necessity for funding to be granted), which may lead to the loss of

a valuable process of discussion and debate with primary stakeholders that should be part of good programme cycles.

Limited stakeholder participation may exacerbate the absence of potentially significant political and cultural analysis. Often, participatory M&E (PM&E) procedures exclude individuals or organisations that have the potential to promote change (Hinton, 2004, p. 12). Furthermore, Huyse (2006) indicates that the LFA underrates the importance of relationships and human dynamics in development programmes as it does not highlight the relations, roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders (p. 58).

This practice results in donors setting up rigid control, accounting and reporting systems and steering programmes in such a way that activities within the project time frame are run as planned. Control, accounting and assessment may thus become the enemies of trust (Marsden, 2002, in Starling, 2003, p. 10), creating a vicious circle where the lack of trust engendered by control and reporting mechanisms makes it impossible to build a genuine picture of development impact and therefore assess an organisation's performance (Starling, 2003, p. 12). In addition, the conceptual maze created by complex donor procedures can constrain decision-making at the local level and exclude those who are unfamiliar with the specific donor tools (Hinton, 2004).

Using measurement-focused frameworks can often increase the pressure to show everything that has been done in a positive light, and therefore undermine feedback mechanisms (Watson, 2006:3-7) and hinder the possibility of learning from practice. Morgan (2006) argues that many conventional approaches remain a-historical, a-political and a-cultural (pp. 6-7). This implies that M&E approaches are often incompatible with the distinct cultural and political environments in which they are employed. In addition, donors establish parallel and overlapping planning and monitoring systems, undermining national accountability systems (Boesen, 2005, p. 8). Lopes and Theisohn (2003) talk of the creation of a perverse cycle: as a response to weak national capacities, donors establish parallel accountability systems which themselves lead to further weakening of local capacity (p. 11).

Differentiating monitoring and evaluation

In the development sector, the term *M&E* is commonly used to refer to the variety of processes related to *monitoring* and *evaluation*. However, monitoring and evaluation are usually two different types of processes with their own specific characteristics and related practices. Crawford (2004) argues that the confusion originates from the fact that the project management literature often does not clarify precise definitions of these terms (p. 81). *Evaluation* is a field in its own right in the research literature and has been studied extensively, leading to several systems of classification and theory during more than three decades of debate, while *monitoring* is more

vaguely described in the literature and has received far less attention conceptually (Crawford, 2004, p. 81; Guijt, 2008, p. 103).

Evaluation

There are many definitions of evaluation proposed in development literature and M&E guides. It usually refers to infrequent in-depth studies that seek to understand changes in a certain situation as a result of a development effort, primarily in order to assess overall merit. In addition to this *judgment-oriented* evaluation, Utilisation-Focused Evaluation (Patton, 1997) also promotes *improvement-oriented* and *knowledge creation-oriented* evaluation, which is gaining more interest in the development sector as it encompasses a focus on learning – practical learning for improvement and theoretical learning to add knowledge (Guijt, 2008, p. 105). Evaluation relates to longer-term objectives and aims to establish a summary of activities that have taken place, whether these activities have achieved their desired objectives, and the extent to which they have had an impact on the lives of the intended beneficiaries. Some people argue that evaluations should be undertaken by external actors so as to ensure objectivity and credibility of results, while others promote the idea of engaging the intended beneficiaries in participatory evaluation (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998), or the programme implementers in self-evaluation (Earl et al., 2001; Gubels & Koss, 2000).

I used the following IFAD (2002) definition of *evaluation* for this research as it resonated with my own understanding of evaluation and also because the development process of the PLA system was partly based on the M&E guidelines promoted by IFAD.

> *A systematic (and as objective as possible) examination of a planned, ongoing or completed project. It aims to answer specific management questions and to judge the overall value of an endeavor and supply lessons learned to improve future actions, planning and decision-making. Evaluations commonly seek to determine the efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and the relevance of the project's or organisation's objectives. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, offering concrete lessons learned to help partners and funding agencies make decisions.*
>
> (Annex A-5)

Monitoring

Guijt (2008) analyses different understandings and definitions of monitoring in development literature (p. 107). Recurring features in these definitions are:

- Focus on standardised and systematic rather than ad-hoc efforts
- Continuous and regularly conducted process rather than one-off events
- Data collection (generally performance related)
- Overwhelmingly indicator-focused

Definitions differ in their focus on the purpose of monitoring, ranging from a focus on servicing basic information needs to process monitoring, activity tracking, financial administration, progress monitoring and decision-making. A critical point of debate is the extent to which 'analysis', or the process of sense-making, is considered to be part of monitoring. Some imply that it is, while others equate analysis with evaluation. This leads to variation in whether monitoring includes assessing merit or value, and in how it relates to decision-making (Guijt, 2008, p. 107).

As the PLA system of VECO Indonesia aims to incorporate sense-making for improved decision-making and action into the monitoring process, I used the following definition for *monitoring* in this study (IFAD, 2002):

> *The regular collection and analysis of information to assist timely decision-making, ensure accountability and provide the basis for evaluation and learning. It is a continuing function that uses methodical collection of data to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing project or programme with early indications of progress and achievement of objectives.*
>
> (Annex A-7)

This study is focused on the monitoring and learning process of the Planning, Learning and Accountability (PLA) system of VECO. Thus, I use the term 'monitoring' to refer specifically to elements related to the monitoring process, and the term 'M&E' either to refer to the general practice of monitoring and evaluation in the development sector, or to highlight that the described aspect applies to both monitoring and evaluation.

Purposes and uses of monitoring and evaluation

The issues raised above make it clear that there is an increasing awareness that M&E of development processes should cover not only the need for *accountability, control and assessment of results* but also, the need for, and the potential to contribute to, *learning, useful and relevant information, programme improvement, feedback mechanisms, future planning and increasing capacity*.

M&E does not end with the information gathering process. A variety of purposes and uses are presented in the M&E literature, such as improving the generation and utilisation of information, making well-informed decisions, supporting strategic planning, empowering local actors, learning (to learn), building trust, identifying unintended changes, enhancing performance, increasing organisational effectiveness, strengthening the capacity of actors, changing the attitudes and behaviour of actors, capturing the 'voice' of the poor, and recognising and celebrating accomplishments (ECDPM, 2006, pp. 3-5; Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 6; Guijt, 2008, p. 276 and Patton, 1997, pp. 63-113).

I present three models which categorise the intended uses of M&E processes and which have been relevant and inspiring for this study.

The first is Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UF-E) (Patton 1997), which distinguishes two main intended uses of an evaluation process (which in my view are also applicable and relevant for monitoring processes. *Product use* refers to the use of the results of an M&E process and *process use* refers to the fact that the application of evaluative thinking and being engaged in the process of M&E can be useful in itself apart from the findings which might emerge from these processes (the M&E results). Table 1 gives a more detailed overview of the different uses of M&E processes according to Patton.

Intended uses of M&E processes		**Examples**
Product use	1.1 Judgement-oriented	Judging the worth or merit of a programme, making summative evaluations, addressing accountability issues, auditing a programme, controlling quality, deciding on a programme's future, making cost-benefit decisions, etc.
	1.2 Improvement-oriented	Identifying strengths and weaknesses, continuous learning, programme improvement, formative evaluation, quality enhancement, organisational learning, improving effectiveness, etc.
	1.3 Knowledge creation-oriented	Generalising, conceptualising, extrapolating principles of what works, theory building, synthesising patterns, policy-making, publishing, etc.
Process use	2.1 Enhancing shared understandings	Giving voice to different perspectives and valuing diverse experiences, providing focus and generating shared commitment, managing meetings around explicit topics, etc.
	2.2 Supporting & reinforcing the programme intervention	Building evaluation into programme delivery processes, having participants assess their own progress, monitoring outcomes as integral to working with programme partners/participants, etc.
	2.3 Increasing engagement, self-determination and ownership	Participatory and collaborative M&E, empowerment evaluation, installing reflective and self-evaluation practices, etc.
	2.4 Programme and organisational development	Development evaluation, action research, strategic evaluation, etc.

Table 1: Intended uses of an M&E process

(Based on Patton, 1997, pp. 76-113)

The second model, based on a literature study on Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation for development programmes by Estrella & Gaventa (1998), proposes the division of the main purposes of M&E into six categories (table 2).

Intended use of M&E processes	Description
1. Impact assessment	Evaluating the changes that have occurred as a result of programme initiatives, comparing programme objectives with actual achievement.
2. Project planning & management	Gaining information on effective ways to improve project management in terms of improving planning, implementation and decision-making.
3. Organisational strengthening & institutional learning	Creating a learning process focused on the organisation's or programme's own organisational capacities (e.g. by self-assessment). In joint reflections, it can also strengthen partnerships between different stakeholders (inter-institutional learning)
4. Understanding & negotiating stakeholder perspectives	M&E processes can be used to share and negotiate needs, perceptions, interests, views and expectations of different stakeholders involved.
5. Accountability	Meeting the accountability needs of donors, beneficiaries, the public, partners, government, etc.
6. Policy formulation	Participatory M&E can also be used by local communities to gather and analyse data in order to determine their own policy priorities, develop common strategies for action and change, and even to inform future government policy.

Table 2: Intended uses of participatory M&E
(Estrella & Gaventa, 1998, p. 6)

The third model is from Guijt (2008), who concludes her study of monitoring for collective learning in rural resource management with a proposal to refocus monitoring on what one is actually learning *for* (p. 276). Her *'wheel of learning purposes'* (Guijt & Ortiz, 2007), consists of nine learning purposes facilitated by the monitoring process (figure 3). Five of them pertain directly to the management of development interventions, and four are parts of the development interventions themselves.

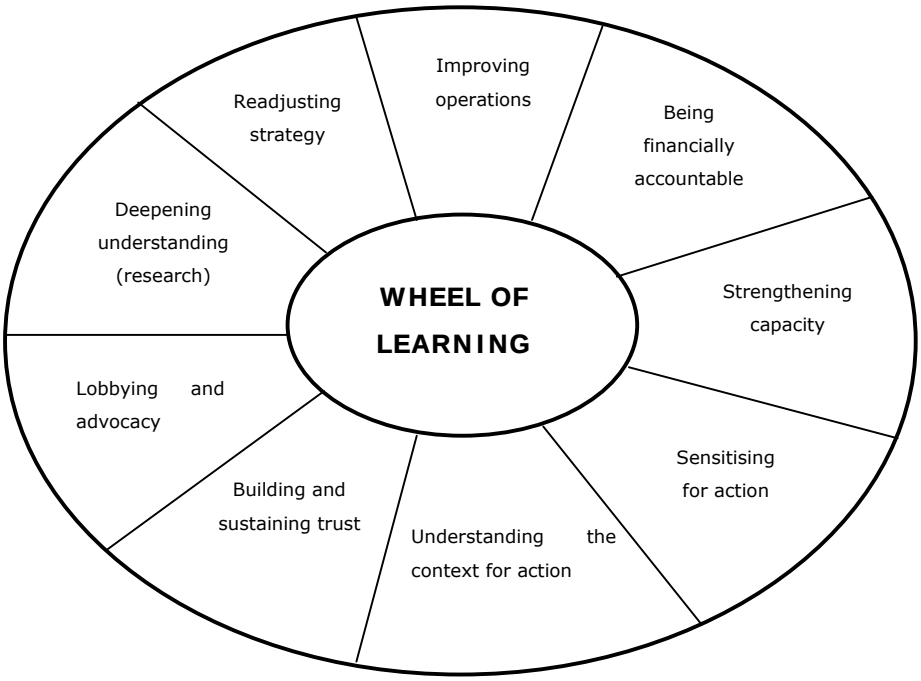

Figure 3: The wheel of learning
(adapted from Guijt & Ortiz, 2007)

All of these authors stress the importance of reaching consensus among users on the purposes and uses of any M&E process before it is developed or implemented. Not all the purposes and uses are equally important to every organisation or programme and prioritisation is required, as the purpose and use of an M&E process directs subsequent features of the M&E system. In chapter 4, I elaborate further on the purposes and uses of M&E processes and highlight their importance in the development of the PLA system.

In the context of VECO Indonesia, a deliberate choice was made to rename the monitoring and evaluation process of VECO Indonesia as a *Planning, Learning and Accountability (PLA) system*, exactly to highlight the intentions of VECO Indonesia to move beyond the conventional purposes of mainstream M&E practice – focused on accountability – to include other purposes and uses presented above. The name PLA suggests the main foci of the M&E process, i.e., to support and improve planning, learning and accountability processes. In the next sections I describe these three core elements as well as their connections to M&E processes and their relevance for development programme management in more detail.

2.1.2 PLANNING

Uncertainty and ambiguity

Planning, designing and implementing development programmes and processes are not linear and predictable, and they are far more complex than the oft-assumed connections between 'inputs' and 'outputs' (Kaplan, 1999:11-12). In fact:

> *Development agencies are operating in a mess, . . . characterised by no clear agreement about exactly what the problem is, uncertainty and ambiguity as to how improvements might be made and being unbounded in terms of the time and resources it could absorb.*
>
> (Eyben, 2004, p. 18)

However, in reality, planning continues as though it were a predictable process, free of unpredictable interactions between stakeholders, in which certain inputs produce set results according to specified time frames (Hinton, 2004, pp. 210-220). This is the underlying logic of the 'results chain' model (figure 4) – the causal framework used to structure the LFA matrix – describing desired 'projected' changes resulting from a certain set of inputs. Specific 'inputs' are invested and 'activities' carried out so that certain predefined deliverables or 'outputs' can be produced. The achievements of output targets are in turn expected to initiate or foster desirable 'outcomes', which ultimately contribute to wider developmental 'impact' within the beneficiary community (Crawford, 2005).

Figure 4: Simplified results chain model

(adapted from Smutylo, 2001, p. 5)

Mintzberg and Quinn (in Britton, 2005) point out that the strategies actually realised (implemented) by a development programme, or organisation, are rarely exactly what was originally intended or planned (p. 43). Some elements of strategy emerge from an organisation's response to the opportunities and threats it faces as it carries out its work. Some of the organisation's strategic intentions may not be realised for whatever reason. The organisation may prioritise some emergent strategic goals over others that are abandoned or allowed to 'fade away' into obscurity. Outcome Mapping (Earl et al., 2001), an alternative planning and M&E approach (see section 2.2), incorporates this unpredictable character into its model by using the term *intentional design* to refer to the planning stage of a development programme.

Another important element influencing the planning of development programmes is related to the idea that development cannot be created or engineered. It is rather a process already in motion

(Kaplan, 1999, pp. 11-12). It cannot be brought in by or transferred from outsiders. It is driven from within and emerges through the free interaction between development worker and 'client', not through third parties. This is the background in which to situate the emergence of the concept of *capacity development (CD)*. This concept is based on the increasing awareness that outside agents, such as donors and executing agencies, can deliver inputs and even outputs, but cannot 'deliver' many intermediate and final outcomes that can only occur to a satisfactory degree in the presence of local will and local capacity to manage and sustain the process of change (Lavergne, 2002, p. 5). Each organisation must ultimately lead its own capacity development initiative and take the responsibility for developing its own capacities to meet its own needs (Horton, 2003, p. 54).

For development organisations such as VECO Indonesia it is a challenge to support the capacity development of its partners. It has become clear that external partners can only contribute positively if the relationships are based on mutual trust and two-way learning, not merely the transfer of money (Eade, 1997:48-49). In addition, capacity, like knowledge, is not something that can be transferred or supplied. It must be actively acquired. As described by Lavergne (2002):

> *The classical approach of donors is one that focuses on what outside agents can "deliver" through the project mode which is quite an instrumentalist and control-oriented approach . . . This approach however often creates a protected and artificial environment in which the donor driven project operates, resulting in the non-sustainability of the project after the donor support stops and the artificial environment has to make place for reality on the ground*.
>
> (p. 2)

Therefore, the role of the outsider – the agency or the practitioner – moves more toward facilitation, by catalysing and supporting the developmental process of the 'recipient' or 'client' and engaging in a relevant organisational and institutional learning process (see next section). The role of the agency or the practitioner encompasses the '*facilitation of effective interaction between different players during key phases of the change process but also . . . long-term guidance of [the] extended, multi-phased development process*' (SNV 2005, p. 3).

Kaplan (1999) argues that the essence of planning and intervening in development processes is therefore about developing the skill to '*read development*', that is, '*apprehending the particular dynamics of an individual's or group's development trajectory or process . . . in order to design appropriate . . . interventions*' (pp. 11-16). This is a reflective and reflexive, iterative and gradual process that demands far more than the kinds of techniques to which we have become used.

According to Lavergne (2005), additional *facilitating roles* for agents planning and promoting capacity development include facilitating access to knowledge and ideas, facilitation of

networking and consensus building, policy dialogue and advocacy, and providing space for learning by doing.

Outcome Mapping emphasises the specific role of the implementing team and facilitates a process – during the planning stage – to identify a mix of support strategies for the capacity development of the direct partners (see section 2.2). Table 3 gives an overview of the different types of strategies presented by Outcome Mapping. The two rows divide the strategies into those aimed directly at specific individuals, groups and organisations and those aimed at the environment in which the individuals, groups or organisations operate. The columns represent strategies, which are causal, persuasive and supportive in nature.

Strategies	**CAUSAL**	**PERSUASIVE**	**SUPPORTIVE**
Aimed at specific individuals, groups, organisations	Actions which cause immediate and tangible results (*e.g. provide funding, equipment, …)*	Actions aimed at capacity building - more intangible results, long-term follow-up processes. (*e.g workshops, courses, training, …)*	Actions aimed at providing general support to the organisation - technical, management, OD… (*e.g. provide ongoing technical assistance, backstopping, consultants, experts, …)*
Aimed at the environment in which the individuals, groups or organisations are operating	Actions which cause change in the physical or policy environment – incentives, rules and guidelines (*e.g. contribute to policy negotiation, provide computers and internet access, …)*	Actions which disseminate information to a broader audience (*e.g. organise an MSD, conferences; publish experiences or post news on an internet site)*	Activities or actions which create a learning/action network and collaboration with other stakeholders (*e.g. research, COPs, mentorship programs, learning networks, …)*

Table 3: Mix of support strategies (strategy maps) presented by Outcome Mapping
(adapted from Earl et al., 2001, p. 63)

Embracing complexity

> *A Planner thinks he already knows the answers; he thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem that his answers will solve. A Searcher admits he doesn't know the answers in advance; he believes that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional, and technological factors. A Searcher only hopes to find answers to individual problems by trial and error experimentation. A Planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions. A searcher believes only insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions, and that most solutions must be homegrown.*
>
> (Easterly, 2006, p. 3)

The preceding section has made it clear that the development process and the facilitation of (capacity) development processes are complex, not straightforward, and can hardly be pre-determined. Development practitioners need to embrace and engage with the real world of mess and paradox, recognising that we are not in control, and giving ourselves modest but feasible objectives (Eyben, 2004, p. 18). Snowden & Boone (2007) present insights on understanding and responding to complex systems. They state that systems and contexts can be either *ordered* or *unordered* depending on the nature of the cause-effect relationships within the system. Depending on the context, different approaches to management, planning, monitoring and action are required (table 4).

CONTEXT	**CAUSE-EFFECT RELATIONSHIP**	**TYPE OF MANAGEMENT**	**PLANNING**	**MONITORING**
ORDERED context ***Simple & complicated***	Cause and effect are perceptible; There is a right answer to the problem; We know what is known and unknown.	Fact-based management; Command & control	Predictable process; Pre-defined & fixed procedures; Make use of best/good practices.	**Sense** ↓ **Categorise / Analyse** ↓ **Respond**
UNORDERED context ***Complex & chaotic***	No immediate apparent relationship between cause and effect; No right answers to the problem; Many unknowns, many (f)actors at play	Pattern-based management; Emerging patterns; Experimental, creative & innovative	Unpredictable process; The way forward emerges as we engage in action; Evolutionary approach in developing strategies.	**Probe / Act** ↓ **Sense** ↓ **Respond**

Table 4: Cause & effect relationships and management in ordered and unordered systems
(based on Snowden & Boone 2007, pp. 2-6)

Determining the prevailing context in which one is operating at any time and being able to change behaviour and decisions to match that context are crucial to manage the system and the context (Snowden & Boone, 2007, p. 8). The Cynefin framework (Snowden, 2008) outlined in table 4 makes the role of planning more explicit for each of the different situations. I argue that the LFA – with its origins in the engineering sector – is a good tool for ordered systems. However, unordered systems, such as those addressed by the majority of social and institutional change

programmes, require other planning and M&E approaches which deal with, or embrace, complexity.[4]

As shown in figure 5, Mintzberg and Quinn (In Britton, 2005) unpack the reality of developing strategies to deal with complexity with reference to:

- Emergent strategies, i.e., unplanned but implemented;
- Deliberate strategies, i.e., planned and implemented; and
- Unrealised strategies, i.e., planned but not implemented.

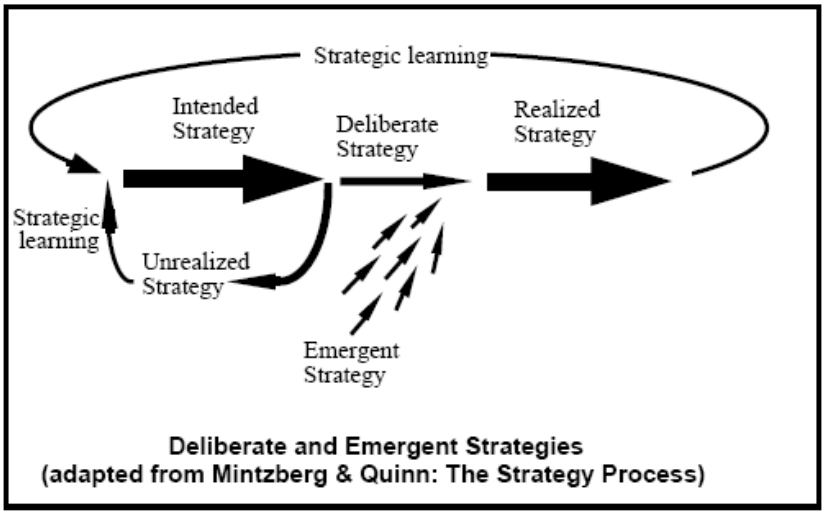

Figure 5: Deliberate and emergent strategies
(Mintzberg & Quinn, in Britton, 2005, p. 42)

What is crucial to the success of an organisation is that it reflects on the various elements of emergent and unrealised strategies and learns from them in such a way that it can better respond to new opportunities and new threats as they emerge in the future (see arrows in figure 5). Guijt (2008) refers to 'surprises' as the unexpected consequences of actions and external events to which adaptive managers (should) stay alert. Monitoring should be able to reveal surprises and other insights that inform improved action. Surprise is an important concept in management because it starts from the premise that our knowledge of any system will always be incomplete, and so, surprise is inevitable. Furthermore, without surprise, learning does not expand the boundaries of understanding. However, this perspective often sits uncomfortably with the role of project managers who are responsible for ensuring the delivery of set and pre-fixed results.

[4] As argued in section 2.2 the *intentional design* and respective monitoring process of Outcome Mapping offers a potential framework for managing complex, unordered development processes.

Mainstream monitoring systems are linked to programme logic models, which implies that the elements that constitute progress are linked to consistent and orderly relationships, and that data are summarised as 'indicators' in relation to a hierarchy of objectives (Guijt, 2008, p. 149). Thus the practice and logic of M&E focus on the known and the expected (Guijt, 2008, p. 150). The Cynefin framework helps to explain the reason why diverse types of information and sense-making are essential in order to understand progress and be able to respond effectively. It defines the 'ontological boundaries of methods' (Guijt, 2008, p. 252). Table 5 gives an overview of monitoring responses to the different situations presented in the Cynefin framework. Simple and complicated situations are categorised under ordered systems while complex and chaotic fall under unordered systems.

Situation	Monitoring Responses
Simple	Routine data collection of variables and comparing them to projected performance (as in programme logic-based monitoring). Compare practice with 'good' or 'best' practices from elsewhere.
Complicated	Engage experts (from science and practice) to undertake joint analysis. Variables can be tracked to feed into analysis. Negotiation of possible explanations is needed.
Complex	Track the emergence of critical events, engage those involved to help understand/explain significance and generate ideas about possible responses; track those responses in terms of what they lead to, and so forth.
Chaotic	Intense dialogue between partners; review and re-strategise following each action; monitor to recognise the next crisis in need of action and gauge the extent to which the response has had desired effect

Table 5: Monitoring responses to the different situations in the Cynefin framework
(Guijt, 2008, p. 251)

Table 5 suggests that development processes with an unpredictable character require a monitoring system that fosters a *process of probing/acting followed by sensing and responding.* Probing and acting are needed prior to understanding what response is best in what context. The programme evolves to a future that is unknowable in advance, but is more contextually appropriate when discovered (Guijt, 2008, pp. 250-252). It embraces the idea of emerging patterns instead of holding on to a pre-defined causal logic of progress or a fact-based monitoring approach such as the LFA.

The process of a development programme should no longer be a set of activities to be implemented according to a predetermined plan but an evolutionary process consisting of continuous cycles of action, reflection and adaptation (den Heyer, 2003, p. 376). Therefore, monitoring and evaluation are '*mechanisms to adjust to evolving conditions and fine-tuning should no longer be perceived as a weakness in planning, but rather as an effective way of*

responding to change' (Lopes & Theisohn, 2003, p. 11). M&E should be designed to facilitate these cycles of action, reflection and adaptation, i.e., to facilitate opportunities to allow for the incorporation of emerging lessons and new responses to the environment, to examine intended and unintended results, and to actively refine the implementation strategies in the programme.

These ideas are in line with the principles of *adaptive management* for development programmes, defined by Loveridge (2007) as a management practice which recognises that both the process and outcomes of development activities are uncertain and therefore views program actions as tools for learning. Actions are designed so that, even if they fail, they will provide useful information for future actions. According to Loveridge, monitoring and evaluation for adaptive management concerns:

> *Developing enabling structures and processes to regularly reassess desired outcomes and learn what strategies work and do not work. These processes shall emphasise collecting and analysing information and reflecting on people's actions, interactions and reactions so that capacity development within developing country systems may be better understood.*
>
> (p. 3)

This kind of M&E practice requires not only that the plans are summarised in the form of a logic model (using words or graphics that describe a cause-effect hypothesis or theory of change in a specific format) but that there is an M&E plan that describes how the process and progress towards outputs and outcomes will be measured, and which information will be used to inform decisions and adjustments along the way (Rugh, 2007). It involves *operational procedures & systems* which are supportive and ensure that lessons learned from experience are integrated and connected to the planning and management cycles so that people and organisations can learn from their experience and change in a way that will enhance their performance (Britton, 1998; Earl et al., 2001; Hauck et al, 2005; Horton, 2003, pp. 40-44; and Kaplan, 1999).

In addition, many authors emphasise the need for intended users and beneficiaries to participate in the M&E process (Earl et al, 2001; Easterly, 2006; Guijt, 2008; Horton, 2003; and Patton, 1997) and for feedback loops to be incorporated into the M&E process to enable continuous improvement in the light of experience (Britton, 1998). Methods that stimulate social interaction and generate discussion, reflection and debate among the actors involved are therefore crucial.

2.1.3 LEARNING

Learning at the heart of development

The shift from traditional notions of capacity development emphasising the 'transfer' of technology or knowledge towards a more holistic approach to capacity development recognises the need for deeper and wider processes of continuous learning (MacLachlan & Carr, 2005, p. 1). *Learning lies at the heart of development* and its management processes, including M&E, should incorporate reflective practices and activities to promote self-learning, critical thinking, team building, action planning and experimentation (Horton, 2003; Morgan, 2005, p. 24). As listed below, there are different reasons why learning is so important for development programmes and at the same time, necessary to integrate into M&E practices:

- Learning is widely recognised as an essential requirement for development programmes and partners *to respond to the complex, uncertain and unpredictable nature of development* (Morgan, 2005, p. 24).
- Integrating learning mechanisms into M&E processes is necessary *to close the gap between M&E and planning* (Britton, 2005, pp. 8-12). Information generated through M&E aims to influence decision-making and planning. However, reality often shows that the information generated is either not useful or relevant or that the systems supporting decision-making and planning are not in place.
- Organisational learning also has the potential to increase the awareness of 'theories-in-use' and 'espoused theories' throughout the implementation of a programme (Loveridge, 2007, p. 3). Argyris & Schon (1974) distinguish between 'theory in use' (what is happening) and 'espoused theory' (what people think or say is happening). There is a common but often unacknowledged disparity between organisational mission and values versus actual organisational practice – or a degree of mismatch between the behaviour and espoused theory of the organisation (pp. 6-7). A learning-oriented and reflective practice analyses and shapes the ways we think and behave and can assist in closing the gap between what we say and stand for as a development organisation and what we really do in action.
- A widely acknowledged reason for organisations to invest in (organisational) learning is *increased organisational performance, efficiency and effectiveness* (Britton, 2005. p. 9), and in the private sector – where organisational learning finds its origins – a direct link with competitive advantage is assumed (Pasteur et al., 2006, p. 1). '*Only those who learn and learn fast can improve their performance and adapt to constantly changing contexts*' (Weggeman, 1997, in ECDPM, p. 15). Organisational effectiveness is therefore increasingly seen as a justification for investment in learning initiatives. Learning becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself, whereby data gathering is linked

to immediate improvements in project implementation (Britton, 2005, pp. 8-12; Patton, 1997, as shown in table 1).

- Estrella & Gaventa (table 2) make a link between M&E, institutional learning and *organisational strengthening*. Learning is a crucial aspect in the identification and development of capacity. It leads to the *enhancement of the capacities* of the participating organisations or systems (Morgan, 2005, p. 24). Again, the link with adaptive management is evident. It includes the need for managers to develop management styles and procedures that enable staff to learn quickly and for policy and programme frameworks to embrace institutional change (Engel et al., 2006, p. 2).
- In addition, Britton (2005) highlights the increasing evidence that organisational learning has a valuable unintended consequence: *building healthier organisations* (p. 11). We can clearly see that many of the mechanisms and processes associated with organisational learning are primarily concerned with developing and strengthening interpersonal connections for the purpose of creating, sharing and using information and knowledge. This can lead to the alignment of motives, expectations, interpretations and perceptions of expatriate staff, national staff, programme partners and beneficiaries (Lopes & Theisohn, 2003, p. 131).
- Organisations participating in learning processes improve communication and participation among partners, which will enhance trust and transparency and ultimately lead towards *stronger partnerships in/for development*. Learning assists in enhancing the elements of a successful partnership (Horton, 2003): shared vision, clear intents and purpose, negotiation processes, clear roles and responsibilities, processes of change in favour of poor people, continuity and persistence, flexibility and openness to change, (organisational) effectiveness and learning how to learn.
- Patton (1997) refers to the knowledge creation-oriented use of M&E (p. 76), that is, the development – through the M&E process – of generalisations and conceptualisations, theory and policies (table 1). The systematic collection of specific information for specific pre-defined learning needs can be seen as a knowledge creating use of M&E.

The above arguments advocate the incorporation and fostering of learning mechanisms at the organisational level and into M&E processes. However, there is a growing awareness that M&E systems themselves – if developed well – have the potential to become a framework or 'carrier' for *individual, organisational and institutional learning. (*Guijt, 2008; Morgan, 2005, pp. 24-25; Preskill and Torres, 2004). As will be explained in chapter 5, this intention is also implicit in the design of VECO Indonesia's PLA system. Guijt (2008) has elaborated on this issue and illustrated the fluid definitional membranes of monitoring and learning (pp. 28-29), as presented in figure 6. The smallest box, 'mainstream', contains the activities usually associated with monitoring. The 'monitoring' box encompasses activities that need to be taken up if monitoring wants to make a

contribution to learning. The more of these activities that are undertaken, the more the definitional membrane of monitoring stretches towards that of learning.

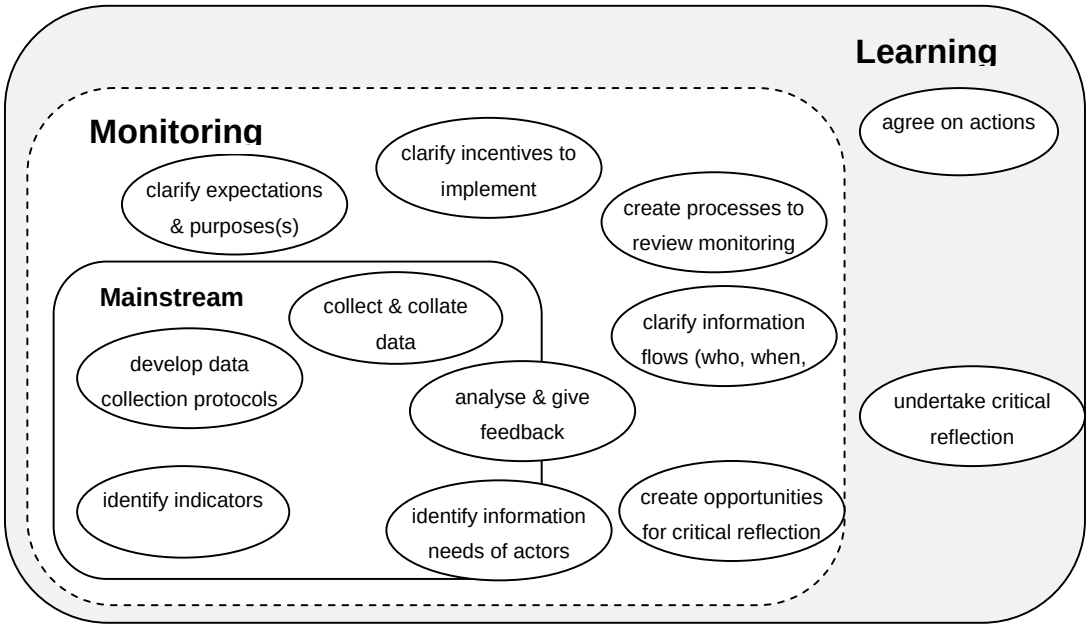

Figure 6: Fluid definitional membranes of monitoring and learning

(Guijt, 2008, p. 29)

Sense-making

But there is more at stake than a checklist of activities (stated in figure 6) when it comes to learning. Guijt (2008) refers to *'sense-making'* as the missing link in mainstream monitoring practice, since the mere focus on the construction of information, or data systems, mostly ignores the reflection and sense-making activities that facilitate effective learning (p. 150). She also argues that a response to change is the result of continuous interaction between events and ideas encountered in real life and sense-making (p. 29). Sense-making in this context is defined as '*the motivated continuous effort to understand connections (which can be among people, places, and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories and act effectively'* (p. 249). It comes down to continuously interpreting information to make it usable for action, i.e., assimilating observations with beliefs and values, current interpretations (theory) and other response variables to come to actionable options that are then subject to decision-making (Leeuwis 2002, in Guijt, 2008, p. 29). Sense-making becomes a process of inner dialogue if it occurs at the level of an individual and lies at the heart of formal and informal debates when it involves more than one individual.

Learning by doing

In this section I move on to discuss some learning-related terms and concepts which are important for this study and for the development of the PLA system.

Experiential learning

Learning is understood as all our efforts to absorb, understand and respond to the world around us. Learning is the essential process in expanding the capabilities of people and organisations and is not just about acquiring knowledge. It is about skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understandings and self-awareness (Britton, 2005, p. 5). We all act on, and receive feedback from our environment, which in turns leads us to adapt our cognitions. It is this kind of learning – distinct from separate educational activities and teaching – that is crucial in the context of adult learning (Leeuwis, 2004, p. 147). It is the type of learning that happens on the job every day through action. It relates to the process that takes the 'job' as the vehicle for learning and is basically inspired by the idea that there is no adequate learning without action and no adequate action without learning. It promotes conscious learning from experiences in order to improve future practice. This is referred to as *experiential learning* (Kolb, 1984), i.e., a cyclical process of reflection on experience, conceptualising meanings that arise from reflection, deciding how new conceptual understanding can be used to improve future practice, and taking action which leads to new experience. This type of learning is very powerful. It appears that conclusions drawn by people themselves on the basis of their own experiences tend to have a greater impact than insights formulated by others on the basis of experiences that learners cannot identify with. Learning occurs from continuous interaction and iteration between thinking and action (Leeuwis, 2004, p. 149). Experiential learning is therefore also referred to as *learning by doing* or *action learning* (Taylor, 1997).

For Argyris & Schon (1978), learning involves the detection and correction of error (p. 2). They developed a model (see figure 7) describing two types of learning – *single-loop learning* and *double-loop learning* – which has subsequently been adapted by other writers to include *triple-loop learning* (Britton, 2005, p. 42). *Single-loop learning* emphasises more observable processes and structures, whilst taking organisational goals, values, frameworks and strategies for granted. It leads to adaptation but only within the existing organisational framework (Pasteur, 2004, p. 15). It is often called 'thinking inside the box' because the theories, assumptions, principles and policies that underpin the organisation's rules and procedures are rarely if ever questioned. 'How?' questions are posed but almost never the more fundamental 'why?' questions (Britton, 2005, p. 42). *Double-loop learning* occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organisation's underlying norms, policies and objectives (Argyris & Schon, 1978, pp. 2-3). It questions the underlying assumptions and principles upon which the rules and procedures are based and is therefore often referred to as 'thinking outside the box' (Britton, 2005, p. 42). The consequences of double-loop learning are potentially far-reaching and

may even lead to what has been called *triple-loop learning* – challenging the organisation's rationale, principles and assumptions, which requires an open and often robust exchange of views (Britton, 2005, p. 42). This is also referred to as organisational transformation or organisational culture change.

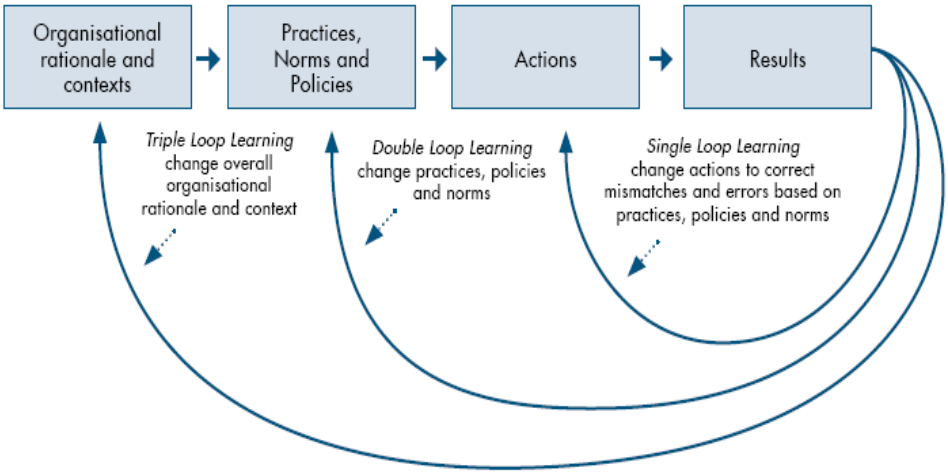

Figure 7: Single-, double- and triple-loop learning
(adapted from Argyris & Schön, 1978, in Ramalingam, 2008, p. 4)

Bloch and Borges (2003) argue that development organisations sometimes get stuck in single-loop learning because their planning and evaluation tools focus on the operational level and fail to engage people in critical reflection on underlying issues of behaviour, values and agency (pp. 277-293). Ellerman (2003) refers to development organisations embracing 'dogma' in trying to identify 'one best way' such that they become deeply wedded to these beliefs (pp. 40-57). This creates significant obstacles to learning, as people focus on explaining away failures (bad single-loop learning) rather than questioning the dogma or dominant paradigm (double- and triple-loop learning). Furthermore, organisations may deliberately – even unconsciously – discourage deeper learning (or at least make it difficult). The questioning nature of double- and triple-loop learning might challenge strongly-held positions, ideas and power structures. Therefore, people (often managers) may avoid organisational problems exposed by double- and triple-loop learning, either by doing nothing (and hoping the problems go away) or by 'escaping into action', which gives the appearance of change but leaves the real problem unsolved. Restructuring the organisation is a common tactic for giving the appearance of change whilst leaving the underlying power structures untouched (Britton, 2005, p. 42).

Learning from the emerging future (anticipatory learning)

Scharmer (2006) adds an interesting missing link – a hidden dimension – in the social process of management and learning. He argues that there are two sources of learning: the past and the

emerging future (pp. 49-57). He states that learning has been primarily concerned with – and described in terms of – how to build, nurture, and sustain the learning process based on single-, double- and triple-learning, i.e., *on learning from the past*, the core principle of experiential learning, also referred to as *retrospective learning*. However, while working with companies in various culture and sectors, Scharmer (2006b) discovered that leaders are wrestling with challenges that cannot be adequately addressed by reflecting only on the past (pp. 51-52). Companies – and development initiatives – are struggling to succeed in an unprecedentedly turbulent, complex and rapidly changing environment and context. Reflecting on what happened in the past will not be adequate to help figure out what to do next. Scharmer suggests another level of learning and knowing: *learning from the future as it emerges or anticipatory learning.* He refers to it as *presencing* – a blend of the words 'presence' and 'sensing' (or 'pre-sensing') – because it involves a particular way of being aware of experience in the present moment. Presencing denotes the ability of individuals and collective entities to link directly with their highest future potential, so that group as a whole can see the emerging opportunities and the key systemic forces at play. While conventional methods develop 'blueprint' design models followed by implementation, this approach aims to co-create the future whereby the design process is part of the sensing and the discovery process. It involves exploring the future by doing rather than through thinking and reflection (Scharmer, 2006a, pp. 7-8). This resonates with the argument of the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) that in complex situations, one has to find ways to make sense of the world in order to act adequately in it. The suggested 'monitoring' sequence in such a context is focusing on *acting* > *sensing* > *responding* rather than *sensing* > *analysing* > *responding* (table 4). Scharmer (2006a) points out that the use of conventional monitoring and learning approaches based on experiential learning practice in complex situations might inhibit innovation processes through 'analysis paralysis' (p. 8).

Organisational & social learning

Organisational learning is defined in the literature (Garvin, 1993) as '*the process of developing new knowledge that changes an organisation's behaviour to improve future performance' (*p. 78)*.* Some authors view organisational learning as individual and team learning in the organisational context, whilst others propose that organisational learning is somehow an aggregate or cross-fertilisation of individual learning, or a process by which an organisation as an entity learns and adapts. However, most authors tend to concur that organizational learning is more than the sum of individual learning, i.e., the learning and changes amongst individual members become encoded within the collective mind of the organisation, resulting in more persistent changes in organisational memory, behaviours, norms and values (Pasteur et al., 2006, p. 2).

According to Engel et al. (2006), learning in an organisation happens at three interlinked levels, i.e. individuals, work processes and organisational core. *Individuals* learn to do their job better, within the framework provided by the organisation's objectives, policies, culture, work processes,

regulatory frameworks and resources (p. 4). If individuals learn, they may help to modify the design of the *work processes* and regulatory frameworks themselves. This may improve the way in which their work is organised and hence help the organisation to perform better. Learning that touches the very *core of the organisation* affects the institutional values and principles (triple-loop learning), as reflected by the organisational culture, its mission and/or its long-term and short-term policies. Where this happens, the organisation actually changes as a result of the learning process. Pasteur et al. (2006) argue that within the development sector an extra level is emerging, i.e. the *inter-organisational / network* level, which brings organisations and institutions into cooperation and networks (p. 2).

The concepts of experiential and organisational learning are embedded in the theory and practice of the *Learning Organisation*. A clear definition of organisational learning is elusive (Garvin, 2000, p. 9) and much of the organisational learning literature is aspirational, i.e. it seeks to describe the organisational ideal where learning is maximised. The learning organisation is seen both as a concept – of an entity, an ideal type of organisation (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2003, in Pasteur et al., 2006, p. 1) – and as a particular methodology within the larger domain of organisational learning, whereby '*the learning is less concerned with capturing and storing of knowledge, as with transforming knowledge and experience into improved action*' (Pasteur, 2004, p. 8). The theory and practice of the learning organisation has been promoted by Peter Senge (1990, 1994) and his team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and finds its origins in the corporate sector. It was in the mid 1990s that the concept of the learning organisation found its way to the development sector, and today, many NGOs, consultancy organisations, researchers and academics are exploring its relevance for the practice of development programmes. Taylor (1998) defines the learning organisation in the context of the development sector as:

> *An organisation that builds and improves its own practice by consciously and continually devising and developing the means to draw learning from its own (and other's) experience.*
>
> (p. 1)

By the end of the 1990s, the development sector – from the World Bank to small NGOs – was increasingly adopting another evolving professional field from the corporate world – *knowledge management* – for ideas about how to best organise and manage their information and recover their collective memory (Britton, 2005, p. 7). Skyrme (2002) describes this field as:

> *The explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge and its associated processes of creating, gathering, organising, diffusing, use and exploitation. It requires turning personal knowledge into corporate knowledge that can be widely shared throughout an organisation and appropriately applied*.
>
> (p. 4)

Practical and theoretical understandings of knowledge and knowledge management have evolved, most notably into what is now being termed second- and even third-generation knowledge

management. Organisations have increasingly come to be seen as interdependent, complex, and needing to be responsive to external stimuli and conditions. Rather than rigid, mechanistic information processes and objectives, second-generation knowledge management embraces the concept of learning as a social process (i.e. one that involves collective human actions and interactions), now merely *facilitated* by information technologies (Pasteur et al., 2006, p. 5).

Social learning

Institutional transformation is not achieved by a single societal actor; it involves multiple actors who engage in feedback processes that draw together information, 'digest' it, consciously co-create knowledge and ensure that intentions are sufficiently shared. Programmes working in multi-actor settings with 'messy partnerships' need to invest in institutional learning processes, in recognition of the need to strengthen concerted action (Guijt, 2008, pp. 262-274). This is referred to as *social learning*, i.e., in order to arrive at coherent practices, multiple actors need to develop complementary and/or overlapping (or even fully shared) understandings as a basis for effective coordinated action (Leeuwis, 2004, p. 147). The adjective 'social' in *social learning* has multiple connotations, related to the topics that need to be learned about (social arrangements, social world, etc.), the methods of learning in groups or multi-actor platforms, and the point that knowledge and perceptions tend to be socially constructed (Leeuwis, 2004, p. 148).

Facilitating learning

I conclude this section – based on the above-mentioned premise that organisational and social learning can be facilitated by the monitoring and evaluation system/process – by providing an overview of some of the key elements of a learning-oriented M&E framework.

M&E is not disconnected from *programme design*. The way a programme framework is built up, how desired changes are projected, and the use of planning tools have a direct link with the M&E system and process. A planning model which allows for flexibility and openness to the unexpected is likely to be more applicable to a learning approach than a model based on projectable changes in time and rigid in its format. As discussed before in section 1.1, the LFA is the most common planning tool in the development sector. Its appropriateness for dealing with the complex settings of many development programmes has been criticised. However, adapting it is a challenge, and adopting a new planning tool is not always possible or acceptable to the donors. A number of alternative tools have been developed in response to the LFA such as the *Most Significant Change (MSC)* technique (Davis & Darts, 2005), the *Result-Oriented Approach to Capacity Development and Change (ROACH)* (Boesen & Therkildsen, 2003), *Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)* methods (Chambers, 2005), the *Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS)* (ActionAid, 2006) and *Outcome Mapping (OM)* (Earl et al., 2001). In section 2.2, I will discuss Outcome Mapping as an alternative planning and M&E approach which – according to the founders – is designed to foster learning and reflection in development programmes. However, I

refer to Outcome Mapping as a 'potential' learning-oriented planning and M&E method since the method is only as good as the people who use it.

Many authors state that the *systematic collection of information* is crucial to enhance learning in an M&E process. But as argued above, M&E goes further than collecting information. It is all too easy to assume that by simply gathering information, storing it and making it accessible, we have somehow increased our knowledge and learning (Britton, 2005, p. 9). First of all, the collected *information should be useful and relevant* for the producers and the users of the information, as promoted by Utilisation-Focused Evaluation (Patton, 1997). This is an important principle in the practice of Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation (Gaventa & Estrella, 1998) and Outcome Mapping (Earl et al., 2001). Secondly, making the connections is even more important than accumulating the information. Collecting information only would overlook the fact that knowledge is information that individuals have reflected on, understood, internalised and are able to use (Britton, 2005, p. 9). This means that monitoring systems need to cater to the social spaces and interactions necessary to enable information sharing and interpretation that leads to collective insights about action – *sense-making* (Guijt, 2008, p. 28).

Outcome Mapping acknowledges that the value and usefulness of data collection depends on its integration into a programme's ongoing management and reporting processes and on learning mechanisms to interpret and analyse the collected data (Earl et al., 2001, p. 76). However, this will only lead to the desired results if the organisation provides the *necessary conditions and capacities* to apply the learning mechanisms adequately (see section 2.2).

Participatory M&E approaches as well as adaptive management practices (Engel et al, 2007:4) claim that learning needs to start with the strengthening of internal self-evaluation or *self-assessment.* Fred Carden, co-founder of Outcome Mapping argues that *' . . . an organisation both knows more about its successes and failures than someone from outside and has a stronger stake in the long-term success of the organisation than any external agency'* (Engel et al, 2007, p. 3). He argues that institutionalised self-assessment forms the backbone of an organisation that seeks to learn from what it is doing. Self-assessment aims to capture the useful knowledge embedded in the experiences of the people and is generated by connecting them through sharing stories and learning together in teams (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Through self-assessment, people gain a common understanding of their successes, the challenges ahead and possible solutions. Since recommendations for further follow-up and improvement come from the people themselves, they will be more realistic and relevant (Deprez, 2005, p. 1).

Another important aspect of the M&E process that can enhance learning is the focus from the outset on the *process use* of M&E (see table 1). Process use is based on the assumption that stakeholders benefit through participation in planning and carrying out the M&E activities. The

application of evaluative thinking and engagement in the process of M&E can be useful in itself apart from the M&E results that might emerge from the M&E process (Patton, 1997, p. 113). Process use claims that through their involvement in the M&E process, participants acquire new knowledge, develop new skills and change their attitudes. These changes might – according to Horton (2003) – be more effective in influencing decisions, actions, procedures and organisational culture than the changes brought about through conventional use of M&E results (p. 113).

Often information and communication flows are uni-directional – moving upward in the hierarchical levels of a programme. *Feedback loops* to the 'lower' levels are a missing link in many M&E systems. Morgan (2005) argues that the idea and practice of feedback is central to the issue of learning (p. 12). Feedback plays an important role in shaping human practices because it is a crucial mechanism in human learning (Leeuwis, 2004, pp. 153-155). Feedback is the information we get about the outcomes, characteristics and/or consequences of our actions, and it helps us to evaluate these. Especially when feedback is somehow 'disturbing' it can trigger learning processes. Therefore, programmes that plan for and develop culturally appropriate (constructive) feedback mechanisms are stimulating and contribute to learning.

Guijt (2008) argues that monitoring processes fostering learning need to move beyond the 'intra-organisational' perspective, i.e., monitoring systems based on a single organisational perspective, or for which the location of responsibility for decision-making is centralised (p. 274). Development is not delivered in that form. Increasingly 'messy partnerships' are involved in development programmes, and monitoring processes have to cater for the need to understand the partners that have converged around concerted action and what they bring to the mix (pp. 274-275). Therefore, programmes working in messy partnerships need to expand their understanding of monitoring towards an *institutional monitoring and learning* process, earlier referred to as social learning (section 1.3.2). Each partner, individually and in partnership, monitors whether and how well actions are taking place and how the context is changing as a result, both through formal (explicit) and informal (tacit) monitoring and learning processes (Guijt, 2008, p. 244).

Lastly, I refer to Scharmer (2006) and Snowden (2007) who argue that in complex situations, monitoring and learning practices have to be organised differently, i.e., with a stronger focus on consciously engaging in action followed by a sense-making process focusing on the potential future rather than 'learning from the past'. This 'emerging future' learning is embedded in and

fostered by social learning processes and by a variety of methods such as *Scenario building tools'*[5], *Appreciative Inquiry'*[6] *and the Delphi-method.*[7]

2.1.4 ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is understood as 'giving an account' to another party who has a stake in what has been done. It evokes a sense of taking responsibility but it also holds the meaning of being held responsible by others – being 'held to account' (Crawford 2004, p. 72).

Imbalances in accountability

As mentioned in section 2.1.1, accountability is probably the most common purpose and use of M&E processes and is associated with reporting systems, justification for and control of funds, and (impact) measurement. At this stage I present the different lines of accountability and their associated dynamics within development programmes.

Anderson (2000) argues that the giving side of the aid relationship is primarily accountable to communities and powers *outside* the development programmes and only secondarily, if at all, to insiders, the people who receive aid (p. 496). Be they bi-lateral, multi-lateral or non-governmental development organisations, the communities and powers outside the programme tend to be situated in the donor country. Accountability to these actors is referred to as *upward accountability*. Donors and development agencies are increasingly under pressure to 'measure' their performance and the results of their development work. Key factors include the need to understand the implications of, and improve, development work, to combat scepticism about aid in general and to demonstrate organisational performance in a competitive market (Starling, 2003, p. 2). Accountability to donors is mostly linked to the control of the use of public funds, which needs to be justified to the government and taxpayers. '*If they cannot show what is done with their taxpayers' money, they have a credibility problem'* (Lopes & Theisohn, 2003, p. 11).

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[5] *Scenario building tools*: methods that facilitate creative planning for the future, particularly useful where complexity and uncertainty are high. They aim to stimulate *creative ways* of thinking that help people break out of established ways of looking at situations and planning their actions. Scenarios are *stories of what might be*. The value of scenarios comes then from learning to think in new ways about the future and in making decisions appropriate to uncertain conditions. (Wollenberg et al., 2000, pp. 2-5).

[6] *Appreciative Inquiry*: A group process that inquires into, identifies, and further develops the best of 'what is' in organisations. It provides a framework for creating an imagined future (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, pp. 1-2).

[7] *Delphi Method*: an established (though not undisputed) research method in social research (mainly used for social forecasts and the exploration of unstructured fields), where a series of people ('experts') interact in a systematic way to estimate answers to a problem. The method builds specifically on the intuition of experts and tries to surface their unconscious knowledge (Steinlin, 2008).

There are different reasons why this is an 'unhealthy' situation: first, the need to maintain funding may create a situation in which development programmes are designed in a way that reflects the needs and preferences of donors, not the beneficiaries (Johnson, 2001, p. 8). Second, beneficiaries may be placed in a position in which their ability to influence inappropriate or undesirable interventions is limited. Third, when beneficiaries are not consulted about project priorities, the efficacy, sustainability and accountability of the intervention can be limited indeed (Brett, 1993; Chambers, 1983 in Johnson, 2001, p. 8). Fourth, local communities might express apathy or '*… simply state what they think the questioner wants to hear*' (Niang, 2002 in Lopes a& Theisohn, 2003, p. 42). Fifth, systems for planning, monitoring and evaluation are often developed and practiced in isolation.

Downward accountability aims to increase the donor's accountability to the beneficiaries of the development programme through greater involvement of those beneficiaries in the assessment of the donor's work and performance. It is also referred to as *reverse* accountability – reorienting the flow of accountability – or *primary* accountability, i.e., accountability to primary stakeholders (Chambers, 2005, p. 76). An important barrier to improved downward accountability is that relationships, most notably those with poor people, are not in place (Groves and Hinton, 2004, p. 4). They argue that people are generally better at forming relationships with those with whom they share common behavioural traits. Where there are significant differences, it appears to be more difficult to develop relationships grounded in trust and transparency. Johnson (2001) concludes that being in tune with the aspirations and needs of the local people, spending time in a community, being willing to listen to what villagers have to say, and the cultural and religious affiliations of external agents have a serious impact on accountability to beneficiaries (p. 14). The voices of those most affected by development programmes are the voices of local intermediary organisations – such as local institutions or NGOs – and the direct beneficiaries – often the poor. Are they invited to provide feedback on the content and approach of development programmes or on the way they are being supported? As one of the Action Aid (2001) staff critically asked, *'we are supporting local people to be represented in government decision-making processes but do we allow them to be in Action Aid*?' (p. 15). The following two quotes summarise the challenges of the imbalances in accountability.

> *… While the stated commitment of … donors is to downward accountability and promoting local ownership and control of development, the policies and procedures that surround the disbursement and accounting for aid money ensure upward accountability dominates.*
>
> *(Wallace & Chapman, 2003, p. 1)*

> *… The current global governance arena is not characterised by unaccountable organisations, but by organisations that are either accountable to the wrong set of stakeholders or focus their accountability on one stakeholder at the expense of others. The key challenge is in creating a more balanced relationship in which the voices of those most affected by the organisation are not overshadowed by the interests of the most powerful.*
>
> *(Blagescu,* 2006)

Establishing a good balance between upward and downward accountability leads to a development practice based on *two-way accountability systems,* moving away '*from micro-management and unilateral control to performance measurement and mutual accountability based on agreed standards and collective results*' (Lopes and Theisohn, 2003, p. 86). Development agencies being held accountable by those for whom they work will increase the integrity of and balance of power in the aid relationship (Blagescu et al., 2005). More and more tools and techniques to guide this inclusive approach have been developed, such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA), participatory monitoring and evaluation, transparency and information initiatives, participatory budgeting, report cards, citizens juries and social audits (Chambers, 2005, p. 77). However, as mentioned earlier, conventional management and M&E tools often undermine this inclusiveness. The more regulation, reporting and control mechanisms are forced upon Southern partners, the more they divert energy and resources away from the achievement of organisational objectives (Hinton, 2004, p. 216) and the less local partners feel respected and trusted (Starling, 2003, p. 12).

These new emerging insights on accountability have led to the emergence of some broader and more contextualised definitions of accountability as:

> *The means by which local people shape and influence development programmes* or *the way in which collective decisions reflect the interests of the broadest possible group.*
>
> (Johnson, 2001, p. 17)

> *The processes through which an organisation makes a commitment to respond to and balance the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making processes and activities, and delivers against this commitment.*
>
> (Blagescu et al., 2005)

The previous paragraphs suggest a shift both in *the aims of accountability* – moving from control towards the inclusion of learning – and in *those to whom accountability is directed* – moving from upward accountability towards the inclusion of endogenous accountability mechanisms.

Groves and Hinton (2004) argue that there are five lines of accountability for development programmes: the taxpayers of the donor country, the government of the donor country, the government of the recipient country, the poor in the recipient country, and the international development framework (p. 13). Watson (2005) suggests a similar division, but also introduces some new terms. *Exogenous accountability* refers to the accountability of recipient countries and organisations to lenders or donors for the utilisation of external resources, while *endogenous accountability* refers to the accountability of recipient governments or organisations towards citizens, clients or members. Another interesting division is suggested by Lopes and Theisohn (2003) who divide accountability and its respective reporting systems into two main areas: *programmatic* (programme content, goals, results, etc.) and *financial* accountability (p. 85).

Fulfilling these accountability needs through the M&E process is therefore a challenge. O'Neill (2002, in Starling, 2003), however, suggests giving up the fantasy of total control and finding an acceptable balance between measurement, management and accountability (p. 12), or as Hauge states, *'at the end of the day, it is better to have approximate information about important issues, rather than to have precise data on those that may be irrelevant to human development'* (2002 in Lopes &Theisohn, 2003, p. 86). Therefore, choices must be made in terms of prioritising accountabilities. O'Neill (2002) talks of moving toward *intelligent accountability* that identifies and recognises what is most important to monitor. This approach suggests that those who are called to account should give an account of what they have done, including their successes and failures, to those who have sufficient time and experience to assess the evidence and report on it.

Transparency

Another crucial element associated with accountability is *transparency.* Creating a culture of transparency can enhance downward accountability and substantially improve the effectiveness of the development programme's operations (Jacob and Angood, no date, p. 5). It entails sharing information between partners and making it accessible to the beneficiaries and the wider public – *outward or public accountability.* Lopes and Theisohn (2003) argue that a culture of transparency, in terms of financial resources, institutional management practices, planning and service delivery, is the foremost instrument of public accountability (p. 11). However, few NGOs have systems set up to do this, and there is rarely any external or financial incentive to do so. Most NGO systems typically focus on financial reporting to donors, boards and head offices. Typical questions raised are: *Can we really share all financial details with our partners? What about the details of development agency staff wages? Can we really share our financial information and details of spending to poor people?* (ActionAid, 2001).

Jacobs and Angood (No date) conclude that transparency in sharing crucial information with local actors – if presented in a style that is easy for them to understand and use – can bring substantial benefits, such as (pp. 2-3):

- Creating a significant shift in the quality of participation;
- Strengthening trust and respect between NGO staff and users;
- Improving the quality of programme decisions, as users provide feedback on how funds are being spent;
- Empowering users to make their own decisions on their own behalf;
- Reducing the risks of inefficiency and misuse of funds;
- Encouraging finance staff to get more involved in the fieldwork.

Open communication might also generate a process whereby people ask why certain decisions were taken and express their frustrations over certain items of expenditure not addressing priority needs (Jacob & Angood, no date, p. 3). Therefore, improving transparency implies an openness to feedback and the development of mechanisms to deal with feedback.

2.1.5 THREE INTERLINKED PURPOSES

The three key purposes of an M&E system cannot be seen or dealt with in isolation. Table 6 presents the interrelatedness of the elements and processes involved for each of the purposes.

KEY PURPOSES OF M&E	ELEMENTS & PROCESSES INCLUDED
PLANNING	Better management, improved programme strategies, adjustment planning, strategic planning, decision-making, outcomes monitoring, progress and process monitoring …
LEARNING	Adjustment planning, improved effectiveness, organisational learning, action learning, organisational strengthening, capacity building, understanding stakeholder perspectives, negotiation, stronger partnerships, self-knowledge, knowledge creation, learning needs, evidence and theory building, policy formulation, publications, ownership, empowerment, self-assessment ...
ACCOUNTABILITY	Impact assessment, summative evaluations, audits, quality control, donor accountability, downward accountability, public accountability, transparency …

Table 6: Elements and processes related to planning, learning and accountability

Improving the system of M&E practice is a continuous and challenging balancing act between three parallel but interlinked processes (see figure 8) whereby the translation of the aspired ideas into practice will definitely be challenged by the unpredictable and ambiguous reality of development work.`

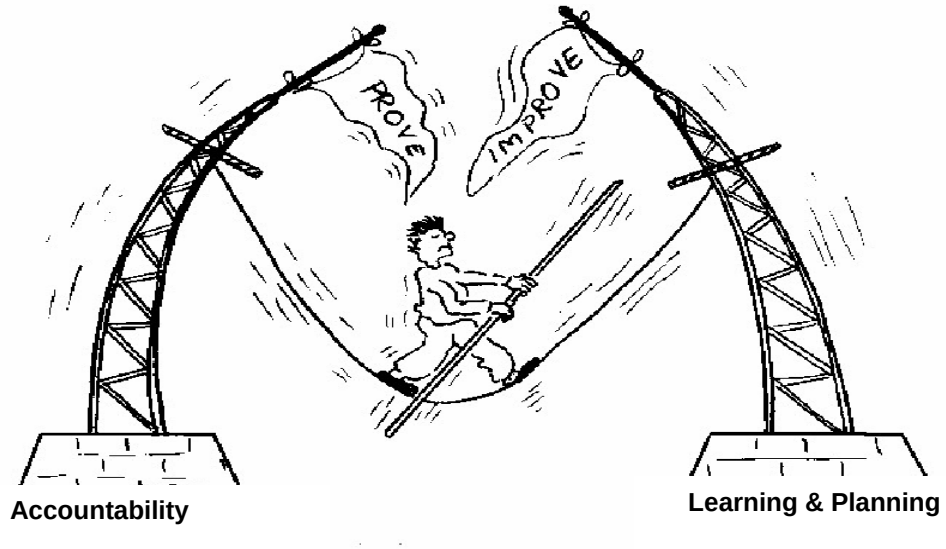

Figure 8: M&E: a balancing act!
(adapted from Earl et al., 2001)

2.2 OUTCOME MAPPING

Outcome Mapping (OM) is a planning, monitoring & evaluation approach developed by the *International Development Research Centre* (IDRC) in Canada (Earl et al., 2001) and is designed as an alternative and/or complementary model to the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) with an emphasis on building reflection and learning into (development) programmes. Outcome Mapping was used as the guiding framework for the design of the VECO Indonesia programme 2008-2013. In this section, I present the core principles, the logic and the different stages of Outcome Mapping.

2.2.1 CORE PRINCIPLES

Boundary partners

An important assumption underlying OM is that local actors control change. External agents like development organisations, '*only facilitate the process by providing access to new resources, ideas, or opportunities for a certain period of time*' (Earl et al., 2001). This is displayed in figure 9, in which the three circles represent the different actors in development programmes, on which the logic of OM is built.

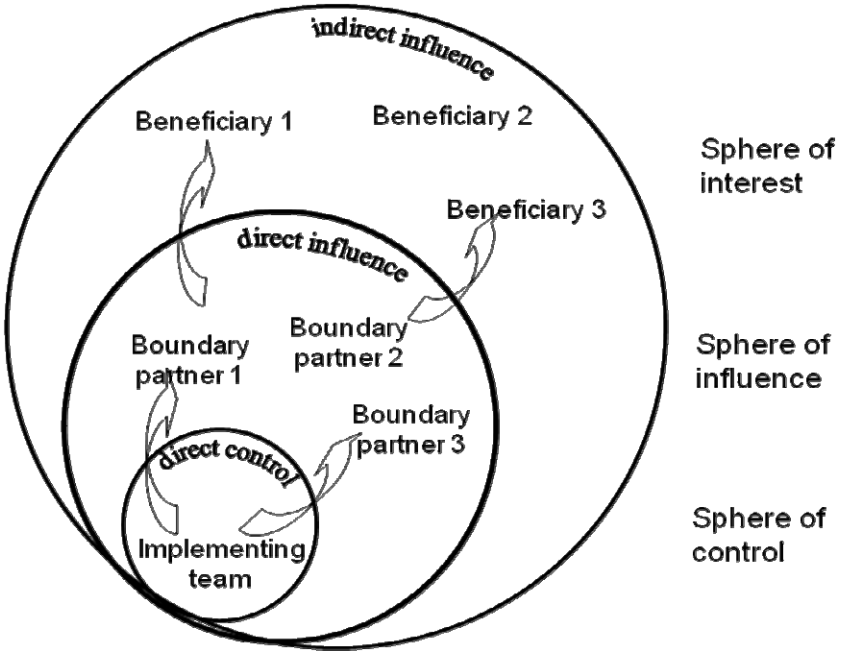

Figure 9: Three types of programme stakeholders and their relationships
(adapted from Montague, 2001)

A core aspect of OM is the concept of *boundary partners: these are* individuals, groups, or organisations with whom the programme interacts *directly* and with whom it anticipates

opportunities for influence. The vision of a programme is achieved through the actions of the boundary partners and the influence they have on the *beneficiaries* – e.g. local farmers (who are the boundary partners of the boundary partners of the programme). The development organisation, i.e., *the implementation team* facilitates the process by providing access to new resources, ideas or opportunities.

Sphere of influence

OM acknowledges that desired changes at the impact level (the level of the beneficiaries) are not caused by a single intervention or series of interventions by a programme. The diagram in figure 10 spells out the kinds of relationships that can be developed between different actors:

- the programme implementation team has *direct control* over inputs, activities, etc. in working with the boundary partners, *but*
- it *cannot control* change at the level of its boundary partners or beneficiairies. The ultimate responsibility for change rests with the people affected. However,
- it hopes to have *direct influence on or contribute* to changes at the level of its boundary partners, and
- it can only *indirectly influence* change at the level of ultimate beneficiaries (impact).

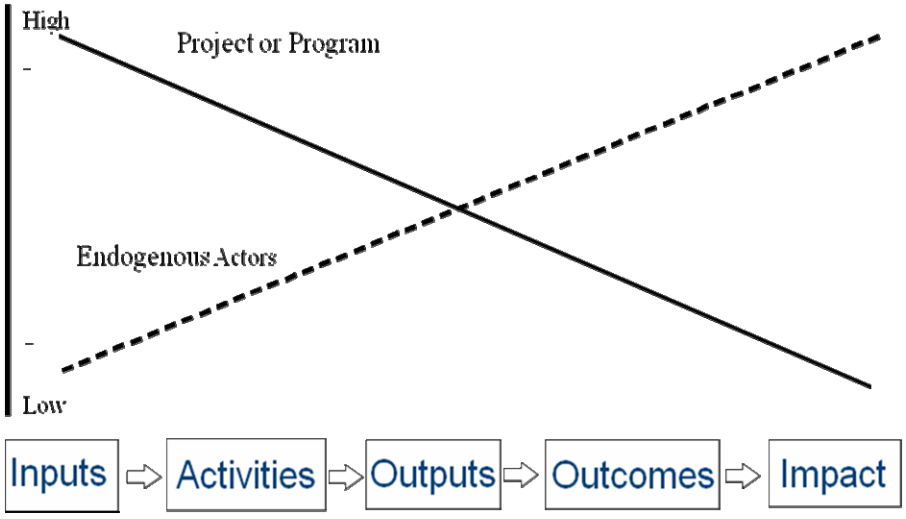

Figure 10: Relative direct control / influence along the results chain
(Smutylo, 2001, p. 6)

These are the fundamental ideas influencing the design of OM. Whereas programme *planning* is done in relation to the broader development context, Outcome Mapping promotes the idea that *assessment* (M&E) should be focused on those changes *within the sphere of (direct) influence* of the programme, i.e. M&E focuses on changes at the level of one's boundary partners. '*The intended*

impact of the program is its guiding light and directional beacon, test of its relevance – it is not the yardstick against which performance is measured' (Earl et al., 2001, p. 10).

Behavioural change

Another dominant assumption underlying OM is the idea that development is essentially about people relating to each other and their environment. The focus should therefore be on people. It argues that for each change in state (which is often the aim in developmental processes), there are correlating changes in behaviour and therefore, it is better to plan for and assess contributions to development by focusing on changes in behaviour. OM focuses particularly on one specific type of results, i.e., *outcomes as changes in the behaviour, relationships, activities, and actions of people, groups, and organisations with whom the programme works directly* (Earl et al., 2001, p. 1). In addition, it is inspired by the idea that assessing changes in state – or *impacts*, as in the LFA – does not necessarily provide the kind of information and feedback that programmes require to improve their performance and relevance. This is said to be particularly true for programmes that focus on capacity building (Earl et al., 2001, p. 14).

Attribution vs Contribution

OM does not attribute outcomes to a single intervention or series of interventions, but looks at the logical link between interventions and behavioural change. OM is not based on a causal framework; rather, it recognises that multiple, non-linear events lead to change. Following these ideas implies that the programme will have to change during the course of an initiative and has to think of itself as a dynamic programme whose goals, methods and relationships with partners need to be reconsidered and adjusted regularly (Earl et al., 2001, pp. 1-15).

In terms of M&E, the focus will be on assessing the contribution of a programme to the achievement of outcomes, rather than trying to attribute results to any particular intervention. In this way, the programme takes credit for contributions to the achievement of outcomes, can show progress towards outcomes and obtains feedback about its efforts.

2.2.2 OUTCOME MAPPING LOGIC & FRAMEWORK

From the OM perspective, developing a programme framework involves three stages (figure 11): intentional design, outcome and performance monitoring, and evaluation planning.

Intentional design

The planning stage in OM is different from the conventional LFA in a number of areas. Planning always starts with a dialogue on the development of a shared vision and mission for the programme, followed by a stakeholder analysis and identification of the boundary partners, which forms the basis for the development of outcomes and strategies. The project logic in OM is

centred around the boundary partners, and not around the desired final change of state (improved services, products, or infrastructure), as in the logframe-based methods. By thinking in terms of influencing endogenous actors (boundary partners), instead of replacing them with parallel project units, OM integrates sustainability thinking and capacity development processes directly into the design of the programme. A linear cause and effect relationship is replaced in OM by a view of development as a complex process that occurs in open systems.

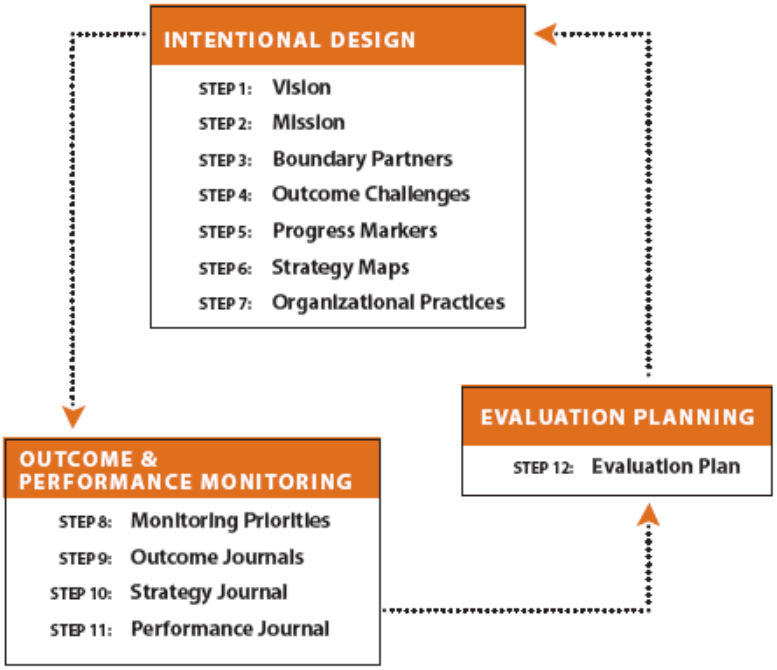

Figure 11: Three phases of Outcome Mapping

(Earl et al., 2001, p. 4)

In section 5.4, I elaborate further on the intentional design of OM and how it has influenced the VECO's programme design.

Outcome & performance monitoring

Earl et al. (2001) advocate that M&E considerations be incorporated in the planning phase, based on the principles of participatory M&E and utilisation-focused evaluation. OM moves away from the notion that M&E is something that is done to a programme. Instead, it actively engages the programme team and stakeholders in the design of the M&E framework and promotes self-assessment as an integral part of the programme (pp. 1-15).

OM provides a programme with a continuous system for thinking holistically and strategically about how it intends to achieve results and unites the M&E of both the process and outcomes of the programme. By focusing M&E on the programme's boundary partners, OM makes it possible

to obtain useful feedback about the programme's performance and results within its sphere of influence. Additionally, it monitors and evaluates whether a programme has contributed to changes in behaviours in a way that would be logically consistent with supporting development changes in the future. Therefore, programmes get credit not only for being present when a major development change occurs, but for their ongoing contribution to that change (Earl et al., 2001, pp. 1-15).

The monitoring process is centered around ongoing and systematic information collection around three key areas of the programme:

1. Changes in the behaviour of the boundary partners
2. The strategies of the programme implementing team
3. The organisational performance/functioning of the programme team.

Evaluation Planning

The third step helps the programme identify evaluation priorities and develop an evaluation plan. It outlines the evaluation issue, the ways findings will be used, the questions, the information sources, the evaluation methods, the evaluation team, the timeframe and costs (Earl et al., 2001, p. 115). Although evaluation is primarily done to meet accountability needs, OM suggests that evaluation exercises should also be used to generate new knowledge, support learning, question assumptions, plan and motivate future activities, and/or build the analytical capacity of the actors involved.

2.3 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the role and purpose of monitoring and evaluation processes in development programmes and the challenges mainstream M&E practice is facing in providing effective programme management support. The three key purposes of M&E, i.e., planning, learning and accountability, have then been investigated, exploring for each purpose, its relation with programme management, the key challenges faced in daily practice, some 'new' emerging views, and their consequences for monitoring and evaluation practice. The chapter has concluded with a short introduction to the core principles of Outcome Mapping – as an alternative approach to programme design, monitoring and evaluation, which forms the underlying framework of VECO's programme and incorporates some innovative elements into development programme planning, learning and accountability. Chapter 5 will elaborate further on OM and its relevance for the planning and monitoring process within the VECO context.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how this qualitative study was underpinned by a socially critical orientation to development (programmes) following an action research method. It highlights the characteristics of action research, the positioning of this study, and how the action research process supported the development of the PLA system. The remaining sections of the chapter describe the data generation methods – including document analysis, focus group discussions/interviews, semi-structured interviews and observation – and the data analysis approach applied. The concluding part covers the validity and ethical considerations of the research.

3.2 RESEARCH ORIENTATION

This qualitative research is underpinned by a *socially critical orientation* on development and development programmes following a (participatory) action research method.

A socially critical orientation is derived from critical theory, which refers to the nature of self conscious critique and to the need to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation (Giroux, 1983:9-10). Socially critical research *'involves strategic pedagogic action . . . aimed at emancipation from overt and covert forms of domination'* (Tripp, 1992, pp. 13-23).

As the VECO staff had – during the previous decade – routinely followed a rather control- and report-oriented M&E system (chapter 5), it was important that a broad basis of staff participate in the PLA design process, not only to involve the users and beneficiaries of the system, but also to encourage interaction between them and to create ownership of the new M&E system. In addition, as the PLA system would be linked to an Outcome Mapping programme framework – which by its nature challenges the use of conventional planning, monitoring and evaluation practices for social change processes – the research process used to develop the PLA system also aimed to empower participants to socially construct their own meanings for development, for the VECO programme and for their role as 'change facilitators' in the development process. Thus, in line with Lather (1986, pp. 257-277) this critical research was intended to be a *'form of praxis whereby the lines between research, education and development are often blurred'.*

This study was inspired by and followed the methodological principles of socially critical research (SCR) defined by Tripp (1992, pp. 13-23):

- Participation: SCR research is most effective if done by mutually supporting groups

- Self-direction: SCR research is self-directed because the emancipatory interest of the participants will inform the way they themselves work as well as inform what they aim to achieve
- Outcomes: SCR research tends to develop new practices whereby the outcomes might be incorporated into (political) action as well as into the development of academic knowledge
- Meaning: SCR research sees knowledge as socially constructed and held differently by different groups. It aims at understanding people's values and uses of their meanings rather than finding the 'truth'.
- Audience: the audience for the SCR research findings is the participants themselves.

3.2 RESEARCH METHOD

3.2.1 ACTION RESEARCH

This study took an action learning / research approach for the development of the PLA system. In line with the socially critical orientation, action research is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the world by changing it and learning how to improve it based on the effect of the changes made (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, pp. 5-6).

Action research is defined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as *'a form of self reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out'* (p. 162). Action research seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2). This approach to action research is tied to self-reflection and is in line with the ideas of 'the reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983).

Action research is grounded in the participatory world view which Reason and Bradbury (2001) believe is emerging in this historical period of time. They argue that the participatory perspective asks us to be both situated and reflexive, to be explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know which serves the democratic, practical ethos of action research (p. 3). Further, they trace action research back to the Marxist dictum (that the task is not to understand the world but to change it), the participatory research practice inspired by the educational work of Freire (1970) and the theory and practice of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

3.2.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTION RESEARCH

The underlying thoughts of the emerging participatory world view assist in providing a deeper understanding of the key features of action research as expressed in the literature.

- Action research is *participatory* research and involves *mutual sense making* and *collective action* (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 3). Although the collaborative aspect is essential, Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1888) argue that it is important to realise '*that action research of the group is mostly achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members … and … in some cases a solitary process of systemic self-reflection*' (pp. 5-6).

- Action research concerns *actual*, not abstract, practices and works towards *practical outcomes.* Producing practical knowledge directly useful to the group is the primary purpose of the knowledge quest *(*Heron, 1996, pp. 24-34).

- Action research is *critical* since it aims to help people recover and release themselves from the constraints embedded in the social media through which they interact: language (discourses), their mode of working and the social relationships of power (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). It aims to *transform both theory and practice*.

- An important aspect of action research is that it aims to *emancipate or empower* people (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 14), through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge which Freire (1970) called consciousness raising – *the process of self-awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection*.

- Action research is a social process which explores the relationships between the individual and social realms (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 596). It emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process – a learning process – whereby the process itself is as important as the outcomes (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

- Action research is characterised by different steps within different *cyclic spirals* of planning change, acting, observing and reflecting. It is difficult though to follow a rigid step-by-step process since in many cases different activities and inquiry processes will be fluid, open and responsive. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) state: '*the criteria of success is not whether the participants have followed the steps faithfully but whether they have an authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices and the situations in which they practice.'* (p. 595). It is as such not a method or a template for the practice of research but a series of principles for conducting social enquiry (McTaggart, 1996, p. 249).

- In action research, *the sense-making is embedded within the process of inquiry*, in the cycles of action and reflection, in the dialogue of the inquiry group. The real outcome of the inquiry is therefore far more than can be written in a research report. The inquiry will continue to live (if it is successful) and the knowledge will continue to be passed along in the continuing practice of participants as it is informed by the inquiry experience (Reason, 2003, pp. 208-209).

Beyond the theory, there are some pitfalls and challenges – and critiques – regarding the practice of action research. These are related to ethical considerations and the validity of the research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000, p. 591). First, for some, the nature and practice of action research lacks scientific rigor and they hold that the process of social activism and community development is confused with research. Second, action research might also be considered a romantic aspiration, over-emphasising people's willingness and capacity to participate in change processes. It can also become another vehicle for the imperialism of academic discourses over participants' own ways of describing and engaging in their experience. Third, when outside facilitators are involved, participants can become dependent upon both the outsider and their facilitation and can be left in a vulnerable position after the intervention has ended. This has implications for the sustainability of interventions. Finally, the outsider is in an ambiguous position despite claims to be value-free, neutral and politically inert.

3.2.3 POSITIONING THE STUDY

This action research study was initiated by an interest in a problem and an intention to understand the situation with a view to resolving the problem. The problem was a discrepancy between espoused organisational values concerning participatory monitoring and organisational learning and actual M&E practice, which led to some dissatisfaction among VECO and VE HO staff. Their dissatisfaction triggered internal discussions and inquiries as to how the situation could be changed. This is what Argyris (1978) refers to as the 'gap' between 'espoused theory' and 'theory in use'. This gap is often used as a point of reference for change. This is what happened here. The 'gap' was taken up by VECO and the VE HO and provided an opportunity to reframe the design of the existing monitoring system as part of the development of VECO's new programme (2008-2013), which led to the action research PLA design process comprising this study.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) argue that with regard to the nature of 'truth' in the human and social sciences, two dichotomies have commonly been used to define the differences between competing approaches and practices (pp. 575-579). First, approaches that see human and social life largely in *individualistic* terms are contrasted with those that see human and social life largely in terms of the *social realm*. Second, approaches that conceive their problems, phenomena and

methods largely in *objective* terms (external perspective) are divided from those that conceive their problems, phenomena and methods largely in *subjective* terms (internal perspective). However, the two sides of these dichotomies should not be seen as opposites but as dialectically related. This dialectical view is the underpinning orientation for research practices which are reflexive, collaborative, participatory and emancipatory – such as this action research. In this view, practitioners are likely to regard research as a process of being engaged in action, and as a process of learning that produces action and makes history. It is not a process of standing outside action and history in the role of a recorder, or above it in the role of a controller. It implies that '*the researcher understands that studying a practice is to change it, that the process of studying is 'political', and that its own standpoint is liable to change through the process of action'* (p. 576)**.**

I argue that this study is underpinned by this *dialectic view* as its purpose was to better understand the context and change the mechanisms and processes of monitoring and learning. Furthermore, it aimed to change people's views and behaviours with regard to planning and facilitating change processes, engaging with local partner organisations, embracing learning and becoming reflective practitioners.

The knowledge-constitutive interest of this research – *the reasons that frame and justify the search for knowledge through research* (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000, p. 583) – is a combination of *critical and practical reasoning***.** On one hand, the purpose of research is to change practice, the practitioner (including myself) and the practice setting (the work, the worker and the workplace). This is *critical reasoning*. On the other hand, the point of conducting action research into practice is to educate practitioners (including myself) and to inform practitioners' practical deliberations about the nature of their practice. It is not directed towards the achievement of control – which would be based on technical reasoning – but to enable actors or practitioners to understand the nature and consequences of their actions more fully.

Based on the above characteristics and intentions of the study and the fact that the PLA design process is embedded in VECO's organisational processes, I argue that this action research is closely linked to *action learning* as defined by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000):

> *Action learning is a form of participatory action research that aims to bring people together to learn from each other's experience, to clarify what the organisation is trying to achieve, to study their practice in organisational settings as a source of new understanding and improved practice, to work towards removing obstacles and to improve the organisation's efficacy and efficiency.*
>
> (p. 570)

3.2.4 DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLA SYSTEM

The objective of the study was to develop a *Planning, Learning and Accountability (PLA)* system for the VECO country programme. The outcome of this action research process was a PLA system designed to:

1. Support the *planning & management process* of VECO;
2. Facilitate *learning* in VECO and its programme;
3. Fulfil the *accountability requirements* of VECO;
4. Proactively develop measures to enhance *organisational capacities and conditions* supportive of the effective implementation of the PLA system.

This action research study was structured around seven steps that guided the design of the PLA system, as explained in detail in chapter 4:

1. Identifying the scope and purpose of the M&E process
2. Identifying the organisational spaces and rhythms
3. Defining and prioritising the information needs
4. Planning for data collection, storing and synthesis
5. Planning for critical reflection, analysis & conceptualisation
6. Planning for documenting and communicating M&E results
7. Assessing the organisational conditions and capacities required for successful implementation of the PLA system.

However, as described in section 6.1, this action research did not unfold by a rigid step-by-step process. The study was carried out in a real – action-oriented and busy – NGO in which the different activities and inquiry processes were to be embedded in the existing organisational rhythms of VECO and VE HO. Appendix 8 presents an overview of all the activities that contributed to the development of the PLA system (between April 2007 and October 2008). A more select set of activities and inquiry processes or core events – focus group interviews, focus group discussions and workshops – were crucial for the data generation and sense-making of the action research guiding the PLA design process. These events are are listed in table 8. Depending on the activity, different actors participated in the process: programme management staff, programme officers (POs), staff of VE HO and representatives of VECO's partner organisations. After each of the core events, new insights and decisions were systematised, documented and communicated, and the PLA framework was further fine-tuned with the new elements. A detailed description of the PLA design process action research is presented in section 6.1.

3.3 DATA GENERATION

3.3.1 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

This research used official documents produced by VECO and VE which can be found in the public domain, such as annual reports, as well as the internal / private domain, such as reports, minutes, internal memos and correspondence (email) (Bryman, 2004). As a VE and VECO insider, I have access to these documents. According to Bryman official documents derived from private sources are likely to be authentic and meaningful (p. 387). Table 7 gives an overview of the documents used for analysis. The codes D1, D2 and so forth will be used in the following chapters to refer to the respective documents presented in this table. How these documents were analysed and used in this study is described in section 3.4 on data analysis.

TYPE OF DOCUMENT	DOCUMENTS USED FOR THIS RESEARCH	CODE
Annual monitoring reports for the different donors of VECO	1. Annual report 2006 2. Annual report 2007	D1 D2
Official proposal and planning documents	1. Proposal document VECO programme 2008 - 2013 2. VE strategic document 2008-2013	D3 D4
ASAP (an acronym used for a memo-style type of document used as an internal communication tool at VE)	1. ASAP 137: Planning, learning & accountability tool 2. ASAP 141: OM as general programme framework 3. ASAP 150: Organisational learning in VE strategy 2008-2013	D5 D6 D7
Reports of training, workshops, consultancies and other programme activities	1. Report of the OM training VE HO (January 2007, Belgium) 2. Report of the global PLA workshop (March 2008, Belgium) 3. Proposal document of a PLA consultancy (September 2007)	D8 D9 D10
Minutes of meetings at VECO, with partners and at the VE HO level	1. Minutes of Executive meeting (2007 and 2008) 2. Minutes of PLA meeting at VE HO (December 2007) 3. Minutes of OM meetings VE HO (September 2007)	D11 D12 D13
Email communications within VE and VECO	1. Email communication with colleagues from VE/VECO 2. Email communication at the PLA forum (a virtual community of practice within VE)	D14 D15

Table 7: Documents used for document analysis

3.3.2 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS

A focus group is a group of people who share a similar background and experience and who participate in a group interview or discussion about issues that affect them (Patton, 1990, p. 173; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 388). In focus groups, there is an emphasis on questions related to a fairly tightly defined topic and the accent is upon interaction within the group and the

joint construction of meaning (Bryman, 2004, p. 346). The focus groups were the core events in this action research and a key activity for each of the seven steps of the PLA design process.

For the purposes of this study, I distinguished and used two types of focus groups:

- *Focus group interviews*, which are well structured and prepared interviews during which a specific set of questions is covered within a given time span (average two hours) and in a specific group (Patton, 1990, p. 173; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 388).
  Examples: focus group interviews were used for the identification of the purpose and scope of the PLA system, for the identification of organisational spaces, for defining the learning needs of VECO Indonesia and for the assessment of the organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system.

- *Focus group discussions*, *which* are group sessions whereby a group of people discuss more open-ended questions and issues in a less structured way. A variety of group methods (mapping, categorising, brainstorming, group discussions and so forth) were used. The latter are, according to Kitzinger (1994), suitable to explore participants' views and experiences on specific issues and to emphasise group interaction (pp. 121-130). This was important for the PLA design process as both the individual and group reflections were also aimed to stimulate common understanding and build ownership of the future monitoring and learning process. For example, focus group discussions were used for the discussion and identification of the PLA components and for the discussion and negotiation of outcome challenges, progress markers and strategy maps (section 5.5).

The focus groups were organised specifically for the development of the PLA system and were, where possible, integrated – for practical (time and logistical) reasons – into the existing meetings and workshops of VECO such as the bi-annual planning and learning week of VECO, programme planning meetings, management team meetings and national partner meetings/workshops. Table 8 presents the different focus group interviews and focus group discussions (F1, F2 and so forth) carried out during the PLA design process. In addition, VECO organised some specific PLA workshops and meetings (W1, W2 and so forth), which are also included in table 8 as they were also crucial events for data generation and sense-making in the PLA design process.

Three important actors participated in both types of focus group: the *VECO-Indonesia management team*, *VECO programme officers*, and VECO *partner organisations*. These actors had a crucial stake in the PLA design process as they are directly involved in the implementation of the PLA and directly affected by the M&E results. Most of the focus groups were made up of natural and 'pre-existing' groups, such as VECO staff members or partner organisation staff, which, according to Bryman (2004) is an advantage, as it will lead to more natural discussions (pp. 353-354).

Ideally, there should have been a focus group with the *programme staff of VE HO* and the *staff of the donor organisations* to identify M&E needs and to discuss the use of M&E results in their respective spheres. As the VE HO and donor staff are based in Europe, it was not practical to organise focus groups with these actors. However, the global PLA workshop (March 2008) provided valuable input from VE HO staff for the study and the PLA design process. In addition, quite a few informal conversations (face to face and by phone) took place with VE HO staff during the period of this study.

The role of the focus groups and workshops as data generation methods for this study and how these events contributed to the PLA design process are described in section 3.4 on data analysis. Table 8 indicates the link between the events and the respective steps of the PLA design process.

DATE	EVENT	TIME	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS
31/07/2007	Focus group interview (F1)	2.5 hrs	To discuss and identify the purpose, use and the scope of the new PLA system ➢ **STEP 1**	All VECO staff (20) (participants were divided into three groups for the focus group interview)
19/09/2007	Focus group discussion (F2)	2.5 hrs	To discuss and identify the main components and general information needs of the PLA system ➢ **STEP 1**	VECO management staff & programme officers (12)
23-24/10/2007	Programme intentional design workshop (W1)	3 days	Internal presentation of the new programme + discussion and further formulation of the progress markers and strategy maps (including the respective information needs) ➢ **STEP 3**	VECO management staff, programme officers and admin staff (15)
	Including a focus group discussion with each type of boundary partner (F3)	3x3hrs	To discuss & negotiate the respective outcome challenges, progress markers and strategy maps and M&E timeframes ➢ **STEPS 2, 3 and 4**	
20-22/11/2007	National Partner Meeting (W2)	3 days	To clarify and discuss the new VECO programme and its objectives ➢ **STEP 1**	Representatives of every boundary partners of VECO (30)

2/04/2008	Focus group interview (F4)	3 hrs	To discuss and define the organisational learning needs of VECO in view of the new programme ➢ **STEPS 3 and 4**	VECO management & programme officers (8)
28-30/04/2008	PLA design workshop (W3)	3 days	To discuss & identify the main M&E events (spaces), timeframes, data collection, M&E calender & partner reporting system ➢ **STEPS 2, 3 and 4**	VECO management & programme officers (8)
	Including a focus group interview (F5)	2.5 hrs	Identification of the main PLA events of VECO ➢ **STEP 2**	
22/09/2008	PLA design meeting (W4)	1 day	Clarification & discussion of sense-making, documentation & communication, and group assessment of M&E capacities ➢ **STEPS 5 and 6**	VECO management staff, VECO programme staff, VECO publication officer (10)
	Including a focus group interview (F6)	3 hrs	Group assessment of the organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system ➢ **STEP 7**	

Table 8: Overview of focus groups and workshops for the PLA design process

3.3.3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

For additional data generation, I interviewed some of the people who participated in the PLA design process. As this study had a clear focus and the emphasis of the inquiry through interviews was on how the participant framed and understand the issues, patterns and events related to the research topic (Bryman, 2004:323), I used *face to face, semi-structured interviews* – which are commonly used for qualitative research (Bryman, 2004, pp. 319-320).

Since I work for VECO, I could easily identify potential participants with sufficient experience and knowledge to provide relevant information in response to the questions. The following people were interviewed in the last phase of the study (between August and October 2008): the VECO country representative, the VECO programme manager, one additional member of the VECO management team and two VECO programme officers. In the following chapters, quotes from the respondents are referred to as I1, I2, I3, I4 and I5 (for reasons of confidentiality, the sequence

of the numbers I1, I2, and do forth does not correspond with the sequence of the VECO staff mentioned in the previous sentence)

The interview questions were pre-formulated, structured in a specific order and presented to the participants in a similar sequence (Schurink, 1998). As a result, the data were obtained relatively systematically, which facilitated the analysis of the data. The interview questions focused on (appendix 2):

- The previous M&E system of VECO
- The PLA design process
- The necessary organisational conditions and capacities to successfully implement the PLA system
- Initial reflections on the relevance of the PLA system.

Before an interview began, I clarified the purpose of the interview, asked permission to record the interview and promised confidentiality of information. Shortly after each interview, I made a written reconstruction of the interview from the recording and noted the core elements of the respondent's answers. In the next stage all the interview data were categorised (see table 9) and labelled with I1, I2 and so forth to be able to track their source. Which specific data were generated through the semi-structured interviews and how the data were used in the study are described in section 3.4 on data analysis.

3.3.4 OBSERVATION

As a member of the VECO staff, I was able to include observation as an important data collection method for this research. Wamahiu and Karugu (1995) describe some advantages with regard to observation for qualitative research (p. 114), which also apply to this study, i.e., that it enabled me to obtain in-depth data, to record behavior as it occured and not as people felt it ought to be, and the accuracy or validity of interview statements could be cross-checked.

According to the dimensions of observation presented by Patton (2002, p. 277), my role was one of *participant-as-observer*, defined as having a strong membership identity and an insider's perspective (as opposed to complete participant, observer-as-participant or complete observer). The duration of the observations was long-term (two years) and consisted of multiple observations rather than brief and single observations.

I used a notebook to capture my observations. The notebook 'travelled' with me to any potentially interesting meeting, workshop or research related activity. My observations focused on the specific people and groups involved in the development of the PLA system and the contexts in which they operate as well as the different dimensions of the PLA system itself. During steps one to six of the development process, the focus of observation was broad and

rather informal whereas during step seven – assessment of the organisational conditions and capacities – the observations were more focused and specific or "narrow" (Patton, 2002, p. 277). The specific data observed and how observation was used to triangulate the information derived from interviews and document analysis are described in section 3.4 on data analysis.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

3.4.1 DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

Data analysis and interpretation involve integrating the data from the various sources through triangulation, looking for patterns and making sense of them in line with the research goal (Patton, 1990, pp. 347-348). Bryman (2004) argues that qualitative data analysis strategies are *iterative* – that is, there is a repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data (p. 399). This means that analysis starts after some of the data have been collected and the implications of that analysis then shape the next steps in the data collection process. This was the case in this study. Part of the analysis and sense-making happened during the focus groups and workshops as well as during the synthesis and the feedback process. The different steps of the PLA design process were influenced by the outcomes of the previous steps. In addition, I also engaged in personal reflection and analysis of the data during and at the end of the research period.

Patton (1990) describes an *inductive analysis approach* as a process whereby patterns, themes and categories of analysis emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis. In contrast, a *deductive analysis approach* involves the formulation of a hypothesis and respective categories for data analysis to test the viability of that hypothesis (p. 411).
At the beginning of the study (April 2007), the research was mainly guided by the research objectives stated in chapter 1 and it was assumed that through the action research process, general conclusions, connections and relationships would become apparent (inductive approach). Additionally, I used a design framework – developed at the onset of the study and adjusted during the action research process (see chapter 5) – to inform and structure the action research development of the PLA system. Indeed, the focus groups and workshops were aimed to facilitate data generation and sense-making on specific steps (categories) of this design framework, which leans more towards a deductive approach (although not to validate a hypothesis).

Towards the end of the study (July 2008), I developed five categories of analysis (A, B, C, D and E, as shown in table 9) which assisted me in constructing a more structured data analysis and informed the compilation of the interview questions. For the data related to categories B and C, I used a rather deductive approach, following the pre-determined categories defined by the seven

design steps. Sections 5.6 and 5.7 describe the results of this data analysis process. For the data related to categories A, D and E, I used an inductive (coding) approach to define subcategories and analyse the data. I carefully read all the generated data and considered the multiple meanings in the texts. I identified meaningful text segments or units of meaning and allowed subcategories to emerge to which I could assign the text segment (David, 2003, pp. 4-5). Sections 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.1 and 6.2 represent the results of this inductive data analysis process.

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES	DATA COLLECTION METHODS
A. M&E practice of the previous VECO programme	A.1 What were the main characteristics of the previous M&E practice? A.2 What were the strengths and weaknesses of the previous M&E practice?	Observation Focus group interview (F1) All semi-structured interviews Document analysis
B. Development of the PLA system	B.1 Scope and purpose of the PLA system B.2 Organisational spaces & rhythms B.3 General & specific information needs B.4 Data collection, storage and synthesis B.5 Critical reflection, analysis & conceptualisation B.6 Documentation and communication of M&E results	Observation All focus groups and workshops All semi-structured interviews
C. Organisational conditions and capacities for successful implementation of the PLA system	C.1 Creating motives C.2 Creating means C.3 Creating opportunities	Observation Focus group interview (F6) All semi-structured interviews Document analysis
D. Reflections on the PLA design process		Observation All semi-structured interviews
E. Reflections on the PLA system	E.1 Relevance for planning E.2 relevance for learning E.3 relevance for accountability	Observation All semi-structured interviews Workshops

Table 9: Overview of the categories of analysis and respective data collection methods

3.4.2 USE OF DATA AND TRIANGULATION

Document analysis

A preliminary document analysis was carried out at the start of the study primarily to understand the previous M&E system (category A) as well as to prepare for the initial steps of the PLA design process (category B). A second document analysis process – on both the initial and new

documents – was carried out at the end of the study. The different documents mentioned in table 7 were useful in different ways. They provided insights into the characteristics of the previous M&E system and triangulated the strengths and weaknesses articulated by the interview and focus group respondents. They were also useful to understand how the concept M&E and PLA had developed over time within the organisation as well as how the intentions to create an alternative system gradually evolved from initial ideas to more concrete actions and formal decisions (as described in sections 5.1 and 5.2). The documents were carefully read and analysed, or 'screened', according to the categories of analysis presented in table 9. Depending on the category, I took a macro view, by looking for overall patterns (e.g. in annual monitoring reports of previous years), or a micro view, by identifying specific information in the documents. In chapter 5, I present quotes from some documents to illustrate the issues at hand. One interesting observation was that although I had read all the documents before the document analysis, the conscious assessment process generated richer information than I initially assumed it would.

Focus groups

The focus group interviews, focus group discussions and workshops presented in table 8 can be seen as the backbone of the PLA design process, i.e., they were the main data-generation and sense-making events. They generated the data for category B, and one focus group interview (F6) was specifically organised to collect and analyse the data for category D. In practice, each focus group or workshop was focused on a specific aspect of the PLA system linked to one or more of the seven design steps (see table 8 and chapter 4). The *focus group interviews* were used to generate even more finely focused data regarding the purpose of the PLA system, the specific learning needs of VECO or the assessment of the organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system. For each of these sessions, I developed specific interview questions, facilitated the discussion, and then summarised and verified the results at the end the session. Meanwhile, I used *focus group discussions* for those steps of the PLA design process which were less straightforward and required a fair amount of debate – often in more than one event – such as the identification of information needs, the formulation of progress markers and strategy maps, and the identification of data collection methods. The *PLA workshops* were bigger events – often more than one day – consisting of a mix of activities and processes such as presentations, brainstorming sessions, debate and decision-making.

After each of these focus group events, I took the analysis one step further. By synthesising the outcomes and linking the different steps, I identified discrepancies, overlapping issues, issues for further investigation, or new opportunities. These aspects were communicated to the participants through workshop reports, and at the start of each session I presented a summary of the progress made so far. The data derived from the focus groups and workshop were firsthand data obtained directly from the participants, which were then triangulated with my personal

observations, and at a later stage, with the data generated through the semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in the last stage of the study as it intended to include a reflection/assessment on the PLA design process (category D) as well as on the relevance of the PLA system (category E). The interview questions (appendix 2), informed by the five categories of analysis, were open-ended and stimulated in-depth conversations with the respondents. Although it was clear that this was a research exercise, participants were rather relaxed and used the opportunity to express their personal opinions and reflections on the PLA design process and its results to date. I experienced the interviews as powerful moments during which the respondents and I improved our understanding of the PLA process and the challenges for implementation. The semi-structured interviews turned out to be very useful for further analysis for each of the categories of table 9 and for the triangulation of all the previously generated data.

Observation

Personal observation happened throughout the entire study on a continuous basis and generated data for all the categories in table 9. The observations, which I wrote down in a notebook, ranged from overall impressions to detailed facts. As I was a 'participant observer' in the PLA design process, some of my observations directly informed the action research process, especially during the synthesis and analysis process after the focus groups. However, it was only until I developed the five categories of analysis (table 9) that I referred back to my notes and used them for further analysis. As I had daily contact with most of the participants of the action research for a period of two years and understand the organisational context and work processes, my observations were particularly useful to cross-check the accuracy and validity of the interview statements.

3.5 VALIDITY & ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.5.1 QUALITY ASSURANCE

Data generation, analysis and use for the PLA design process was continuously shared and negotiated with VECO's management and programme staff to ensure face validity (Lather, 1986, pp. 257-277). As I aimed to represent as closely as possible the experiences, perceptions and opinions of the participants (Ely et al., 1991, pp. 93-94), the results of the data collection and analysis were made available to the participants through official reports, powerpoint presentations, personal discussions and papers written in the course of the research. Direct and

indirect feedback and revision – peer debriefing (Patton, 1990, p. 67) – were encouraged. I gathered, reconciled and analysed data from different sources using a variety of data collection methods. Such triangulation enhances the validity of one's research (Patton, 1990, p. 67). As suggested by Bassey (1995, p. 16), I kept systematic records of the research interventions (meetings, workshops, reflections, papers, handouts, drawings, pictures, etc.) and I made them accessible to all VECO staff via a shared folder on the VECO computer network.

Due to my role within VECO, I was both a participant-observer as well as the facilitator of the action research process. Throughout the data gathering, analysis and interpretation I critically reflected on my assumptions (Bassey, 1995, p. 16) and on my role as lead-facilitator of this process. I also negotiated these assumptions with some of the other actors involved. This is referred to as self-reflexivity by Lather (1986, pp. 257-277). In particular, critical comments and inquiries from the programme manager, the VECO country representative and some representatives of VE HO 'forced' me to regularly put on my reflexive hat.

3.5.2 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The principle of informed consent (Bryman, 2004, p. 511) requires that, even when people agree to participate in research, they should be fully informed about the research process. This action research process was part of the day to day work activity of VECO. The research goals – developing a PLA system - and the process were clearly communicated and negotiated during official meetings and in the PLA design-related documents. It was also known to all VECO staff that I was carrying out a study. I committed myself to providing as much information as possible unless I felt that informing colleagues / participants could prejudice the outcome of a research activity. As Bryman (2004) pointed out, sometimes it is advisable not to give the full details of the research for fear of contaminating people's answers to questions (p. 512).

As this was a participatory action research process, with backup from the VECO management, participant readiness and commitment to participate in and contribute to the development process was crucial. Throughout the action research I observed – and was amazed - by the motivation, participation and trust of the people involved. All the core events were attended by a majority of the invited people. VECO and VE HO management were supportive of the process and created the necessary conditions for the PLA design process to unfold. Lastly, the continuous feedback and the overall attitude of 'let's make it work' of the participants showed their high level of readiness and commitment to the process.

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the research methodology of the study. It began with an explanation of how this qualitative study is underpinned by a socially critical orientation to development (programmes) following an action research method. It has spelled out the characteristics of action research, clarifies the ontological and epistimological positioning of this study, and explained how the action research process supported the development of the PLA system. Furthermore, this chapter has given an in-depth description of the data generation methods used – including document analysis, focus group discussions and interviews, semi-structured interviews and observation – and a presentation of the applied data analysis approach. The concluding part of the chapter has covered the validity and ethical considerations of the research.

CHAPTER 4 PLA DESIGN FRAMEWORK

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the main conceptual framework guiding the PLA design process. It is based on existing M&E approaches and design models but adjusted to fit the specific context of VECO and VE HO. Therefore, the guiding framework presented in this chapter can be partly seen as an outcome of the action research. The scope of this action research is limited to the *monitoring* process of the PLA system and does not include the evaluation part as some crucial elements to develop the evaluation framework were unknown during the period of the action research. I will use the term 'M&E' to refer to aspects which are relevant for both monitoring and evaluation; otherwise I will use the term 'monitoring' (see also section 1.1.2).

4.2 GUIDING APPROACHES AND FRAMEWORKS

Developing a planning, learning and accountability (PLA) system involves the design of a conceptual and practical framework for the monitoring of the programme, taking into account the intention of the PLA system and following the principles of the applied planning approach, i.e., Outcome Mapping.

Although the intentional design part of the Outcome Mapping (OM) methodology (introduced in section 2.2.2) is well described and documented in the OM manual (Earle et al,, 2001), the M&E part is less developed and is, in my opinion, not sufficient on its own to guide the design of an adequate M&E plan. However, as OM is based on the principles of *Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation* (PM&E) and *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (UF-E), I drew from the theory and practice of these M&E approaches to draft a a more complete design framework process for the PLA system.

PM&E has emerged as a response to the limitations of conventional M&E approaches/models, to make M&E more responsive and appropriate to people's needs and real life contexts. PM&E recognises the need to incorporate beneficiaries and project participants into the M&E process. The emphasis moves away from externally-controlled, data-seeking programmes towards the recognition of locally relevant processes for gathering, analysing and using information (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998, p. 16). PM&E is based on the ideas of 'fourth generation evaluation'[8] (Guba &

[8] In fourth generation evaluation, the focus of an evaluation is not on a set of conclusions, recommendations, or value judgments, but rather on an agenda for the negotiation of concerns and issues. This approach is different from the earlier three generations of evaluation which dealt with measurement, description, and judgment respectively (Guba & Lincoln, 1989 in Estrella & Gaventa: 1998, p. 15).

Lincoln, 1989 in Estrella & Gaventa: 1998, p. 15) which describes evaluation as a process of negotiation that incorporates various stakeholders into its design, implementation and interpretation. Through negotiation, fourth generation evaluation helps to identify a course of action for stakeholders. Thus, the key principles of PM&E are *participation, learning, negotiation and flexibility* (Estrella & Gaventa, pp. 17-27). Table 10 shows the key differences between conventional and participatory M&E.

	Conventional	**Participatory**
Who	External experts	Community members, project staff, facilitator
What	Predetermined indicators of success; principally cost and production outputs	People identify their own indicators of success, which may include production outputs
How	Focus on 'scientific objectivity'; distancing of evaluators from other participants; uniform, complex procedures; delayed, limited access to results	Self-evaluation; simple methods adapted to local culture; open, immediate sharing of results through local involvement in evaluation processes
When	Usually upon completion of project / programme; sometimes also mid-term	More frequent, small -scale evaluations
Why	Accountability, usually summative to determine if funding can continue	To empower local people to initiate, control and take corrective action

Table 10: Differences between conventional and participatory evaluation
(Narayan-Parker:1993, p. 12)

UF-E (Patton, 1997) begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use. Use is concerned with how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience the evaluation process. Therefore the focus in UF-E is on *intended use by intended users* (Patton, 1997, p. 20). Often, decision makers, programme officers and evaluators devote little or no attention to intended uses prior to data collection. In contrast, UF-E works with intended users to determine priority uses early in the evaluation process. The agreed-upon, intended uses then become the basis for subsequent design decisions (Patton, 1997, p. 64).

4.3 DESIGN FRAMEWORK

To practically guide the development process of the PLA system I initially started with IFAD's proposed M&E design steps (IFAD, 2002,chapter 4, p. 8): establishing purpose and scope, identification of performance questions and information needs, planning information gathering, planning critical reflection processes, planning for quality communication and reporting, and planning for necessary conditions and capacities. During the action research this six-step model

was adapted to fit the context of VECO, and new insights – which emerged during the action research – were integrated together with elements from other existing monitoring and learning frameworks (Senge, 1994; Britton, 2005; Earl et al., 2001; Estrella & Gaventa, 1997; Guijt, 1998; Guijt, 2008, Horton et al., 2003; Patton, 1997, p. 380).

One particular aspect which influenced the model is a change in the view of monitoring from '*meeting information needs that track the planned activities …*[as proposed in a conventional M&E framework, including IFAD's six steps] *… to meeting information needs based on reflective spaces and learning purposes that sustain the relationships needed for concerted action*' (Guijt, 2008, p. 265). This view argues that data per se are not the starting point of monitoring; rather, monitoring is viewed as a communication process that creates and feeds information flows based on both needs and reflective spaces. Information flows need to be mapped out based on who needs to know what in order to act (Guijt, 2008, p. 263). By doing so, one avoids accumulating a generic body of 'desired information' that is not explicitly attached to some kind of sense-making process, which makes the information less likely to be useful. This idea resulted in building an additional step into the model which focuses on the main sense-making spaces for respectively planning, learning and accountability in VECO.

Accordingly, I developed a seven-step model for the design of the PLA framework (see figure 12). The steps represent the core aspects of the M&E framework – and parts of the M&E process itself – and follow each other in a logical order. However, while the flowchart depicts a seemingly straightforward, one-step-at-a-time logic to the development process, in reality the process is seldom linear, nor simple (Patton, 1997, p. 380) and unfolds through different, often simultaneous, inquiry and reflection processes. The seven steps will be explained in more depth in the following sections.

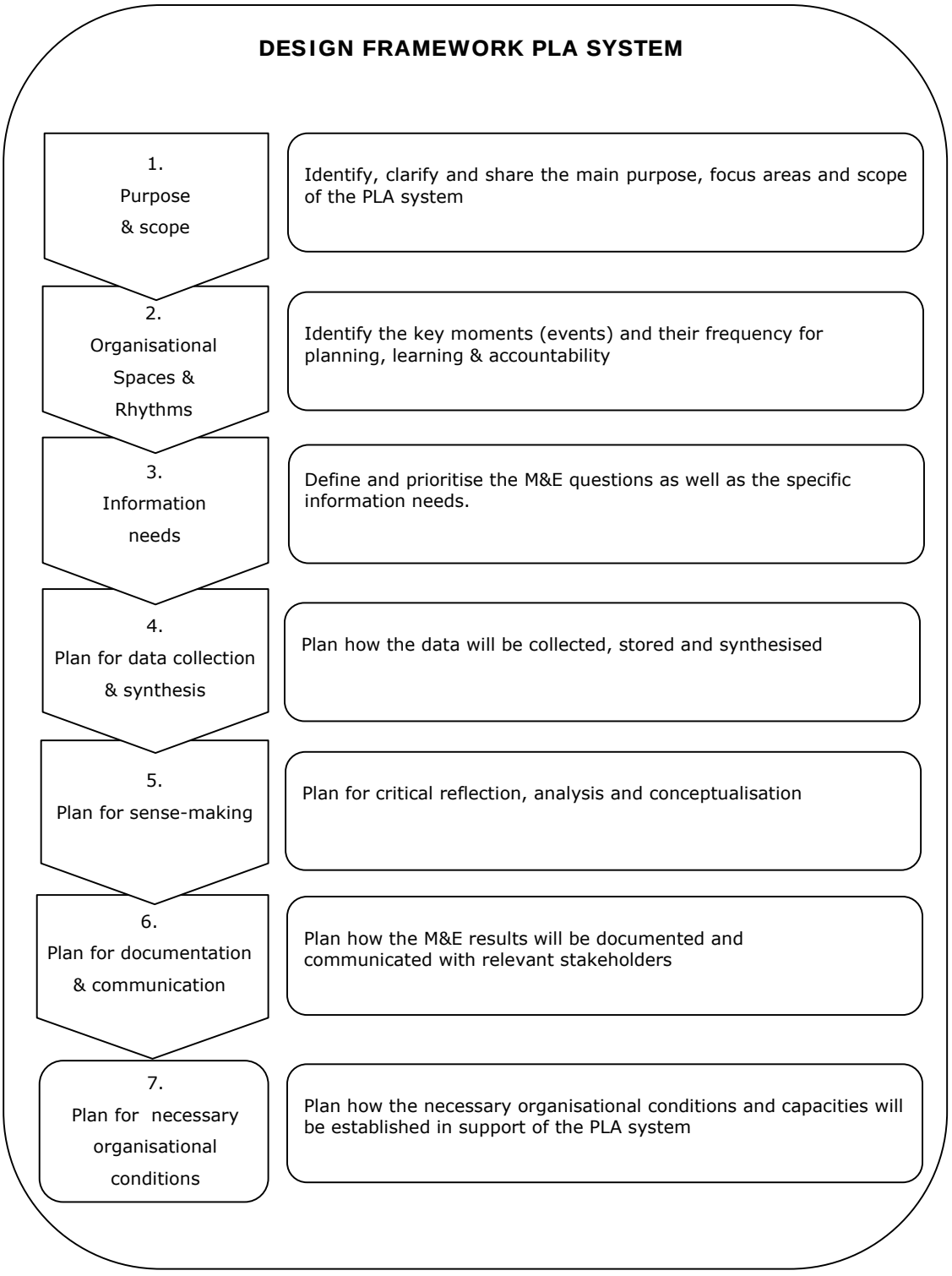

Figure 12: Seven-step design framework for the PLA system of VECO

4.3.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Starting the design of a monitoring framework is the most critical stage of the process. The effectiveness of the PLA system will depend heavily on how well this stage is discussed and prepared for. Different authors highlight the following key aspects to be addressed and negotiated with the participants before deciding on the details of the monitoring process, as they influence features of the M&E process such as the relevant time frames, linkages to decision-making, the degree of participation of various stakeholders and the depth of analysis and rigour (Earl et al., 2001, pp. 75-124; Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 28; Guijt, 1998, pp. 22-26; Guijt, 2008, p. 276; Horton et al., 2003, pp. 83-106; Patton, 1997, pp. 376-381).

Purpose & scope of the monitoring

The people coordinating the development of the M&E process should agree on its main purpose. What is the monitoring system going to be used for? Section 2.1 provides an overview of different M&E purposes. Estrella & Gaventa (1998) identify five main purposes for which participatory M&E is used (see table 2), while Patton (1997) suggests the incorporation of product and process uses of M&E efforts (see table 1) and Guijt (2008) presents nine learning purpose for monitoring (figure 3).

Furthermore, people should reflect on and confirm the focus areas and scope (main components) of the monitoring process. Besides the normal programmatic aspects, managers might incorporate additional elements such as specific learning needs, financial aspects, partnership issues, gender or HRM issues. Horton et al. (2003) concluded that many M&E teams have difficulty defining clear boundaries and units of analysis (pp. 95-96). However, spelling out the focus and scope will greatly assist in gathering the right information to adequately answer the relevant monitoring questions.

Intended users and use

It is important to define who will be the intended users of the M&E process and results (Patton, 1997, pp. 376-381) and for them to decide on the intended uses of the M&E as well as to determine the focus and scope of the monitoring. *Participatory* M&E advocates the involvement of end users of information in designing the M&E system and in collecting, analysing, compiling and sharing the information. In practice, however, full participation is impossible, impractical, or perhaps even not desirable for some stages of the M&E process (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998, p. 28). Therefore, it is essential to be clear about which (potential) participating groups should or should not be involved in which parts of the monitoring process. Guijt (1998) argues that the question of who participates should be constantly reassessed during the process (p. 24).

Defining M&E principles

Developing the M&E plan is a complex and potentially sensitive process. Therefore, Horton (2003) recommends the identification of some basic principles which can inspire the M&E practice and assist in resolving differences in opinion which may arise (p. 89). The literature provides some guidelines with regard to principles for M&E. Most authors (including Earl et al., 2001; Estrella & Gaventa, 1998, pp. 14-27; Guijt, 1998, pp. 22-26; Horton, 2003, pp. 89-92; IFAD, 2002; Patton, 1997) emphasise core principles for (P)M&E such as utility, participation, learning (by doing), negotiation and flexibility.

4.3.2 ORGANISATIONAL SPACES AND RHYTHMS

> *We should ensure that M&E becomes a ribbon of rhythm drawn through organisational learning processes. Such a rhythm should be natural to the culture, systems, procedures, structures and processes of organisations.*
>
> (Dlamini, 2006, p. 31)

If M&E is to foster and facilitate organisational learning in a programme – as intended by VECO – its process must be embedded in those organisational spaces and rhythms which are central to sharing, debate, learning and decision-making (Guijt & Ortiz, 2007). This implies that M&E processes should be built into regular organisational processes so as to become integral to the thinking and doing of the organisation and to create spaces that allow people to express themselves and to shape their experiences in ways that can be shared (Dlamini, 2006, pp. 24-25). Reeler (2001) describes *organisational spaces* as formal and informal meetings and events which bring organisations and programmes to life (p. 1). *Rhythms* are patterns in time, the regular activities or processes which provide a structure-in-time, through which an organisation can direct, mobilise and regulate its efforts, i.e., regular weekly, monthly, annual activities that characterise the tempo of organisational functioning. Without an appropriate rhythm, an organisation becomes chaotic and staff become insecure, tired and stressed. Guijt (2008) concludes that defining the reflective spaces and rhythms in fact spells out the organisation's governance structure (p. 263).

Reeler (2008) further relates the concept of 'rhythms' to the 'learning rhythms' of an organisation.

> *Investing frequent and regular time to reflect on experience and to rethink work and purpose can do wonders for the health of an organisation and its practice, not only at a visible, functional level but also for sustaining meaning and the soul of the organisation. Rhythm is essential to our biology, to our health, as true for organisations or social beings as it is for individual beings. So, why do we so easily see regular learning processes or rhythms as a luxury, or why we so successfully avoid them despite our rhetoric*.

In practice, defining the spaces and rhythms is to sit down with the people involved and ask them to list when they interact and share information and make sense of what is happening. These

moments are then listed and categorised followed by a mapping out of the rhythm, i.e., how often and when these spaces occur and what type of sense-making – sharing, debate, learning, decision-making – occurs (Guijt & Ortiz, 2007).

One should also pay attention to the fact that much valuable exchange and reflection at both strategic and operational levels occur continually through *informal interactions* among partners (Guijt, 2008, pp. 262-263). As these processes are critical sources of information and sense-making, there should be a deliberate incorporation of these informal spaces into the monitoring design together with a linking of the informal sphere with formal processes (Guijt, 2008. p. 280).

4.3.3 INFORMATION NEEDS

The key task in this step is to clearly define and prioritise the information needs for the monitoring system. Patton (1997) argues that this entails a clarification of the key questions and the information needed for the M&E process (pp. 376-381).

Before identifying the specific questions the programme wants answered, it is advisable to discuss and decide upon the *general information needs* of the programme as a whole (IFAD, 2002, chapter 4, p. 11). M&E cannot be divorced from the planning or design stages of a programme. Most programmes draft a logic model in the design stage, i.e., a simplified chain of relationships that portray the logic and assumptions underlying a programme or intervention and how it intends to achieve its expected results (Horton et al., 2003, p. 94). The required information needs in this step should be derived from and connected to this logic model. Terms may vary depending on the logic model used by the programme, but most programmes have some hierarchy of objectives and results, and with it, a set of indicators. In the case of VECO, this logic model is a combination of Outcome Mapping and the LFA (section 2.1.1). In addition to the programme framework, the programme might also include additional M&E components or focus areas (as defined in step one). The information needs linked to these components go further than conventional programmatic aspects such as objectives, results and indicators. For example, if the organisation wants to include specific organisational learning needs, it needs to reflect on the specific questions to be answered or the issues to be addressed and what specific data need to be systematically collected?

For each general information need, it is necessary to define what exactly the user wants to know. In other words, *what are the M&E questions*? Developing M&E questions helps to focus the information seeking and information analysis process on what is necessary in order to know if the programme is performing as planned or, if not, why not. Once the M&E questions are defined, it is easier to decide what specific information needs to be collected rather than to simply focus on 'what is nice to track' (IFAD, chapter 5, p. 15). For most development programmes, clear M&E

questions do not exist. However, for each programme, there are certain questions which need to be answered to know the extent to which one is achieving the objectives and to explain success or failure (IFAD, chapter 5, p. 17). The development of good questions requires the programme to be very clear about what it aims to achieve. It will also help stakeholders together to further refine the progamme design (IFAD, chapter 4, p. 12). Guijt (2008) argues that focusing on questions creates the mental space needed to identify different data generation and learning approaches to feed the information needs and fuel debate at different levels (p. 265).

M&E questions require the collection of *specific information* to answer those questions. They spell out the level of detail and the exact type of information needed and indicate whether the collected information is indeed going to be useful for the programme, i.e., whether it will answer the M&E questions. Practical questions which trigger further discussion about specific information needs are:

- Does the information to be collected really provide answers to the M&E questions?
- What will be the nature of the data and information collected? What will they really look like?
- What are we going to do with the collected information?
- Is the information available and how easily can it found and recorded?

In conventional M&E systems, specific information needs are embedded in the use of *indicators* and more specifically, the use of '*SMART*' indicators, i.e. indicators which are Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic and Time-framed. This often results in a collection of quantitative data. However, promoters of participatory M&E practices argue that defining indicators is not so straightforward since they need to be '*suggested, adapted, negotiated and approved by all the different stakeholders*' (Abbot and Guijt, 1997,, quoted in Estrella & Gaventa, 1998, p. 29). Outcome Mapping anticipates this by making use of another type of indicator, *progress markers* (see table 13), i.e., a set of desired changes which indicate progression towards the ideal outcome. Progress markers articulate the complexity of the change process, and can be adjusted during the implementation of a programme to ensure their continued relevance. The specific information needs linked to progress markers result mainly in the collection of qualitative data.

Baseline data

As monitoring is basically the repeated assessment of the same situation over a period of time, it is very common to define the initial situation or 'baseline' against which the situation at later points in time can be compared (often before any intervention has taken place). There are mixed feelings about, and different approaches to the use of baseline information. On one hand, from a scientific and positivistic perspective, it is not possible to make adequate comparisons if there is no clear baseline information. On the other hand – as explained in chapter 2 – in social change

programmes, there is often a high level of uncertainty about the process and final orientation of a project. Thus, it might be difficult to decide early on in a project exactly what kind of information is needed to determine the baseline. Furthermore, as sustainable agriculture is far more than technical change and includes social, economic, environmental and other dimensions, the scope of a baseline study can potentially become enormous, costly and time-consuming (Guijt, 1998, p. 43). Alternative approaches to baseline studies which I have come across in my professional work include taking the information collected during the first monitoring cycle (e.g. year 1) as the baseline data (e.g. if a baseline study is not budgeted for), or making use of a 'rolling baseline' where data about certain aspects of the programme are collected throughout the lifespan of the programme. Some programmes decide not to collect baseline data at the beginning but rather make use of retrospective impact studies at the end of a project cycle.

Timeframes and frequency

Another important aspect of this step is to discuss and decide upon the timeframes and frequency of data collection. When should information be collected? What are the key moments to collect information? How often should information be collected during the lifespan of the programme?

There are two major questions which influence the timeframes and frequency of data collection:

1. When do the users need the information? This depends on the intended use of the monitoring results (e.g. to adjust annual planning, for budget control, to make strategic decisions, to compile a donor report, etc.).
2. When is the collection of information (indicators/progress markers/variables) most likely to reveal significant change? This depends on the likely rate of change for the different indicators. For example, biophysical changes might be measured every month while institutional changes could be measured every six months (Guijt, 1998, pp. 23-24).

Decisions about the timeframes for and frequency of data collection will also give an indication of whether the collection of information and its use are to form part of an *ongoing monitoring process* or part of an *evaluation process* and how these processes are to be linked to and fed into each other. This does not exclude the possibility that for more in-depth and specific evaluation exercises, other new information needs can be defined during the implementation of a project.

Prioritising information needs

As explained in step two, data as such are not the starting point for monitoring. In my experience, many projects and programmes collect far more information than is actually used. Reports and M&E documents – often compiled by a few people who have employed sophisticated and laborious data collection processes – are seldom used for analysis, re-planning or improved action. As the cartoon (figure 13) shows, collecting data is one thing, but its actual use is

another. To move from 'nice-to-know' information towards 'must-know' information requires a prioritisation of information needs. Therefore, it is recommended that during this step one refer back to the outcomes of step one – the 'intended uses' and step two – the 'organisational reflective spaces' in order to decide upon the importance and relevance of specific information needs by verifying whether they are actually needed and will be useful. This includes spelling out for what, when and by whom the information is going to be used.

Figure 13: 'Nice-to-know' or 'must-know' information?

The discussion and debate generated during this step, especially if the different programme stakeholders participate, contribute towards developing a common understanding about and creating ownership of the programme. As many programme models – including Outcome Mapping – are often technical documents, not easily accessible for everyone, discussing them together as stakeholders has been shown to help clarify programme objectives, make M&E questions and information needs more accessible, and ensure that they are understood and agreed upon by everyone (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998, pp. 14-27; Guijt, 1998, pp. 23-24).

4.3.4 PLAN FOR DATA COLLECTION & SYNTHESIS

In most cases, the data collection process includes the following actions (based on IFAD, 2002, chapter 6, p. 4; Guijt, 1998, p. 37; Horton, 2003, pp. 99-102):

- Data collection: How is information acquired? Which methods are used?
- Data recording: How is the information registered or recorded? Which formats are used to write, visualise, photograph or video the data? And by whom?

- Data storage: Where and how will the data be stored? Is there a database or another information management system in place?
- Data synthesis: How will the data be organised, structured and presented in a logically ordered and understandable overview?

Data collection

The literature presents different types of data to be collected for M&E purposes in the development sector. Often programmes rush into *primary* data collection – data generated specifically for the M&E process – and overlook the existence of *secondary* information – retrieved through existing written organisational records, files, reports or publications. In some cases only an overall view or general sense of the patterns is sufficient – a *macro view* – while in other cases, a detailed understanding of a particular change is required – a *micro view*. *Quantitative* collection methods are used if numeric data is required, while *qualitative* information is most appropriate for understanding opinions, experiences, attitudes and priorities. Furthermore, it is important to consider whether the information can best be gathered in an *individual* or *group* context (Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 32; Guijt, 1998, p. 38; Guijt & Ortiz, 2007; and Horton, 2003, p. 99).

> ***The journey data take***
> Whenever data are collected and used within the M&E process, they start a journey which involves their transformation from data to information to knowledge. Data are the raw material that has no meaning. Information involves attributing meaning to the data by synthesising and analysing them. Knowledge emerges when the information is related back to a concrete situation in order to establish explanations and lessons for decisions

The literature provides a wealth of data collection methods for participatory M&E. While many methods and tools have generally been applied for data collection purposes, many of these same techniques are also applicable for planning, analysis, documentation and reporting (Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 32). Horton (2003) suggests self-assessment workshops, review of documents, key informant interviews, group interviews, personal histories, direct observations and questionnaires (pp. 99-102) while Guijt (1998) differentiates *visual* methods (photographs, video, maps,…), *writing-based* methods and methods that are *oral* and record people's experiences and opinions (pp. 34-39). Common approaches to PM&E include participatory rural appraisal and participatory rapid assessment methods comprising a range of visualisation tools (mapping, diagramming, etc.), interviewing and group work, as well as participatory quantitative tools such as community surveys and ecological assessments ((Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 32).

Selecting the appropriate data collection methods depends on a number of criteria. The most fundamental criterion is that the method produces the required information, but there are others. The evaluation literature promotes criteria such as validity, reliability, relevance, sensitivity, practicality, cost-effectiveness and timeliness – is there not too much delay between the

collection, recording and organising of the data? (Guijt, 1998, p. 39; Patton, 1997, p. 380). Furthermore, it is worth checking whether the repetitive use of a specific method is possible. Since the essence of monitoring requires the regular and continuous noting of the same kind of information – i.e., systematic data collection to understand changes that are occurring – it also implies the repeated use of the same methods. If methods are changed, information can be distorted, comparisons become difficult, and findings dubious (Guijt, 1998, p. 36).

Data recording, storing and synthesising

Some recording methods require the filling in of forms or tables; others require using a tape or video recorder, writing answers on work cards or flip charts or taking daily notes. What is important is that language or symbols are used which are understandable to the producers of the information (IFAD, 2002, chapter 6, p. 21). Storing information and making it accessible to others is crucial for M&E. Stored information serves as a source for future verification and comparison and is the source of institutional memory. As data storage systems (hard copy, archives, databases ...) get easily congested, it is important to only store data which will be used and to regularly update the system. Nowadays, data is stored mostly in the form of computerised data which can be made accessible to others (IFAD, chapter 6, p. 25).

Gathering and recording data is one thing. But the data and information need to be organised and above all, synthesised and presented in a way that is understandable and useful for the users (Patton, 1997, p. 379). This will be crucial to enable them to critically reflect upon and analyse the information.

Who will collect the data?

It is critical to know *who* will be involved in collecting, compiling and synthesising the data. Ideally, data collection should be undertaken by those to whom the data pertains. and if the users of the data collection methods can be involved in selecting or developing these methods, the more likely it is that they will understand and use them correctly (IFAD, 2002, chapter 4, p. 12).

M&E calendar

Through this step, more details about the M&E process are identified. These new facts can be used to adjust the timeframe developed in step two and to start compiling an *annual monitoring calendar* which includes the following*:*

- Which data collection method is used to meet each specific information need?
- Who is going to collect and record the data?
- Who is going to store and synthesise which data?
- During which events will the data be presented and analysed? By who? (*see step two*)
- When will this all happen (frequency)?

4.3.5 PLAN FOR SENSE-MAKING

'Monitoring systems need to cater to the social spaces and interactions needed to enable information sharing and interpretation that lead to collective insights about action' (Guijt, 2008, p. 248). Monitoring does not end with gathering data. In fact, the real monitoring process only starts after the data collection, i.e., when the data is used and analysed to solve problems, to adjust processes, to anticipate negative impacts, to improve and change, to learn and reflect, to assess the process and recognise the accomplishments (Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 37). This process is probably the most important but also the most challenging and often least developed step of a monitoring system.

The key reflective spaces have been identified in step two. Step five covers the process of understanding and deciding how data can best be used and analysed in order to strengthen concerted action and facilitate decision-making. I adopt the term *sense-making* from Guijt (2008) to refer to this step in the process of developing the PLA system. Sense-making is '*a motivated continuous effort to understand the connections (between people, places, events ...) in order to anticipate and act effectively'* (Gujit 2008, pp. 277-279) It is the process by which people choose between different possible explanations of perceptions in order to understand, anticipate or act in their world. And this process needs to be planned for.

Social interactions as sources of information and sense-making are critical for organisational and institutional learning (Guijt, 2008, p. 280). Therefore, it is important to ensure there are organisational spaces where sense-making can take place. Planning for sense-making during these spaces can be guided by the following questions (Guijt, 2008, pp. 277-279; IFAD, 2002, chapter 4, p. 13):

- What are the foci and the desired type of outputs? What do we need to understand?
- Who will participate and who needs to interact with whom?
- How will the sense-making process be designed and facilitated?
- Who will facilitate? Will facilitation be external or self-managed?
- How does the process feed into other activities and processes?

In line with the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), I understand sense-making to include critical reflection and analysis of the data/information, followed by a conceptualisation process during which lessons learned are drawn (figure 14).

Critical reflection and analysis

In this step, stakeholders engage in critical reflection and thinking about the successes and outcomes as well as the problems and constraints of their efforts and activities (Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 31). It is a process of interpreting the experiences and data to create new

insights. A critical reflection exercise with a group of programme actors creates opportunities for feedback, which, according to Leeuwis (2004) is as a crucial mechanism for learning, especially when feedback is somehow 'disturbing' (pp.153-155). Whereas mainstream monitoring practice often focuses on the *what* and *how* questions, this step focuses on the *why* questions, the effectiveness of actions (what worked, what did not work), validating assumptions about the programme, and the relevance of actions and changes in view of the bigger aims of the programme.

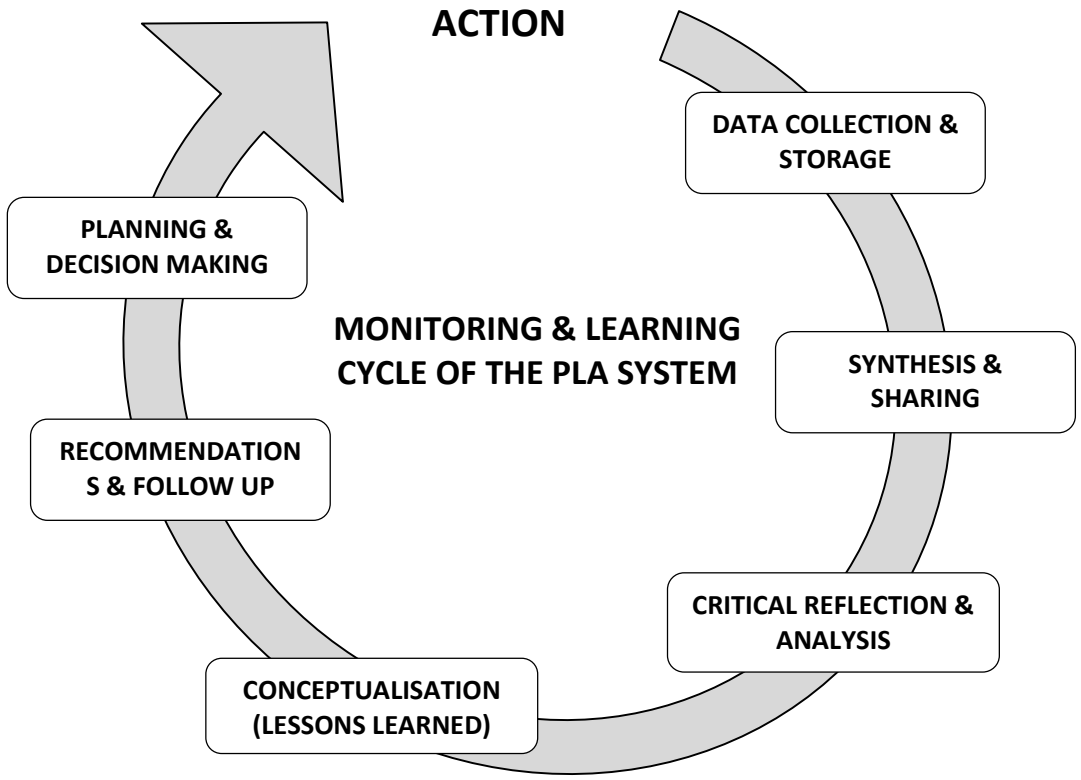

Figure 14: Sense-making in the monitoring and learning cycle of the PLA system

Conceptualisation & lessons learned

People often incorrectly assume that the knowledge gained through reflection will automatically impact on the way things are done in the future (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 6). This step focuses on the process of drawing lessons which differentiates learning from simple information exchange and analysis (Britton, 1998, p. 17). However, this is often neglected and even in the best cases, lessons from monitoring data and information tend to be drawn by management staff or, if available, specialists in the organisation (e.g. research/KM). Accidental learning happens all the time, but it is not the most efficient way to learn nor does it necessarily lead to improved action.

IFAD (2002) defines '*lessons learned*' in this context as the knowledge derived from experience that is sufficiently well founded and can be generalised so that it has the potential to improve action (chapter 8, p. 7). The process of deriving such knowledge is a process that refocuses attention from 'what actually happened' in a situation to 'what tends to happen' in a particular kind of situation. This allows the learner to make a leap from a particular experience to more general valuable learning which can be applied to new situations (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 6).

Figure 14 and the explanation above might lead one to assume that the sense-making process happens at a specific event scheduled after the data collection and synthesis process. Although most M&E frameworks include specific (formal) sense-making activities such as self-assessments, partner meetings, mid-year reviews or end of year evaluation meetings, sense-making is an ongoing and often non-linear process at individual and group level. For example, face to face meetings which are mainly organised as data generation activities (participatory rural appraisals, focus groups discussions, stories, interviews …) can also be powerful sense-making activities. However, as the focus is on the collection of data, critical analysis and lessons learned might not be sufficiently discussed or captured. In addition, informal interactions (field visits, discussions with partners and among staff …) are important sense-making moments as it is during such meetings that *'… information is exchanged, doubts are expressed, surprise is registered, innovative ideas are sparked, and informal agreements are made…' (Guijt, 2008, p. 263).* However, informal interactions are mostly neglected in monitoring processes. As such, what is called for is not a matter of formalising these events but of installing mechanisms to capture and share people's reflections and thinking during these events – as far as possible.

Who participates?

In mainstream M&E practice, it is very common for critical analysis to be made and lessons learned to be drawn by stakeholders located at higher institutional levels or even by outsiders to the development programme. However, the idea of Participatory M&E is to involve the people who have participated in the data collection process and the end users at all levels (Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 31; Guijt, 1998, pp. 22-26). Therefore, if the monitoring system aims to influence the planning process, enhance organisational and institutional learning and improve accountability, the sense-making and subsequent agreement on actions should be undertaken with the intended users. In this way, programme actors are actively and directly involved in interpreting findings, making judgments based on the data, providing feedback and generating recommendations (Patton, 1997, p. 380).

Decision-making

The ultimate test of learning is the ability to apply what has been learned. Only when learning is applied through decision-making that influences policies, strategies and/or changes in practice, can we say that a continuous learning cycle has been created (Britton, 1998, p. 20). Therefore, it

is recommended that – wherever possible – lessons learned are fed into the key decision-making moments.

Organising sense-making

Sense-making needs to be fostered and requires investing in creating the right conditions, developing appropriate approaches and developing learning capacities (Guijt, 2008, pp. 277-279). Organising sense-making cannot rely solely on a 'tool-box' or 'blue-print' approach. It requires people who have the capacities to organise and facilitate culturally-sensitive, reflective and analytical group processes. As the analysis and the formulation of conclusions constitute the most important – and most difficult – step of the M&E process, Patton (1997) argues that in many cases it is recommended to use an external facilitator (p. 379). In addition, building relationships of trust between staff and partners is key because it guides and determines who people talk to, share experiences with, whether people challenge one another, debate together, and whether their own weaknesses and strengths can be expressed (Britton, 2005, pp. 32-35). Especially in the relationship between programme-implementing teams (often donors) and local actors (partners, farmers, etc.) trust can never be taken for granted. Snowden (2005) argues that enabling critical reflection requires a mix of trust and novelty, i.e. trusting the source of information or advice and novelty to increase the probability of an emergent solution (p. 8).

Information and decisions about sense-making processes should be included in the annual M&E calendar.

- What kind of activities / events will be organised for sense-making? (see step two)
- When will these activities take place?
- Who will participate and who needs to interact with whom?
- Who will facilitate? Will facilitation be external or self-managed?

4.3.6 PLAN FOR DOCUMENTATION & COMMUNICATION

The key question of this step is how the outcomes of the M&E process, such as synthesised information, key findings and lessons learned, will be documented and shared with the relevant stakeholders.

In most cases information is disseminated in written formats in rather formal language, such as *official reports* compiled for donor organisations(s). These reports tend to be long, very detailed and often symbolic. Many authors and practitioners advocate for more *useful and simplified M&E reports* which will actually be read by people and used for information sharing or decision-making (Chambers, 2005; Earl et al., 2005; Estrella & Gaventa, 1997, p. 32). Furthermore, higher management levels seem to appreciate overview reports in the form of *graphs, tables, maps and diagrams*. Reports and documents for donor organisations or higher management levels are often

seen as the final result of an M&E process. However, reporting and documentation can also be the initiation of a new process.

For example, other type of documents such as a public annual report, articles in magazines, 'postings' on website or blogs – containing popularised and synthesised information about the programme – can initiate more support and interest in the programme and generate feedback from external actors about the programme actions and progress (IFAD, 2002, chapter 4, p. 14). In addition, Estrella & Gaventa (1997) emphasise the importance of communication to local partners and beneficiaries (p. 32). Formal written reports might not be appropriate for reaching local audiences and it is suggested to use forms of communication which include informal styles of reporting, adopting the local language and using more oral and visual techniques. Often, mainstream monitoring practices collect data at the local level which are used and communicated for accountability and (re-)planning purposes at higher levels of the programme hierarchy. Communicating M&E findings and decisions taken – based on the collected data – recognises and acknowledges the contributions from local actors by showing that the data is actually used (and for what). It is an important feedback mechanism, improving transparency, downward accountability and trust. Stimulating quality feedback is almost synonymous with stimulating and contributing to learning (Leeuwis, 2004, pp. 153-155). In my experience, this line of communication has often been neglected in development programmes.

Developing a good communication strategy will encompass a discussion on the targeted audiences (users of M&E findings and other interested actors), why these audiences need the information, in which format the information can best be documented and presented (IFAD, 2002, chapter 4, p. 14), how the documentation and communication process links with the data collection and sense-making process, and who is to do what by when. A well-organised and user-friendly system for information storage (databases, filing systems, etc.) will be an important support tool for any documentation process.

The M&E calendar can be further updated with the following details with regard to documentation and communication of the M&E results:

- What type of documentation needs to be compiled and for whom?
- Who will develop the documents?
- Who will communicate the M&E results?
- When will all this happen (frequency)?

4.3.7 PLAN FOR NECESSARY ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS

This concluding step focuses on the '*institutionalisation*' of the PLA system. There is often a large gap between the principles and design of the monitoring process and the actual monitoring practice. Acknowledging that this involves more than having good intentions – and that, at the

end, real people in the real world have to 'translate' the good intentions into action – a programme needs to invest in creating the necessary organisational conditions to implement and maintain the PLA system. As Woodhill (2006) states: *'To shift the mindset and to institutionalise learning-oriented M&E practices, major investments in capacity development are required.'* (p. 8).

To analyse the organisational conditions needed to support the PLA system, I drew from the literature of *the learning organisation* (section 2.13). Learning organisation theory and practice investigate how organisations can learn and what can be put in place to foster organisational learning. Since the PLA system aims to provide a framework for monitoring, evaluation *and* for learning (section 2.1.3) at the organisational level, I argue that the following models are very relevant and useful for the assessment of the organisational conditions to implement the PLA system.

First, I refer to Senge's (1994) '*learning organisation architecture*'. He argues that to develop learning disciplines within an organisation, one need to invest in the development of three building blocks, i.e., *guiding ideas; theory, methods and tools;* and *innovations in the infrastructure* (figure 15).

Figure 15: Building blocks of learning organisation architecture
(Source: Pasteur, 2006, p. 18)

Second, Britton (2005) presents a model that is similar but contextualised for development organisations. It is based on the core idea that an organisation can develop a practical strategy for organisational learning if it creates the right *motives, means and opportunities* to do so. Motives refer to support from the leadership and the development of a culture of learning. Means cover individual learning competencies, guiding concepts, methods and tools and adequate financial resources. Opportunities highlight including learning as a strategic goal, integrating learning into planning and M&E, knowledge management infrastructures, and building relationships of trust.

Both models highlight three interlinked elements which highlight similar aspects related to organisational conditions. *Guiding ideas* resonate with *motives*; *theory, methods and tools* with *means;* and *innovations in infrastructures* with *opportunities* respectively. In either model, the three elements or 'building blocks' generate a synergy which will not occur when attention is paid to only one of the elements alone. If there are no guiding ideas, there is no sense of direction or purpose. If there are no theories, methods and tools, people cannot develop the new skills and capabilities required for monitoring and learning. If there are no innovations in infrastructure, people will not have the opportunities or the resources to persue their aspirations or apply the tools (Britton, 2005; Senge, 1994).

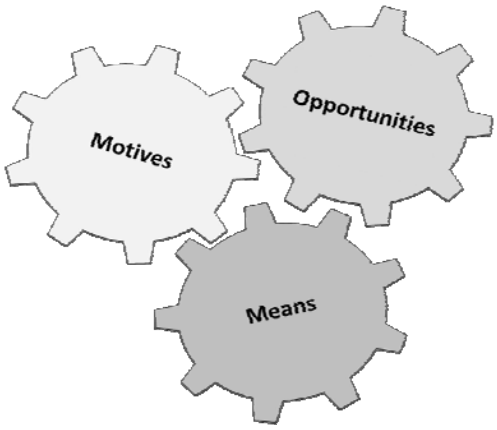

Figure 16: Three interlinked organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLAs

In the remaining parts of this chapter I will further explore the three elements in the context of M&E and learning and argue that those elements are crucial aspects for the institutionalisation of the PLA system.

CREATING MOTIVES	CREATING MEANS	CREATING OPPORTUNITIES
1. Guiding ideas 2. Support from management 3. Culture of learning 4. Incentives	1. Human capacity 2. Specialist support 3. Concepts & methods 4. Financial resources	*1.* Integration into management & operations 2. Structures, responsibilities & plans 3. Information Management Infrastructure *4.* Relationships of trust

Table 11: Organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system

Creating motives

> *An organisation is not like a machine but a living organism, and much like an individual, it needs a collective sense of identity and fundamental purpose.*
>
> (Senge, 2004, p. 23)

Guiding Ideas

Formulating aspirations, establishing guiding ideas and creating the motives for the development and implementation of a new initiative such as the PLA system are fundamental and should therefore be developed and articulated deliberately (Senge, 1994, p. 23-24). Programme managers, programme officers and partners will not contribute and participate adequately unless they have an understanding of what it is, why it is important and what is expected.

Support from management

Support from leadership is vital for an organisation or programme to encourage and value the PLA system. Support from leadership can be detected, among other factors, by communication about the initiative, its prioritisation on the agenda, living by example and recognition for contributions by staff (Britton, 2005, pp. 15-18).

Culture of learning

The PLA system will be positively influenced by an organisational culture supportive of learning, i.e., a culture that enables, encourages, values, rewards and uses the learning of its members both individually and collectively (Britton, 2005, pp. 15-18). Organisations with a learning culture demonstrate that learning is legitimate, that it is seen as an integral part of staff's work, and that space and time for learning are provided (Britton, 2005, pp. 15-18). Learning culture is enhanced by programme managers with an open-minded, transparent, innovative and inclusive mindset (Gujit et al, 2007, pp. 14-15).

Incentives

Providing incentives (for programme staff, partners, farmers, chain actors …) means offering stimuli to perceive monitoring as opportunities to discuss, critically reflect and learn in order to improve the programme (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 22). For the organisation's staff, it involves introducing sources of encouragement, such as clear job descriptions, financial rewards, activity support, career advancement, recognition, feedback and transparency regarding the collected data. Furthermore, it entails removing disincentives such as ambiguous job descriptions, not making it clear how data is to be used, and the marginalisation of M&E in the organisation (IFAD, chapter 7, p. 21). For partners involved in the monitoring process, it is recommended to properly negotiate expectations, provide targeted support for operationalising monitoring events and processes, hold joint monitoring training events with programme staff, and maintain a positive

spirit of collaboration (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 23). Primary stakeholders (e.g. farmers or chain actors) can only be expected to invest valuable time in data collection and sense-making activities when the returns are of value to them, in forms such as financial compensation, training opportunities, covering transport and accommodation costs, public recognition of participation, and regular feedback on M&E results (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 23).

Creating means

> *If you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don't bother about teaching. Instead, give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking.*
>
> (Senge, 1994, p. 28)

In order for staff to contribute to and participate adequately in the PLA system, the programme needs more than motives and guiding ideas; it also require the means to operationalise it.

Human capacity

Monitoring and learning processes require sufficient human capacity on the part of the people involved in the PLA system. '*When asked why a project M&E is not working, a common response is 'poor' or 'insufficient capacity'* (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 3). One cannot assume that everybody has the capacity to adequately contribute to, participate in or manage the different stages of the PLA system. There are specific technical knowledge and skills required related to data collection, data storage, synthesis, documentation and communication. In addition, for participatory M&E, face-to-face events for sense-making require good analytical and facilitation skills (Britton, 2005, p. 18). It is also necessary for programme staff to understand why the views of partners and beneficiaries matter and to develop a self-critical look at their own attitudes and behaviours vis-à-vis partners and beneficiaries (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 13). Strategies to ensure sufficient M&E capacity imply hiring the best possible people for each position and providing training, although most capacity is developed through work experience (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 3). Focused inputs by consultants might be necessary but do not contribute much to internal or local capacity building (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 9).

Specialist support

Many organisations install specialist support and champions whose job is to coordinate monitoring and evaluation processes, help the people and the organisation learn, develop competencies to learn, facilitate analyses and develop appropriate tools and methods. Especially in new programmes, staff are under much pressure to perform, assemble teams, design basic information and management systems, and so on, which leaves little time for anything else. Therefore, it is advisable to shift parts of the monitoring and learning process to other actors in the organisation or even sub-contractors (Guijt et al., 2007, pp. 14-15). These can be individuals or teams, depending on the size and scope of the learning initiatives (Britton, 2005, p. 18).

Concepts and methods

It is important to discuss and choose appropriate conceptual models for the development and implementation of the PLA system. It is believed that understanding and exposure to new and challenging conceptual models can help people think and act differently in the way they plan, monitor and learn in the context of the programme. Methods and tools – for data collection, storage, sense-making and communication – based on underlying concepts bridge the gap between theory and practice (Britton, 2005, p. 18). Senge (1994) argues that it is the synergy between theory, tools and methods that lies at the heart of any field of human endeavour that truly builds knowledge (p. 29).

Financial resources

Developing and implementing the PLA system not only requires staff but also adequate financial resources. M&E processes and systems cost money! Especially learning-oriented and participatory M&E processes require more investments in time, meetings and human capacity. Therefore the organisation has to ensure that adequate financial resources for all the stages of the PLA process are available and that an indicative budget is incorporated into the overall financial planning. Most commonly M&E costs are categorised into labour costs, operational costs, M&E events, training & study on M&E, equipment and external consultancy costs. Many M&E functions and activities overlap with implementation and management activities. It is recommended not to budget the PLA costs as programme management costs as this makes it unclear what is available. In general, M&E budgets range from 2% to 15% of all costs (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 36). A general rule of thumb is that the M&E budget should not be so small as to compromise the accuracy and credibility of results, but neither should it divert programme resources to the extent that programming is impaired.

Creating opportunities

> *Until people can make their 'work space' a learning space, learning will always be a 'nice idea' – peripheral, not central.*
>
> (Senge, 1994, p. 35)

Creating motives and means alone are not sufficient for people to contribute to and participate adequately in the PLA process as long as the organisation is not creating opportunities for good implementation of the PLA process.

Integration into management and operations

For successful implementation, learning and M&E processes should be integrated into the existing management and operational procedures and processes of the organisation (Britton, 2005. p. 30). The PLA system should be an integral part of the programme management process. This

entails the creation of the necessary time and space for the PLA system to take off and unfold (Britton, 2005, p. 30; Senge, 1994, p. 32) and an emphasis on face-to-face sense-making activities (Britton, 2005, pp. 32-35; Guijt, 2008, p. 277). By doing so, certain adjustments to existing management mechanisms, procedures, work processes, reports, schedules and agendas might be required (Senge, 1994, p. 32).

Structures, responsibilities and plans

To avoid communication bottlenecks, conflicts of interests, task duplication and inefficient efforts, one needs to carefully consider the location of M&E functions and responsibilities in the organisational structure as well as develop clear and transparent M&E plans, including procedures and timeframes (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 24). It is often argued that M&E and learning is the job of everybody in the organisation. This idea is based on the belief that monitoring and learning is a daily and spontaneous activity and that everybody informally or formally monitors their daily operational activities. However, experience shows that the location of those responsible for M&E is critical for performance (IFAD, chapter 4, p. 15). Incorporating M&E positions into programme management and decision-making levels is recommended to facilitate the efficient use of information by management. For staff to participate in any activity not considered 'core business' will require additional efforts. Clarity about M&E responsibilities at the programme staff level involves developing clear job descriptions, allocating clear levels of authority and giving sufficient recognition to M&E related staff. As mentioned before, it is also essential to clearly spell out the M&E responsibilities of partners and beneficiaries.

Information management infrastructure

The PLA system will generate data and information, synthesised information, analyses and lessons learned. Therefore it is recommended to invest in a well-designed and responsive information management (IM) system (Britton, 2005, pp. 32-35). In bigger programmes, handwritten notes and reports alone will not be sufficient for the management of the M&E process (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 31). Storage and documentation provide the foundation for interactive communication, transparency, consensus-building and continuity (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 6). Computerised information systems can make a critical contribution to tracking and using data, but should be carefully developed in order to avoid data being computerised but never used. Crucial aspects for the design of the IM system are to: investigate which information needs to be stored and made accessible, how data and information are to be stored (logic) and how and by whom they can be retrieved. The IM system should be in line with, and not divorced from the management's information needs (IFAD, 2002, chapter 7, p. 32) and should ideally be an integral part of the learning mechanisms in the organisation (Britton, 2005, pp. 32-35).

Relationships of trust

The quality and the nature of the relationships among programme staff or within a partnership will heavily affect monitoring, learning and negotiation processes. Interpersonal relationships are a key factor in organisational learning processes and are qualified by the level of trust and respect involved (Britton, 2005, pp. 32-35). Building relationships of trust between staff and partners is essential because it guides and determines who people talk to and share experiences with, whether people challenge one another, and whether their own weaknesses and strengths can be expressed.

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the conceptual framework for the development of the PLA system. As will be reiterated in chapter 5, steps one to three can be seen as the 'fundamentals' of the PLA system. They include discussion of the purpose and scope of the PLA system, followed by the identification of the organisational spaces and respective information needs. Steps four to six are designed in line with the sequence of a mainstream monitoring process and provide a framework for planning for data collection, synthesis, sense-making, documentation and communication of the monitoring results. The last step aims to ensure that the PLA design can be carried out in practice, and urges the programme to create the right motives, means and opportunities to institutionalise the PLA system. Based on the conceptual framework described above, a set of guiding questions was developed for each of the seven steps (as summarised in appendices 3 and 4) to guide the action research to develop and implement the PLA system at VECO. Although the respective steps and accompanying questions suggest a linear development 'trajectory', the reality is bound to be less straightforward and a 'messy' process most likely to unfold, as discussed in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5 ACTION RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLA SYSTEM

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an account of the action research process and its results. It is entirely based on the results of the focus groups, document analysis, personal observation and face-to-face interviews. It starts with an analysis of the M&E system used in the previous programme and highlights how VE and VECO came to the decision to develop a planning, learning and accountability system. The intentional design of VECO's new programme is briefly presented as this is necessary for a better understanding of the next sections. The main body of this chapter is a detailed, step-by-step presentation of the development of the PLA system, focusing on the process, the activities and the design decisions taken.

5.2 REFLECTIONS ON THE PREVIOUS M&E SYSTEM

5.2.1 VECO LEVEL

Reflection on the previous M&E practice produced the following overview of some of the main characteristics of the M&E system used in the VECO programme from 2003 to 2007.

Monitoring = reporting

The previous M&E system was mainly geared towards the *compilation of the annual report* for the main donor of VECO whereby the information needs and data collection were determined by the pre-fixed indicators of the programme's logical framework. '*The previous M&E system was very much focused on accountability, i.e., making a report for the donor, and we did not spend much time to analyse the data and learn from it'* (I1). The main data were collected through EVAPERCA (see next paragraph), the annual reports of the partners and through observations of the programme officers of the respective working areas. '*Monitoring was mainly focusing on the VECO programme and less on the administration, finances, publications or internal functioning of VECO.' (I5)*.

The annual monitoring report provides an overview – in a standard table format – of key quantifiable changes and activities carried out by VECO. The guidelines (D5) accompanying the 2006 annual report state: '*… avoid too many words, especially in the tables. The tables should be … understandable and easy to monitor … in many cases it is sufficient just to put the figure that refers to the indicator.'* In general, it is hard to distill the progress made for the data presented

and the effectiveness of VECO's interventions in relation to the achieved changes. The report does not include an analysis part stating the challenges, lessons learned or recommendations for next year's programme. However, the report does include nine case studies – containing stories with pictures of a significant change during the year for each of nine respective result areas. These stories bring the report to life and make the connection with reality (compared to the quantifiable data in table format). One of the respondents mentioned that the case studies were the most useful part of the report as they could be used for future publications, VECO's public relation materials and the public annual report.

Focus on data at community level

All interview respondents referred to EVAPERCA as the core monitoring mechanism. EVAPERCA – an abbreviation of *Evaluasi dan Percanaan*, meaning 'evaluation and planning' in Indonesian – was used by the VECO partners to monitor their respective programmes. EVAPERCA consisted of a participatory face-to-face meeting during which data on changes and results at the farmer level were collected. '*The data collected are mainly quantitative based on the indicators of the LFA.' (I2)*. VECO programme officers collected the data from the partners and made a semester or final year overview (table overview) which served as the basis for the compilation of the annual VECO report. Thus, the EVAPERCA results came to be expressed in statements such as: '*51 villages (15% of total villages covered in the VECO programme) have a system in place for food security (food storage)*' or '*1,827 farmer households have participated in training activities on marketing*' (D1).

Interaction with local actors

EVAPERCA also provided the opportunity for an important local stakeholder meeting during which farmers and VECO's partner organisations discussed progress made, challenges and constraints with local government and other local actors. '*The stories from farmers and the involvement of the local government made this meeting more than just a monitoring meeting because people could share their experiences and we could 'socialise' our programme to the local government … EVAPERCA is a kind of forum with multi-actors (I3) …[and] … a good mechanism for downward accountability' (I3 and I5).*

Disconnection from planning

As the deadline to submit the annual report was set on 1 April of the following year, it resulted in a synthesis, analysis and compilation process between February and April. By implication, the data collection, analysis, learning and reporting process was divorced from the planning process which happened at the end of the previous year (in December). Thus, it was observed that the *formal* monitoring process did not influence decision-making with regard to future planning. Respondents mentioned that decisions for the planning of the next year were mainly based on their personal experience, and informal observations and discussions with partners and other

VECO staff. *'We based our decisions mainly on our own analysis and the discussions with partners during EVAPERCA.' (I1).*

Few people involved in the use of data

Although the programme officers and their respective partners were the main data collectors, there was basically one person – the programme manager – who was responsible for analysing and synthesising the collected data and compiling the programmatic aspects of the data for presentation in the annual report. Once the data were collected, there was no further reference to how the data were used. In addition, interview respondents stated that they hardly ever read the annual report once it was finished. In addition, '*the information we were collecting was much more than we ever used. It was there in the reports but nobody really needed it*' (I4).

Limited learning

Twice a year (mid-year and end of year) the programme staff held a coordination meeting during which the programme officers presented the activities carried out, the results achieved (based on the data collection), the budget spent and the planned activities for the next semester. However, *'the coordination meeting was mainly a decision-making and planning body with limited reflection on the achieved results.'* (I4). During the end of year monitoring process there were no formal face-to-face meetings with other VECO programme staff and the report did not contain lessons learned (see below). This implies that few formal opportunities were created for reflection on the M&E results. However, one could argue that most likely, the programme manager – by synthesising the data and compiling the annual report – learned a lot at an individual level.

5.2.2 VE GLOBAL LEVEL

During a brainstorming session at the OM workshop (January 2007), participants critically reflected on the M&E system of the previous VECO programme (2003-2007) at the global level. Participants mentioned that it was difficult to link the M&E results from the different countries into a common global M&E framework. It was also observed that the M&E system was very much linked to and determined by the funding mechanisms of the donor rather than by our own (learning) needs. Based on the formats used and the strong focus on the achieved results – largely expressed in quantitative figures – it was difficult to get insights into the progress made. In addition, it was felt that the monitoring of VECO's contributions to developmental changes and their own organisational functioning was limited.

Some official documents also refer to several limitations of the logical framework:

- The strong quantitative emphasis on the definition of objectives, outputs and indicators – mostly arbitrarily (D5)
- The strong focus on outputs/results or 'change in state' (D5)

- Limited flexibility in the application of the tool to allow learning and mutual accountability (D5). A participant in the VE HO workshop (January 2007) mentioned that the logical framework was used in a rather static and artificial way undermining its use to facilitate the monitoring process;
- The strong focus on impact at the grassroots level (D5)
- The fact that the specific planning of each VECO was done separately, which made *'the task of consolidation of a common global planning and monitoring framework, a nightmare.'* (D6). '*In the past … we never had a common process of strategic reflection and planning.' (*D9).

However, participants at the OM workshop (2007) also felt that the main tool (LFA) had some clear advantages: it was known to everybody (VECOs and partner organisations); staff throughout the organisation 'spoke the same language'; there was a strong capacity throughout the organisation in report writing; and the clear deadlines (set by the donor) 'forced' us to engage in a monitoring process.

5.3 TOWARDS A PLA SYSTEM

5.3.1 LEARNING-ORIENTED MONITORING

Building learning into VE's policies & strategies

The strategic planning process for the VE global programme 2008-2013 provided an opportunity to address some of the limitations mentioned above. VE emphasised the strategic importance of *organisational and institutional learning* for its own organisational development by including it as a specific programme objective (figure 17). *'By 2013, VE is recognised by others for its expertise on SACD for family farmers, and learning is an integral part of organisational culture reflected in values, practices and program approaches.'* (D4).

Functioning as a learning organisation, with professional management at all levels was seen as critical in realising VE's core programme objectives as well as in building its expertise to support family farmers to actively participate in markets. VE's learning strategies refer to *organisational learning* initiatives at national and international levels to strengthen its expertise in Sustainable Agricultural Chain Development. Reference was also made to *institutional learning* initiatives such as 'chain-wide-learning' processes within multi-stakeholder alliances. A special focus would be placed on knowledge exchange, peer to peer and collective learning (D7, D4).

VECO-Indonesia also adopted this specific objective in its programme's strategic framework. As stated in the VECO programme 2008 – 2013 proposal document:

VECO … aims to become a learning organisation […] and to make appropriate efforts to facilitate the potential and knowledge of every staff member for contributing to the better understanding of complex realities and for optimal decision-making. Optimal decision-making requires planned and systematic learning processes and well-developed knowledge management (KM) and information management (IM) systems.

(D3)

Britton (1998) states that developing policies and strategies which reflect organisational learning are an important characteristic of learning organisations (p. 19). By including learning in the strategic goals – including indicators to ensure accountability and ensure that learning is put on the agenda – organisations can signal to staff, partners and other stakeholders that they take learning seriously (Britton, 2005, pp. 32-33).

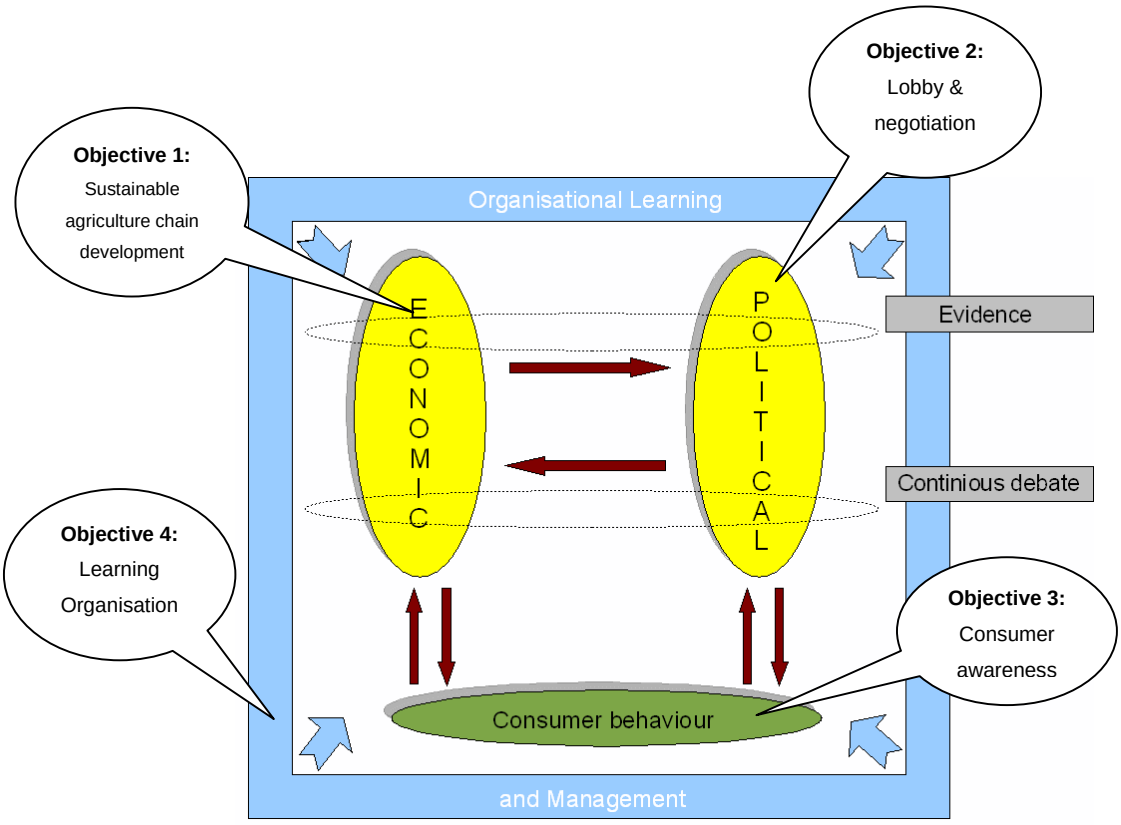

Figure 17: The four specific programme objectives of the VE global programme, 2008-2013

An alternative programme planning, monitoring and evaluation tool

The search for an alternative programme management approach/tool subsequently became an important priority in line with aspirations of VE's learning objective. It was spelled out that a tool was needed which, '*on one hand, responds to the frustrations many of us have faced due to limitations of the logical framework, and on the other hand, provides an opportunity for VE to*

become a learning organisation' (D5). Following from this, VE decided to adopt Outcome Mapping (see chapter two) as the guiding framework for its new programme.

> *[VE] … has made the choice to use OM as its tool for planning, monitoring and evaluation. Using the OM framework, a choice has also been made to gradually move towards […] a process which includes the whole continuum of activities that links strategic organisational reflection and choices to the translation into policies, plans and eventually into budgets. It integrates monitoring of programme and organisational progress and learning to improve practice, implementation and impact*.
>
> (D4)

> *However, we need to appreciate the fact that OM is a tool just like any other, and making the best of it depends on our own commitment to apply it properly*.
>
> (D6)

VECO decided to engage in an organisational change process affecting different levels and dimensions of the organisation in order to maintain and develop the required organisational capacities to implement and fulfill specific objective four (D3). The adoption of Outcome Mapping as the guiding programme framework and the decision to develop a PLA system were the key strategies introduced to foster and facilitate learning at VECO.

5.3.2 PLA SYSTEM

The term PLA[9] was first introduced in the fall of 2005 by the former country representative of VECO at a global VE meeting. She was inspired by the principles of the *Accountability, Learning and Planning System* (ALPS) developed by ActionAid.

> *By reducing the drudgery of written reporting, ALPS should make space for staff to interact more with partners and poor people. And by introducing processes of review and reflection, it is intended to help poor people, our partners and ourselves, to learn from our experiences and those of others in order to continuously improve the quality of our work. ALPS strengthens ActionAid's main accountability, which is to the poor and marginalised women, men, boys and girls and our partners with whom we, and they, work*
>
> (ActionAid, 2000, pp. 2-3)

The importance of the three elements – *planning, learning and accountability* – for M&E processes was discussed and since that time, the acronym PLA has been used in the strategic planning trajectory to refer to the future alternative M&E system for VE (and VECO). The term PLA has appeared in meetings and documents since 2006. In February 2007, it was officially announced that VE would invest in '*developing a PLA system'* together with the introduction of OM as the guiding programme framework (D5). Reference was made to PLA as a system

[9] PLA is different from Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), a common term to refer to Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods.

supporting VE's '*progress monitoring, organisational learning and management information flows*' (D6). However, the term remained vague and I observed that the term was interpreted differently by different people and levels in the organisation.

The VECO programme 2008-2013 proposal document presented a first summary of the PLA system as follows:

> *Using the OM logic, a choice has also been made to gradually move towards developing a PLA system rather than the traditional Program Monitoring and Evaluation system […] The planning is referred to as intentional design of how the organisation will actually translate its policies into plans for implementation. The learning and accountability aspects refer both to monitoring, ensuring the control aspect of management and the learning, ensuring that lessons are taken up for program improvement and adjustment of plans for further implementation. It seeks to prove if we did what we said we would do in intentional design and in the way we planned it but it also compels us to reflect and learn. This means being self critical on what did not go right, learning from it and actually adjusting it in our plans to ensure the realisation of program objectives.*
>
> (D3)

During the action research to develop the PLA system at VECO, the following definition for PLA emerged:

> *The PLA system aims to establish a learning-oriented and utilisation-focused monitoring & evaluation system and provide a framework for systematic data collection, sense making and documentation which supports VECO 's planning & management process, facilitates organisational & institutional learning and fulfills VECO's accountability requirements*
>
> (PLA Framework, VECO, 2008)

The creation and negotiation of a common understanding of the PLA system at global VE and VECO levels unfolded together with the emergence of some principles to underpin the development and implementation of the PLA system:

- The PLA system refers to an improved M&E approach integrating OM principles as well as other methods and principles of organisational learning, knowledge management and accountability (D10).
- The PLA system is basically about monitoring, i.e., collecting and analysing the data VECO needs in order to plan, learn and account (D9).
- The PLA system should not increase our work volume and [should] be kept as simple as possible (D9).
- The PLA system [is] not an aim in itself, it should support our actions. Actions are the driver of our work and '*we are not doing this only to become smart'* (D10)
- The PLA system should allow us and provide the spaces to reflect and learn (D9).

5.4 THE INTENTIONAL DESIGN

5.4.1 CORE ELEMENTS OF THE INTENTIONAL DESIGN

Monitoring, evaluation and learning cannot be divorced from the design and planning stage of the programme. This section presents the core elements of the *intentional design* – based on Outcome Mapping – of the VECO programme 2008-2013. Figure 18 gives a visual presentation of the intentional design of VECO.

Vision & mission

The *vision* of VECO describes the large-scale development changes that VECO hopes to encourage, i.e., the 'ideal' to which the programme wants to contribute. The *mission* spells out how VECO will contribute to the vision and is that 'bite' of the vision on which VECO's programme is going to focus (Earl et al., 2001:, pp. 33-40). Appendix 1 presents the vision and mission statement of VECO.

Four specific objectives (SO)

In line with the vision and mission, VECO organised its programme around four SOs (figure 17) which indicate the desired ultimate changes within the scope of the programme. A set of indicators for each objective were developed to monitor the progress and results made for each of the respective objectives. Objective four (SO4) is different from the others as it describes desired change within VECO with regard to learning, while the others describe changes external to VECO.

SO1 - Economic objective: Sustainable agricultural chains are established at local and national levels in which organised family farmers, male and female, successfully influence their trade relationships and benefit through an improved income, taking into account food security aspects.

Sample indicator: *Number and description of new cases within a sustainable agriculture chain which show that organised family farmers have successfully influenced chain actors in their favour.*

SO2 - Political objective: Organised family farmers, male and female, and other civil society actors, have successfully influenced the government and private sector at local and national levels to make decisions which favour the position of farmers in sustainable agriculture chains.

Sample indicator: *Number and issues of new advocacy cases carried out by VECOs partner organisations and/or organised farmers at local and national levels.*

SO3 - Consumer objective: Consumers are purchasing more sustainable agriculture products through increased awareness of sustainable agriculture and its products.

Sample indicator: *Number and description of cases in which trading of sustainable agriculture products includes consumer awareness initiatives.*

SO4 - Organisational learning: VECO-Indonesia has developed as a learning organisation which effectively supports its programme and partners and is recognised by others for its expertise and practice in sustainable agriculture chain development in favour of organised family farmers.

Sample indicator: *Number and description of occasions on which VECO acts as resource organisation and provides facilitators/trainers on sustainable agriculture chain development issues at the request of third parties.*

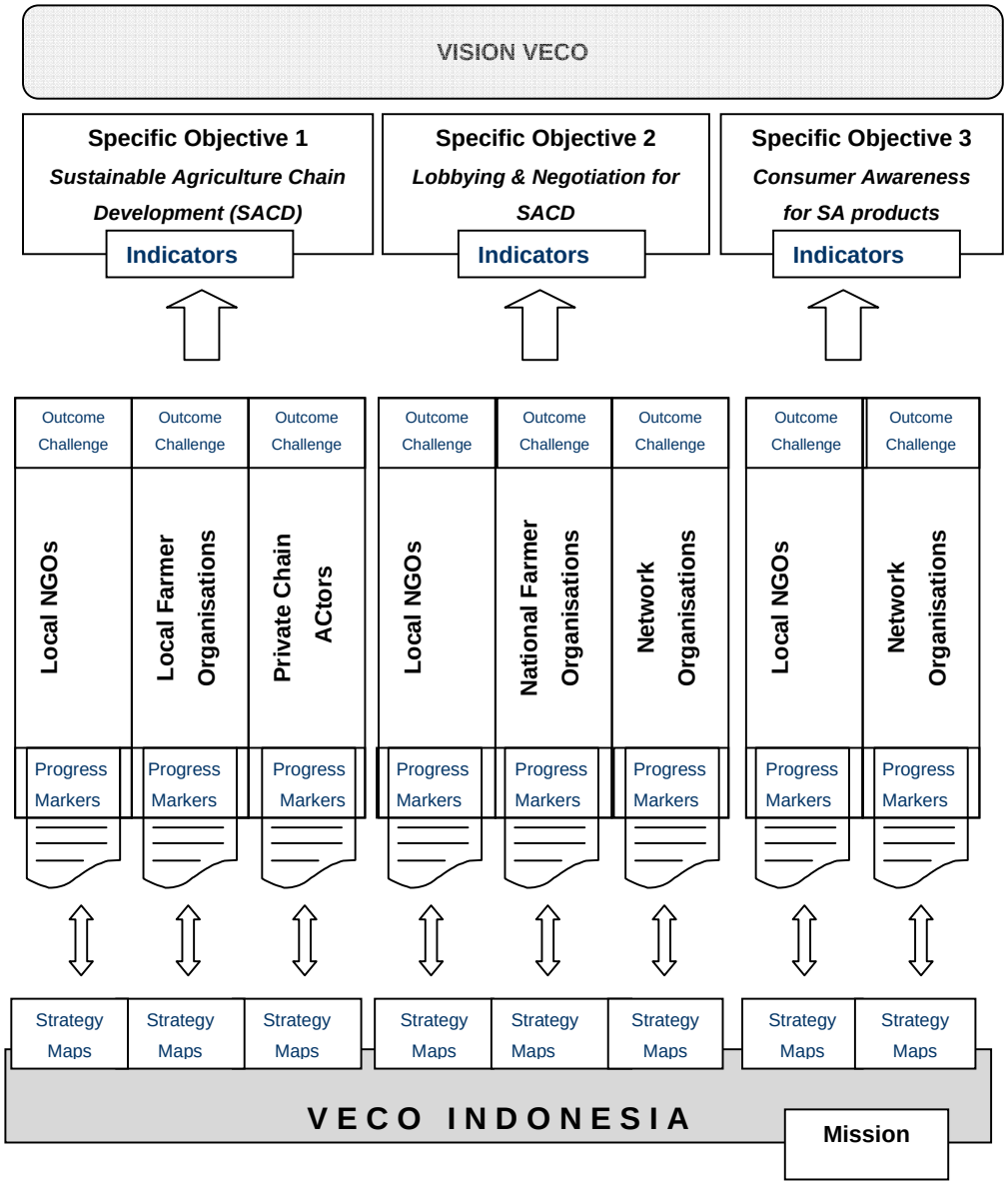

Figure 18: Intentional design of VECO's programme for SO1, SO2 and SO3

Boundary partners

VECO cooperates with and supports a selected group of local partner organisations, referred to as *boundary partners*, i.e., organisations, groups or individuals with whom VECO will interact directly and with whom it anticipates opportunities for influence/change (Earl et al., 2001, p. 41) in favour of family farmers in Eastern Indonesia. VECO identified specific boundary partners for SO1, SO2 and SO3.

ECONOMIC OBJECTIVE	Local farmer organisation, local NGOs and private chain actors
POLITICAL OBJECTIVE	National farmer organisations, network organisations and local NGOs
CONSUMER OBJECTIVE	Local NGOs and Network Organisations

There are no boundary partners for SO4 as it relates to the organisational learning processes of VECO.

Outcome challenge

An *outcome challenge* statement describes desired changes in the behaviour, relationships, activities, actions (professional practices) of VECO's boundary partners. It states the ideal behavioural change of each type of boundary partner for it to contribute to the specific objective and the vision of VECO. Figure 19 provides an example of an outcome challenge for local NGOs contributing to the economic objective (SO1).

Progress markers

Progress markers are a set of statements describing a gradual progression of changed behaviour in the boundary partner leading to the ideal outcome challenge. The strength of progress markers rests in their utility as a set of desired changes which indicate progression towards the ideal outcome challenge and articulate the complexity of the change process. They represent the information which can be gathered in order to monitor partner achievements. Therefore, progress markers will be central in the monitoring process (Earl et al., 2001, pp. 53-57). Figure 19 provides an example of a set of progress markers for local NGOs contributing to the economic objective (SO1). Progress markers can be seen as indicators in the sense that they are observable and measurable but differ from the conventional indicators used in LFA. Progress markers can be adjusted during the implementation process, can include unintended results, do *not* describe a change in state and do *not* contain percentages or deadlines. For SO4, VECO developed an outcome challenge and a respective set of progress markers to describe its own desired changes.

Strategy maps

Strategy maps are a mix of different types of strategies used by VECO to contribute to and support the achievement of the desired changes at the level of the boundary partners. Strategy maps are created for each outcome challenge, i.e.and for each boundary partner. Table 3 in chapter 2 gives an overview of the different types of strategies presented by Outcome Mapping, referred to as strategy maps, and table 12 presents VECO's strategy maps in support of local NGOs supporting the economic objective (SO1).

The various outcome challenges and their respective progress markers and strategy maps were developed and negotiated with the respective partner organisations during meetings W2 and F3 and therefore became, from the onset of the programme. commonly shared outcomes and strategies.

LOCAL NGOs	
OUTCOME CHALLENGE	
LOCAL NGOs empower organised small farmers' families in order to improve their position along the entire sustainable agriculture chain (production, processing, marketing and consumption). Local NGOs facilitate the organisation of farmers and/or strengthen farmer organisations, build the capacity of the organised farmers and farmer organisations to play active role in the sustainable agriculture chain, and function successfully in linking the organised farmers and farmer organisations with other actors of the sustainable agriculture chain. Local NGOs function as effective, democratic, inclusive and accountable organisations and collaborate actively with local government, NGOs, the private sector and other civil society actors.	
PROGRESS MARKERS	
1	Change the approach to assisting organised farmers from a farmer-group approach towards a village and inter-village/regional approach
2	Initiate activities/meetings during which farmers and farmer organisations can share, learn and cooperate together on aspects of the market chain
3	Identify and collaborate with key actors of the market chain
4	Initiate and maintain collaboration with other civil society actors and local government
5	Play an active role in facilitating continuous chain analyses
6	Identify, generate and provide information to farmers on technical aspects of the market chain to improve their access to resources (e.g. market, financial resources)
7	Initiate or actively participate in activities/meetings during which famers and farmer organisations can meet and cooperate with different actors of the market chains (multi-stakeholder fora)
8	Conduct and facilitate research and trials (FFS, PR&D, PTD …) on chain innovations in cooperation with relevant actors (processors, traders, research institutions, universities …)

9	Document LEISA and sustainable agriculture chain development experiences and practices
10	Implement the strategy for their own capacity development and learning process
11	Promote and expose their knowledge and expertise to third parties (on a self organised basis or at the request of third parties)
12	Develop the capacity of key people of farmer groups and farmer organisations to ensure the sustainability of the group/organisation and its programme
13	Initiate or strengthen the development of fair marketing models
STRATEGIES OF VECO	
1	Provide funding and resources for programme activities
2	Organise partner meetings
3	Initiate, organise, facilitate training on marketing aspects, chain analysis, technical agricultural, research design, gender …
4	Ongoing backstoping on sustainable agriculture chain development issues
5	Co-facilitate Participatory Agricultural Chain Assessment (PACA)
6	Facilitate organisational development of NGOs in the areas of organisational capacity assessment, development of organisational change strategies, self-reflection, financial management, KM & IM, HRM, M&E …
7	Link local NGOs with other actors of the sustainable agriculture chain and/or with other relevant stakeholders in the area
8	Co-organise meetings between farmers and different actors in the SAC
9	Coordinate the production of publications in cooperation with local NGOs
10	Produce relevant and useful documentation/information on specific market chain topics for local NGOs and farmers
11	Expose and promote the programmes of the local NGOs to other stakeholders
12	Provide opportunities for local NGO staff to attend, meet, participate in events to expose and share their knowledge and expertise

Table 12: Outcome Challenge, Progress Markers and Strategy Maps for local NGOs (SO1)

Organisational practices

Organisational practices indicate how an implementing organisation (such as VECO) is going to operate and organise itself to fulfill its mission (Earl et al., 2001, p. 69). They refer to the things that an organisation does to foster creativity and innovation, to seek the best ways to assist its partners and to maintain its niche. This is based on the idea that supporting change in boundary partners requires that the programme team itself is able to change and adapt as well, i.e., not only by being efficient and effective (operational capacities) but also by being relevant (adaptive capacities). For VECO these organisational practices are included in the fourth specific objective (SO4) on organisational learning and it was decided not to develop a separate set of organisational practices beyond SO4.

5.4.2 MONITORING AND LEARNING

The subtitle of the Outcome Mapping manual (Earl et al., 2001) is '*Building reflection and learning into development programmes*'. VE and VECO have adopted OM not only because its design logic resonates better with VE and VECO's programme reality but also because it has the potential to develop a more learning-oriented monitoring process, one of the goals of the PLA system. I describe here the key elements of the OM monitoring process in the context of VECO.

Figure 19 provides an alternative way of presenting the intentional design. It compares a development initiative and interventions with the pattern observed when a stone is thrown into still water. The emerging ripples in the water are a useful analogy for the inputs, interventions and effects of these interventions since it shows both the time taken for change to take place within a social system as well as the decrease of magnitude of influence the further it moves from the source (Crawford, 2005, p. 7). i.e., *from a sphere of control to a sphere of influence and interest* (section 2.2). It spells out the relative influence the programme has on changes at the level of partner (direct influence) and family farmers (indirect influence).

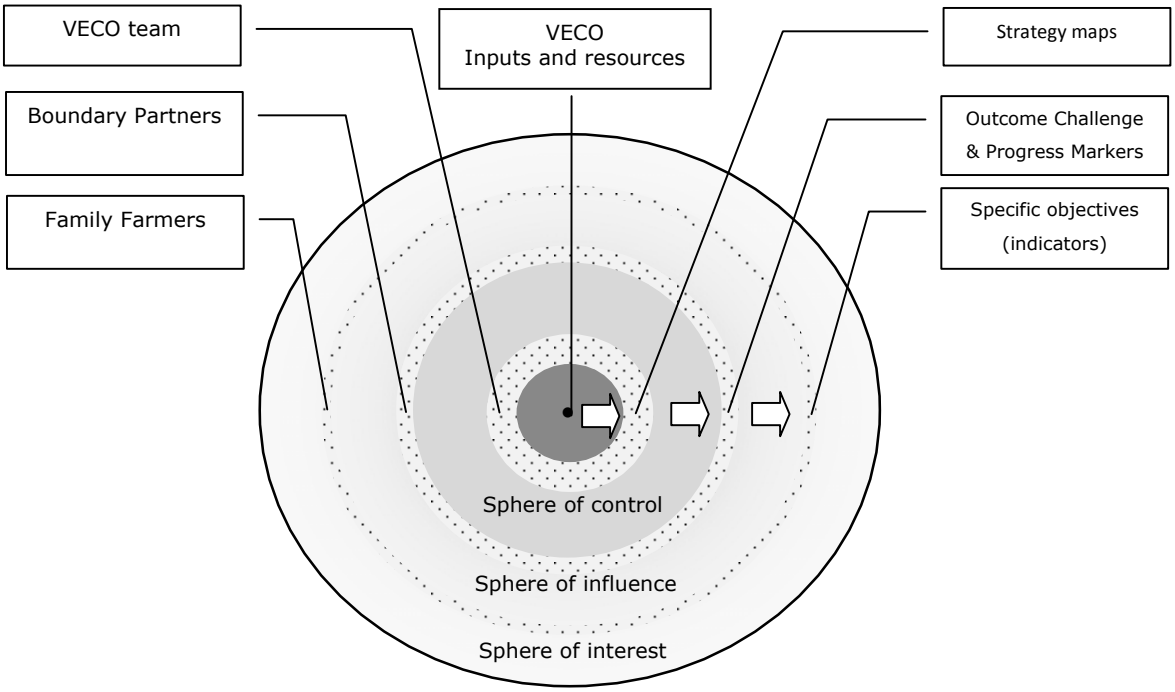

Figure 19: VECO's spheres of control, influence and interest
(adapted from Crawford, 2005)

OM promotes the idea to design a programme boldly, i.e., within the broadest development context or within its *sphere of interest*. The desired changes are normally included in the vision statement of the programme. In the case of VECO, the vision statement is the vision of the entire VE organisation (worldwide) and the specific desired changes are spelled out by the specific objectives. However, in terms of monitoring and evaluation, OM takes a particular stand. Rather than trying to attribute impact results to particular interventions of the programme, it urges programmes to focus the monitoring on the changes within the programme's *sphere of influence*, i.e., by assessing *contributions* to the achievement of the outcomes (progress markers) (Earl, et al, 2001, p. 6).

As in many programmes, it is not an option to *not* assess the changes at the level of the farmers. VECO will still monitor and assess the progress made by the farmers with regard to the objectives of the programme with the aim of understanding and learning about the realities and changes 'in the field' and to anticipate and strategise better. Monitoring at this level is also required by VECO's donors to 'prove' changes at impact level as part of the justification for the funding received (upward accountability).

However, the core process of the monitoring – at least for the programmatic aspects of the PLA system – is the continuous assessment of the progress markers for VECO's boundary partners (sphere of influence) and VECO's strategy maps (sphere of control). The main purpose of this process is to assess the effectiveness and relevance of VECO's support strategies against the changes in behavior, action and practice of the boundary partners. It includes a critical reflection on the behavioural changes of the boundary partners 'assumed to be relevant' (as stated in the intentional design) and on why certain changes have been achieved or not, and whether those changes actually contribute to the objectives of the programme (relevance). As a result, progress markers and strategies can be adjusted, withdrawn or added in order to accommodate new emerging insights and contexts (factors and actors). In addition, through the ongoing monitoring of specific objective four on organisational learning, VECO assesses its own relevance and viability on an ongoing basis.

5.5 DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLA SYSTEM

This section describes the process and some of the results of the development of the PLA system, and is structured around the seven design steps presented in chapter four.

5.5.1 SCOPE AND PURPOSE

The PLA design process was launched with a focus group interview (F1) during which all VECO staff discussed and identified the purpose, use, users and components of the PLA system.

Figure 20: One of the three focus groups discussing purpose, use and users of the PLA system

The focus group interview initially made use of the categorisation of uses provided by Estrella and Gaventa (table 2 in chapter 2) to guide the discussion. Later it was decided to categorise the uses of the PLA system in line with the core elements of its name, i.e. *planning, learning and accountability*. Table 13 presents the outcomes of this focus group interview. This focus group interview also spelled out the intended users. The primary users identified were *VECO, the donors, VECO's partner organisations, family farmers and VE HO*. As VECO is a key user, the team further identified the different users within VECO, such as *management staff, programme officers, finance staff and admin staff*. The external users were not present during this meeting. However, due to VECO's extensive experience and contact with each of the respective users, it was assumed that the 'perceived' uses were in line with the real uses of the respective actors. Then, at a later stage, during the F3 meeting attended by the partner organisations, the main intended uses of the partner organisations were cross-checked and verified with the partners.

	GENERAL USE	SPECIFIC USE	INTENDED USERS
PLANNING	**1. Short-term planning & ongoing programme management**	• To develop and revise the operational planning (including budget) • To develop the short-term planning	*VECO Management* *Programme staff* *Partner Staff* *Finance staff* *VE HO*
	2. Strategic planning	• To develop a strategic planning and direction setting	
LEARNING	**1. Programme improvement**	• To understand the strengths & weaknesses of the programme and VECO • To discuss and develop improved programme strategies and interventions	*VECO Management* *Programme staff* *Partner staff* *Farmers* *Communication & publication staff*
	2. Organisational learning & knowledge creation	• To gain understanding and knowledge about VECO's core themes (SACD, advocacy, gender mainstreaming, multi-stakeholder processes …). • To document and share knowledge & lessons learned internally and externally • To gather information/knowledge for evidence building for the advocacy programme	
	3. Enhanced understanding & negotiation with partners (social learning)	• To understand the positions and points of view of partners / farmers • To build common understanding and negotiate programme focus, collective action and roles • To improve relationships and trust with partners & other actors	
ACCOUNTABILITY	**1. Progammatic accountability**	• To measure the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, sustainability and impact of VECO's programme and its interventions • To document and communicate on the process and the results of the programme to donors (upward), government (upward), partners	*VECO Management* *Programme staff* *Finance staff* *Partner staff* *Farmers* *VE HO* *Donors*

		(downward), farmers (downward) and public (outside)	
	2.Financial accountability	• To prove VECO has sound financial management and bookkeeping (audit) • To compile the donor reports • To compile an annual (popular) report for partners, public, government	

Table 13: Intended uses and intended users of the PLA system

By focusing on the respective users and uses, the team also realised that the scope of the PLA system and the respective monitoring and learning processes moved beyond typical programme monitoring. It became clear that the PLA system had the potential to provide a framework for a more holistic monitoring & learning process for VECO, consisting of three main components:

1. The VECO programme as defined by its intentional design
2. The specific learning needs of VECO
3. The organisational functioning of VECO

For example, nine months into the development of the PLA system, VECO initiated the *Regional Learning Initiative* (RELI) in cooperation with other VECOs in Asia. This collective learning trajectory focusing on specific learning topics (e.g. private sector cooperation, multi-stakeholder processes …) would in the previous programme have been handled as a separate organisational initiative. However, the RELI has now been entirely included within the VECO PLA system, including its learning needs, key spaces and documentation process.

The third component, i.e., the monitoring of the organisational functioning of VECO, covers aspects such as the organisational change process, staff development, performance appraisals, financial management and the PLA system itself. However, this component is *not* included in this study as its development was postponed until the finalisation of the organisational change process that VECO is currently undergoing.

This initial step, during which the basic ideas and intentions of the PLA system were decided, was referred to by two of the interview respondents (I2 and I3) as one of the key moments of the PLA design process. Horton et al. (2003) argue that discussions about these initial and fundamental

aspects of the M&E system are an essential step to assist in cultivating the necessary support and commitment for the monitoring process (p. 87).

PLA principles

The underlying principles for the PLA system were neither developed nor decided at a specific moment in the PLA design process. Rather, they emerged gradually through the reflections on the previous M&E systems, during the many discussions held and from readings of the documents at VE level. They are in line with the principles of the guiding M&E approaches of Outcome Mapping (OM), participatory M&E (PM&E) and Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UF-E). I compiled them and later presented, confirmed and adjusted them together with the team during workshop F6. Most likely, the principles will be further adjusted and gain more meaning during the implementation of the PLA system.

- *Utility*: the PLA system needs to be useful for the programme actors who produce and use the information.
- *Participation*: VECO wants to move away from the notion that M&E is '*done to the programme*' and aims to engage the programme team and partners in the design and implementation of the monitoring processes. It fosters self-assessment as an important sense-making approach.
- *Learning*: the main benefits of the PLA system should come from the insights obtained during the monitoring and learning process rather than from the results presented in the reports. It should generate new knowledge; support learning; guide planning, motivate future activities, and build M&E capacity and reflective thinking among the different people involved.
- *Focus on the process*: In line with OM, the PLA system aims to provide the programme with a continuous system for thinking holistically and strategically about how it intends to achieve results, and therefore focuses on both the process and the results.
- *Feedback*: The PLA system should allow VECO to seek feedback on its interventions and performance from partner organisations and farmers, and VECO should also provide feedback to those actors (two-way accountability and downward accountability).
- *Systematic documentation*: VECO aims to invest in relevant systematic documentation of the information obtained, lessons learned and decisions taken during the M&E process. This aims to support better reflection and analysis as well as to allow M&E findings to be more easily shared and communicated.
- *Transparency*: the PLA system and related processes need to be open and honest. Transparency also includes openness in the communication and sharing of the M&E findings (programmatic and financial) to our partner organisations and other stakeholders.
- *Realistic and pragmatic*: VECO aims to develop a PLA system and procedures which are realistic, (cost-) effective, pragmatic and as simple as possible.

5.5.2 ORGANISATIONAL SPACES AND RHYTHMS

During focus group interview F5, the management and programme staff of VECO discussed and identified the existing organisational spaces (events) and rhythms (frequency) for the planning, learning and accountability processes in VECO (for one calendar year).

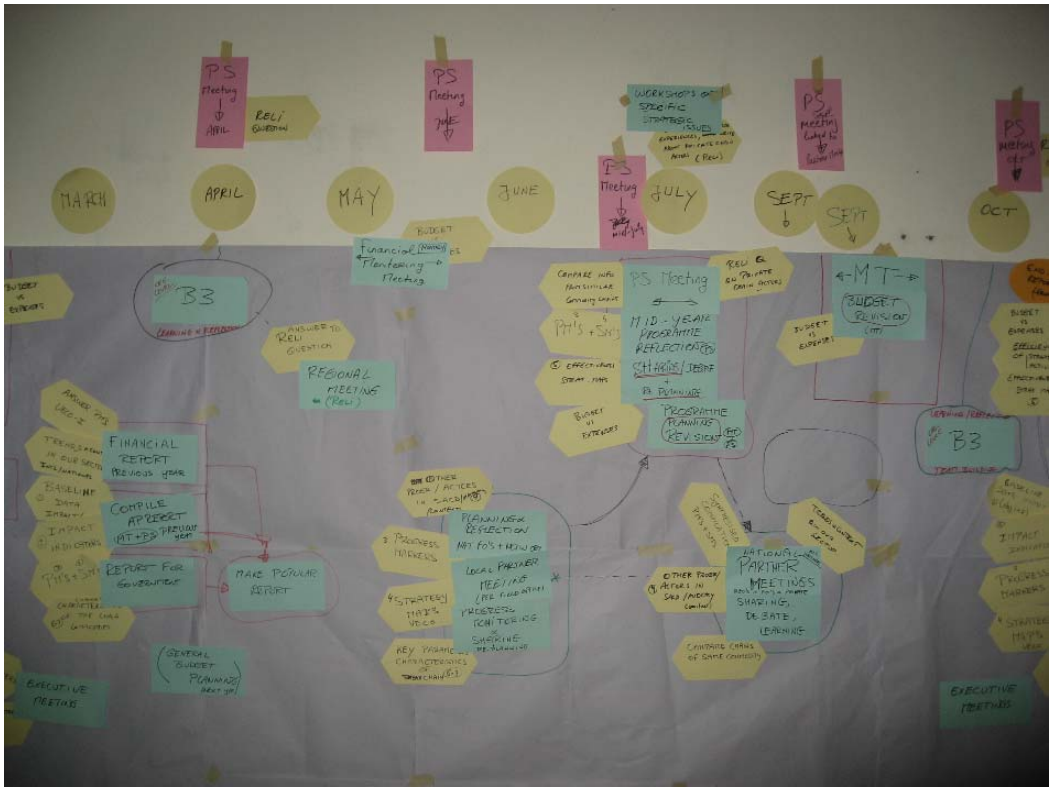

Figure 21: Results of the focus group discussion on VECO's organisational spaces & rhythms

However, a critical analysis of the events showed that further investigation of the types, sequence and relations between events (spaces) was required. The team identified overlapping events, illogical orderings of events and some omitted events. There were different reasons why the existing organisational spaces and rhythms needed to be adjusted: to improve the link between the monitoring and the planning process, to comply with the timeframes for data collection processes, to meet reporting deadlines, and to anticipate new emerging work processes at VE global level. An overview of the organisational spaces and rhythms can be found in table 14.

Examples of changes in organisational events

- First, since two years ago, VECO has been organising the *Badan Belajar Bersama* (B3) – which may be translated as '*shared learning forum* – a bi-annual learning & reflection week (B3) attended by all VECO staff which covers both programmatic and general organisational

aspects. A critical reflection on this organisational space revealed that the mandate of the B3 was not clear and that the major parts of the agenda were not relevant for all staff. Also, the fact that because this event was neither connected to the monitoring and planning process, nor a decision-making space, it did not lead to the desired outcomes. This resulted in the identification of a 'new' mid-year and end-of-year review meeting for the programme section while the B3 has remained a core bi-annual organisational learning event for all staff but with an adjusted agenda, i.e., including only organisational aspects relevant for all staff.

- Second, the PLA system aims to foster social interaction and sense-making between VECO and its partner organisations. The analysis of the core events for planning (and learning) in VECO resulted in the finding that reflection on programmatic issues with partners only happened during ad-hoc and informal events (field visits, participation in field activities, assessing the partner proposals …). Therefore it was decided to install a bi-annual local partner meeting in each of VECO's geographical working areas which would serve as formal sense-making events with partners (informal sense-making is of course still encouraged).

OVERVIEW OF KEY FORMAL EVENTS

ORGANISATIONAL SPACES	TIME	PLANNING		LEARNING			ACCOUNTABILITY	
		Short-term planning	Strategic Planning	Programme Improvement	Organisational learning	Understanding & negotiation with partners	Programme Accountability	Financial Accountability
Assessment of annual partner proposals (*)	Dec-Jan	X				X	X	X
VECO work plan + operational programme planning (*)	Feb	X					X	X
Mid-year reflection	Jul	X		X	X			
Budget review meeting	Sep	X						X
End of Year evaluation meeting	Dec			X	X			
Planning meeting for next year	Dec	X	X					
End of financial monitoring for the previous year (*)	Mar	X						X

External financial audit	Feb							**X**
VECO management team meetings	Monthly	**X**	**X**					
Programme section meetings (*'home weeks'*)	Every 6-7 weeks	**X**		**X**	**X**			
Local partner meetings	Jun & Nov			**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	
Multi-stakeholder platforms for specific market chains	Ad-hoc			**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	
National partner meetings	Aug			**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	
VECO learning & reflection week (B3)	Apr & Oct				**X**			
Communities of practice at section level (KBAs)	May & Oct				**X**			
Regional Learning Initiative (e-forum + regional meeting)	Apr & Aug			**X**	**X**			
VE Executive meeting (global)	Oct & Mar		**X**	**X**			**X**	

*Remark: the events indicated with (*) are not characterised by a single meeting but rather by a series of different processes and meetings. The events in **bold** are the key sense-making events for VECO*

Table 14: Formal organisational spaces and rhythms for planning, learning and accountability

The programme officers also reflected on which informal spaces were crucial for sharing, reflection, analysis and learning and identified:

- Informal day-to-day discussions and sharing of opinions among VECO staff (at the office or in free time activities)
- Ongoing contact with partners (consulting, sharing ideas, discussing opportunities …)
- Participating in and/or facilitating activities with/for partners
- Field visits and exchange visits
- Writing down and systematising experiences in documents and reports
- Personal contact with people of other organisations (meetings, conferences, exhibitions …)

During workshop F5, there was a discussion on how the informal spaces could be more formalised. It was concluded that it would be difficult and even undesirable to formalise them as there was a danger that the 'natural' knowledge sharing and sense-making process would be killed. However, it was recommended to invest in methods and tools which could capture the knowledge and sense-making taking place in these informal spaces, and ideally, feed them into the formal monitoring process. The mechanisms for generating, capturing, storing and disseminating knowledge promoted by organisational learning and knowledge management practice could be useful in this regard (see section 3.5.6).

This step was concluded with a short description of each core PLA event, stating the focus areas, who should attend, what type of sense-making (sharing, reflection, learning, decision-making) was involved, and the desired outputs. In addition, a flow chart of the key events and their linkages was developed for the planning, learning and accountability process of VECO.

5.5.3 INFORMATION NEEDS

The identification, negotiation and prioritisation of the information needs were ongoing processes covered during a series of meetings (F2, W1, F3, F4, W3 and F5). However, it was only during meeting F5 that the information needs were explicitly linked to the organisational spaces. This is an example of how the development process did not follow the seven steps in a sequential order (see table 8 in section 3.3.2)

Programmatic information needs

Most of the programmatic information needs emerge from the intentional design of the programme. The indicators of the four programme objectives induce specific information needs. Furthermore, the monitoring process focuses on the outcomes of the programme's boundary partners, i.e. monitoring of the progress markers, to obtain useful feedback about the programme's performance and results within its sphere of influence. In addition, the monitoring process focuses on how the programme has contributed (or not) to the programme and the outcomes of the partners, i.e. monitoring of the strategy maps. The progress markers and strategy maps (e.g. in figure 19) can as such be seen as the formulation of information needs. However, in order for data collection to effectively generate information which would be useful and relevant for analysis and comparison among different partners of the same boundary partner group, it was decided to define specific information needs linked to the respective progress markers and strategy maps in the form of questions (see table 15).

As it became clear that the identification and formulation of progress markers and strategy maps is a crucial element of the design and the further M&E process, VECO organised meetings W2 and F3 with representatives from the different boundary partners in order to clarify, revise and prioritise the progress markers and strategy maps. Furthermore, participants considered whether it would actually be possible – and how easy it would be – to collect the required data. Outcome Mapping (Earl et al., 2001) argues that the progress markers and strategy maps will evolve over time and can be adjusted during the implementation of the programme to ensure the relevance of the programme efforts. Therefore, it is necessary to include critical reflection on the relevance of the progress markers and strategy maps during local partner meetings.

PROGRESS MARKER *Local NGOs…*	SPECIFIC INFORMATION NEEDS
6. Identify, generate and provide information to farmers on technical aspects of the market chain to improve their access to resources (e.g. market, financial, …)	6.1. Which information has been generated and provided to the farmers (type of info, format & media) 6.2. Has the information been useful? Have farmers benefited from this information? How?
7. Initiate or actively participate in activities/meetings during which famers and farmer organisations can meet and cooperate with different actors of the market chains (multi-stakeholder fora)	7.1. Which activities/meetings have local NGOs carried out and participated in which have enabled farmers and farmer organisations to meet and cooperate with different actors of the chain? (Number of farmers (m/f) and actors, when, where, what topics and geographical scope).

Table 15: Examples of progress markers of local NGOs supporting VECO's advocacy programme

At a later stage in the process – and with the help of a specialist – VECO identified information needs for the monitoring of the different market chains – a list of quantitative and qualitative chain variables. For the monitoring of the programme finances it was decided to continue with the current information needs, although these will be revised and further developed after the organisational restructuring process of VECO is completed. Table 15 provides an overview of the programmatic information needs.

Specific learning needs

VE aims to establish an internal monitoring and learning process between VE HO and the VECO's on a limited number of issues such as establishing the right partner-mix, developing strategies for facilitating SACD and documenting experiences. In addition, VECO committed itself to include the organisational and institutional learning initiatives into its programme in order to enhance its understanding and knowledge on challenging programmatic topics. The *Regional Learning Initiative* (RELI) aims to systematise experiences from VECO's in Asia on private sector cooperation and a c*hain-wide learning* project - a collective learning alliance in cooperation with other organisation and chain actors – aims to foster understanding on market chain development and alternative business models. These initiatives generate their own information needs, mostly defined by a set of guiding questions which facilitate the analysis and systematisation of experiences. Table 16 gives an overview of the information needs related to the learning initiatives.

GENERAL INFORMATION NEEDS	M&E QUESTIONS & SPECIFIC INFORMATION NEEDS	TIME/FREQUENCY
2.1 Inter-organisational learning VE		
2.1.1 Key changes at the level of VECO	Limited set of progress markers for VECO	Semi-annual
2.1.2 Key strategies by VE HO in support of VECO	Limited set of strategy maps for VE HO support services	Semi-annual
2.2 Regional Learning Initiative		
2.2.1 Prioritised learning topics for VECO Asia (e.g. private sector cooperation, gender mainstreaming …)	A set of guiding questions for the systematisation of experiences and analysis	Semi-annual
2.3 Chain Wide Learning project		
2.3.1 Collective learning initiative in cooperation with other organisations and chain actors	*Not defined yet*	*Not defined yet*

Table 16: Information needs related to VECO's specific learning needs

The information needs for the internal organisational functioning of VECO will be developed and prioritised once VECO has finalised its organisational change process.

Unknown information needs

VECO's *donor organisations* also require specific data and information. Some donors give VECO the freedom to report in its own way as long as it follows and refers to the approved programme logic and objectives. However, VECO's main donor works with a compulsory standard report. The report format and associated information needs were unknown at the time of the development of the PLA system.

VE HO has its own information needs at both programmatic and organisation levels. As the majority of the information is generated by all the country offices, which need to incorporate these information needs in their respective data collection processes. These final information needs were not yet decided upon during the PLA design process covered by this study. However, an indication was provided through the piloting of the new semi-annual report (to be compiled by the VECOs for VE HO). Based on the following feedback from the VECOs (D15), it was decided that the report needs revision (including the information needs):

- The report requires a high number of information needs (not always in line with the data collection processes in the country offices)
- The report requires quite detailed data and information.
- There is a lack of clarity about what the information provided would be used for.
- The generation of information and required syntheses were not always useful for the VECOs.
- The report used a rather rigid and unattractive format.
- Compiling the report was time-consuming.

Prioritisation of information needs

The above-mentioned information needs are the results(so far) of the prioritisation process which gradually evolved during the PLA design process. The general and specific information needs identified during the first two meetings (F2 and W1) generated the following feedback:

> *... The information needs were probably elaborated from a thematic point of view, i.e., what could be interesting to know? … There is a need to simplify the system … focus on how to reduce the demanded information to a level that serves VE doing its job… Experience shows that many organisations are overwhelmed by the burden of constant monitoring … people are frustrated because they don't have much time for work (implementing) because they are constantly faced with monitoring issues (production of reports, seeking information etc.) … Action (planning and implementation) is the leading function, while monitoring is the support, feedback, learning tool ...*
>
> (D14)

Throughout the subsequent PLA design process (meetings F3, F4, W3 and F5), VECO screened the information needs and gradually moved from 'nice-to-know' to 'must-know' information needs. However, I observed that people found it difficult to prioritise information needs. First, it was difficult for people to connect specific data with their potential use and therefore, difficult to 'weight' the importance of particular data against other specific data. Second, prioritisation seemed to be easier when the data were not directly related to the job or the reality of the people and/or when data were rather difficult to collect, e.g,. for the impact and objective levels of the information needs. On the other hand, when people were discussing data related to their own jobs, prioritisation seemed to be more difficult. For example, VECO programme staff together with representatives from the different partner organisations revised and negotiated the progress markers and strategy maps along with the priorities for monitoring (meeting F3). Animated debates resulted in negotiated progress markers and strategy maps, and their respective information needs. However, prioritisation was difficult and participants agreed that what they had come up with might indeed lead to a 'heavy' data collection process. It was decided that further prioritisation could take place during the implementation of the programme, at which point the actual usefulness (or not) of the data would become clear. The rather detailed data collection process for year one was perceived as an advantage since the data collected could serve as the baseline for each progress marker and strategy map.

The key moment for prioritisation took place in meeting F5, during which the information needs were matched with the organisational spaces (to determine what information is required for each PLA event). This process led to the identification of the most required information needs as well as some information gaps (e.g. some missing elements related to market chain monitoring). This process also gave indications about the form and type of data needed. It was recognised that in some cases, general patterns are sufficient (e.g. changes in the context and progress in the respective market chains) while in other cases, a more detailed understanding of specific issues is required (e.g. for contractual requirements, for deepening understanding of an issue or for non-negotiable progress markers such as those linked to the indicators in the LFA).

The jar and the rocks

Figure 22 highlights the central position of the first three steps of the PLA design process. The decisions taken with regard to the purpose, the organisational spaces and the information needs are crucial for the further development of the PLA system. Therefore, it is recommended that these steps be discussed, revised and updated with the actors involved and that participants should allow the necessary time to develop the steps thoroughly. The metaphor of 'the jar and the rocks' used in organisational development practices applies here. If one wants to fill a jar with big rocks, small rocks, sand and water, one need to start with the big rocks and add the smaller ones at a later stage. I would compare steps one and three with the big rocks and the remaining steps with the smaller particles. If you don't put the big rocks in the jar first, it is very difficult – or impossible – to put them in at a later stage. Once the first three steps are well defined, they automatically provide direction for the timeframes, the depth and type of data collection, the sense-making process and the documentation. By implication, any changes in the first three steps during the implementation of the programme will have a direct effect on the process of the next steps.

The figure also indicates the central role of organisational spaces and sense-making in the PLA system. In the case of VECO, step three (information needs) was first carried out in disconnection from step two (organisational spaces). At a later stage (during F5), the concept of organisational spaces was incorporated into the process and the link between steps two and three was established (see table 8 in chapter 3).

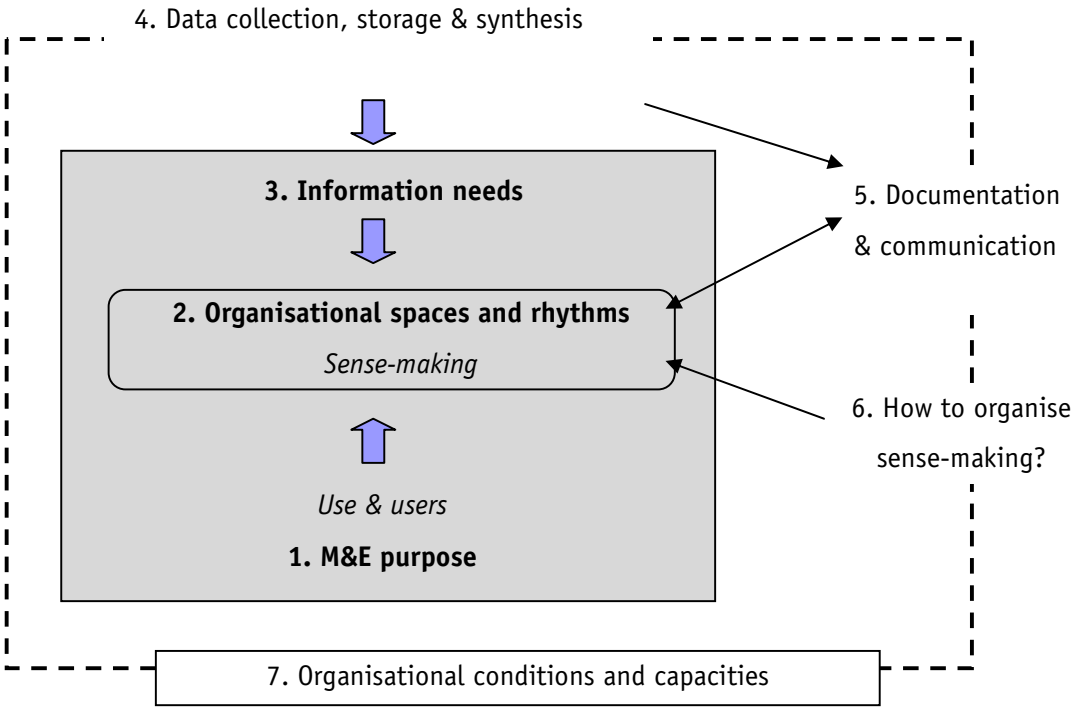

Figure 22: The central role of the first three steps

5.5.4 DATA COLLECTION

The previous steps give indications on which data collection methods can be used to generate the required data. Table 17 gives an overview of the data collection methods for the programmatic information needs.

The following categories of data collection methods were identified for VECO's programme (W3):

1. Data collection through the semester and annual *partner reports*
   For example: partner progress markers, VECO strategy maps, and changes in the chains
2. Data generation through *debate in meetings* such as local partner meetings, multi-stakeholder processes and VECO's end of year reflection meeting
   For example: partner progress markers, effectiveness of VECO's strategies, impact stories
3. *Observation & self-reflection* by programme officers
   For example: partner progress markers, new trends and actors, dynamics within the chains

4. Use of specific *data generation tools* such as interviews, surveys, focus groups and studies
   For example: specific farmer data (income), detailed market chain data and impact study
   External sources such as the media, key informants and secondary data
   For example: market information, impact changes

5. *Informal & ad-hoc events* such as exchange and field visits, discussions with chain actors
   For example: impact stories, partner progress markers and new trends

The informal and ad-hoc events can be seen as *unplanned* data collection methods. VECO has no intention to formalise these events but rather aims to capture from them – as far as possible – relevant information and observations. A knowledge tool to assist in this capturing process is the '*VECO DIGEST*', a light and simple document integrated into VECO's intranet site which provides the space for VECO staff to briefly note down interesting and relevant aspects of events such as meetings, workshops, field visits, informal meetings, and even large documents. Material for the VECO Digest can be compiled on a voluntary basis or planned before an event takes place.

GENERAL INFORMATION NEEDS	M&E QUESTIONS & SPECIFIC INFORMATION NEEDS	TIME/FREQUENCY	DATA COLLECTION
1. PROGRAMMATIC INFORMATION NEEDS			
1.1 Impact level			
1.1.1 Baseline data for specific objectives 1 to 4 (incl. Sustainable Livelihood Analysis for objective 1)	Based on the indicators of each specific objective (+ prioritised info. needs based on DFID's SLA model)	End of 2008 (year 1)	1. Personal interviews (30 farmers/market chain) 2. Focus group discussions (30 farmers/market chain) 3. Secondary data 4. Self-assessment (for objective 4)
1.1.2 *Indicative* evolution of changes related to specific objective 1 to 4	In line with the indicators of each specific objective	Yearly (end of year)	1. Stories from farmers and VECO's partners 2. Partner reports 3. Observation by programme officers 4. Multi-stakeholder processes with chain actors 5. Secondary data 6. Self-assessment (for objective 4)
1.1.3 *Assessment*[10] of changes related to specific objectives 1 to 4 (*)	In line with the indicators of each specific objective (similar to the information needs of the baseline)	End of 2010 & 2013	1. Stories and personal interviews with farmers 2. Focus group discussions with farmers 3. Secondary data 4. External assessment + self-assessment (for objective 4)

[10] Information needs to be included in the evaluation part of the PLA system

1.2 Market chain assessment / monitoring				
1.2.1	Baseline data for each market chain supported by VECO-I	Defined by the questions & info. needs of the Participatory Agriculture Chain Assessment (PACA)	End of 2008 (year 1) + when new chains are included in the programme	1. Participatory Agriculture Chain Assessment (PACA) (facilitated multi-stakeholder process with chain actors) 2. Secondary data 3. Key informants
1.2.2	Ongoing chain monitoring of the supported chains in each working area	A prioritised set of questions and info. needs defined by the Participatory Agriculture Chain Assessment (PACA)	Semi-annually Annually	1. Partner reports 2. Observation by programme officers 3. Secondary data 4. Surveys 5. Multi-stakeholder platforms with chain actors 6. Key informants
1.3 Partner outcomes				
1.3.1	(Behavioral) changes at the level of the boundary partners	Set of progress markers per boundary partner	Semi-annually	1. Self-assessment partners 2. Partner reports 3. Observation programme officer 4. Local partner meetings
1.4 Strategy maps VECO-I				
1.4.1	VECO's support strategies & activities for boundary partners	Set of strategy maps of VECO per boundary partner	Semi-annually	1. Annual operational plans 2. Activity reports
1.4.2	Appreciation on the efficiency and effectiveness of VECO's strategies	Set of guiding questions	Semi-annually	1. Self-assessment by programme officers 2. Partner reports 3. Local partner meetings

1.5 Programme finances				
1.5.1	Budget vs expenses	A set of specific quantitative information needs (budget vs expenses per objective, per partner, per type of strategy …)	Quarterly	*1.* Monthly financial reports by partners 2. Financial reports from field offices 3. Bookkeeping system
1.6 Context				
1.6.1	Other/new relevant projects and actors in our sector and/or working areas & opportunities for synergy	Set of guiding questions	Annually	1. Local partner meetings 2. Observation by programme officers 3. Partner reports
1.6.1	Important changes in the context (e.g. environment, policies, business environment …)	Set of guiding questions (incl. assumptions in the LFA)	Annually	*1.* Partner reports 2. Secondary data 3. Observation by programme officers

Table 17: Overview of programmatic information needs and data collection methods

Storage of data & information

VECO uses a variety of data collection methods which generate data at planned and ad-hoc moments throughout the year. Four types of interlinked data will be systematically stored in computerised databases and conventional electronic formats:

1. Market chain data and information: systematic storage of data and information about (changes in) specific market chains (including data from producers/farmers) in a *'living document'*[11] structured by a set of market chain variables
2. Partner outcomes: most important data on progress and results per boundary partner (partner database) structured by the progress markers. The data is stored in standard reports and a computerised partner database
3. VECO's activities: systematic storage of VECO's activities - structured by the strategy maps - in a computerised database
4. Programme budget and finances: systematic storage of the most important programme financial data structured by the financial information needs.

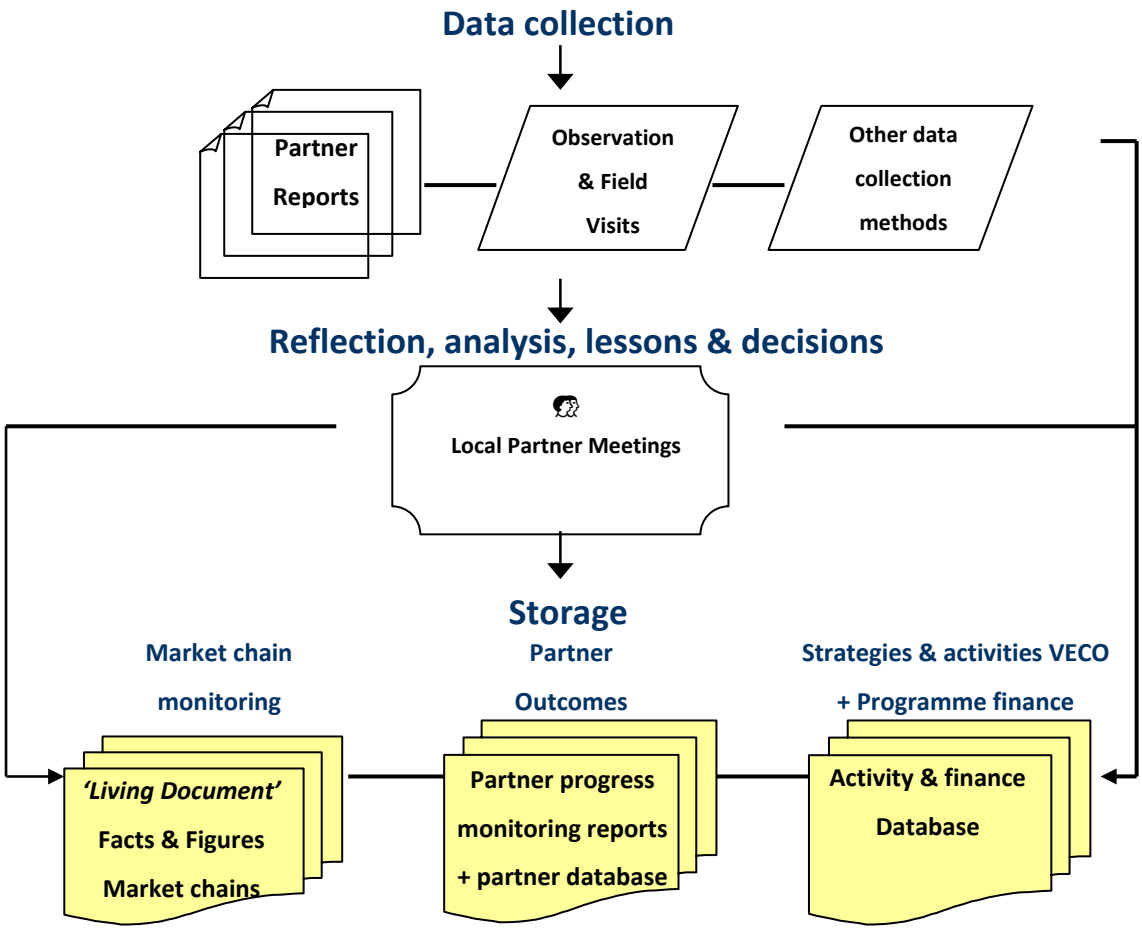

Figure 23: Systematic data storage in the PLA system

[11] *A 'living document' is a document which is continually edited and updated by either a limited or unrestricted group of people.*

Synthesising data

At some stages in the PLA process, data and information need to be synthesised for them to be used for critical reflection, sense-making, documentation and communication. The piloting of the mid-year review meeting with VECO programme staff made it clear that synthesised information is crucial for an efficient reflection and analysis process. It was observed that it is not practical or efficient to have discussions on big amounts of data or detailed data. Particularly the monitoring of progress markers – although useful for generating insights on the progress of the change process – can generate an overload on information. A pre-defined format with probing questions was developed to assist programme officers in synthesising the data collected from their respective working areas (*field office reports).* The computerised partner and activity database is supportive in compiling synthesised overviews such as charts, tables and diagrams.

5.5.5 SENSE-MAKING

Collecting data is one thing, making sense of the data so that they can actually be used is another. In fact, this is the main purpose of the monitoring and learning process. Sense-making is the process which fosters and builds reflective thinking into programme management. It is an ongoing and complex process which occurs at both individual and group levels (section 4.3.5). To facilitate planning for sense-making in VECO, a distinction was drawn between the key *planned* sense-making events and the *informal* sense-making processes.

In terms of planning, it was felt that the agenda, structure and methods to be applied in the planned sense-making activities cannot be decided in advance. Each event should be designed according to the situation and context at the time of implementation. Sense-making events are often combined with other programme activities, which means that flexibility is required to anticipate changing issues and contexts. It implies that there is no 'blueprint' approach to sense-making events and that a case by case preparation process is required. In fact, it is an evolving process of 'learning how to learn' for both VECO's staff and key stakeholders. Therefore, the focus of the design of the *planned sense-making* events was limited to the identification of the events, the key participants and the main focus of the meetings. The following events are the main *planned sense-making* moments within the PLA system (see also the **boldface** events in table 13):

1. Multi-stakeholder processes for specific market chains (ad-hoc)
   Fora with key actors of a specific market chain such as the producers/farmers, middle-men, collectors, buyers, traders and exporters facilitated by VECO programme staff and/or its NGO partners, focusing on issues related to the market chain (production to consumption).

2. Local partner meetings (twice a year)
   Meetings with boundary partners and VECO programme staff focusing on the changes, roles and performance of boundary partners as well as the (effectiveness of) strategies and activities carried out by VECO.

3. Progamme coordination meetings (six times a year)
   Also referred to as 'home weeks', i.e., VECO programme staff from the five field offices gather in the country office to update each other, share stories and experiences from the field, and decide on short-term planning and financial issues.

4. Mid-year reflection (once a year) and end-of-year evaluation meetings (once a year)
   Meetings with VECO management and programme staff to reflect on the major changes and challenges in each working area and revise the strategies for the next period.

5. Badan Belajar Bersama (B3) (twice a year)
   An event attended by all VECO staff (including administration, finance and support staff) focusing on office-related and organisational issues such as internal communication, policies and procedures, HRM, organisational structure changes and team building.

Figure 24: Multi-stakeholder forum with actors of the groundnut chain in West Timor

In addition, further directions with regard to the core processes, desired outputs and guiding principles for sense-making were identified:

- The collected data and information are presented and shared with those who produced the data or to those to whom the data pertains. By doing so, these events become an important feedback mechanism in the PLA system.

- Participants engage in a critical analysis and debate on the data. By doing so, it is hoped that their understanding of the changes, progress, challenges and the context of the programme will improve and that insights for improved action will be co-created.
- The events are aimed to generate additional data and information emerging from the analysis and the use of the probing questions.
- Participants draw conclusions and formulate recommendations for future actions.
- Although consensus can be reached on some common points of action, multi-actor meetings (e.g. sense-making events 1 and 2) are not as such designed for decision-making. As Leeuwis (2004) concludes regarding decision-making processes in multi-stakeholder settings:

  > *…It appeared unrealistic, in practical terms, to expect people to adhere strictly to rational decision-making procedures … The best way of enhancing and supporting decision-making … is to stimulate and encourage continuous experiential learning. On the basis of such regular learning, people can identify which issues and problems need to be tackled, and can gradually collect the necessary insights and experiences to inform and shape conclusions that, in retrospect, may be called 'decisions.*
  >
  > (p. 152)

  The meetings at VECO level (sense-making events 3, 4 and 5) include some direct decision-making while some recommendations for future actions are taken up by the VECO management team for final decision taking.
- Finally, the events should be organised in a way that motivates (e.g., by highlighting the achievements and progress made) and inspires people. This includes methods and approaches which avoid mechanistic analytical processes and which are fun and focus on the positive.

Sense-making in Outcome Mapping

Outcome Mapping fosters sense-making through its particular design. Its learning character lies in the fact that it calls for reflection and analysis – through self-assessment – of the connections between changes at the level of the boundary partner and the support strategies of the implementing team (VECO), as well as the organisational practices of the programme (objective 4 VECO programme). Outcome Mapping suggests a variety of reflective questions to guide the sense-making process: 'what are the unintended changes?', 'what are the hindering and contributing factors in relation to the desired changes?', and 'how effective and efficient were the support strategies in relation to the changes?'.

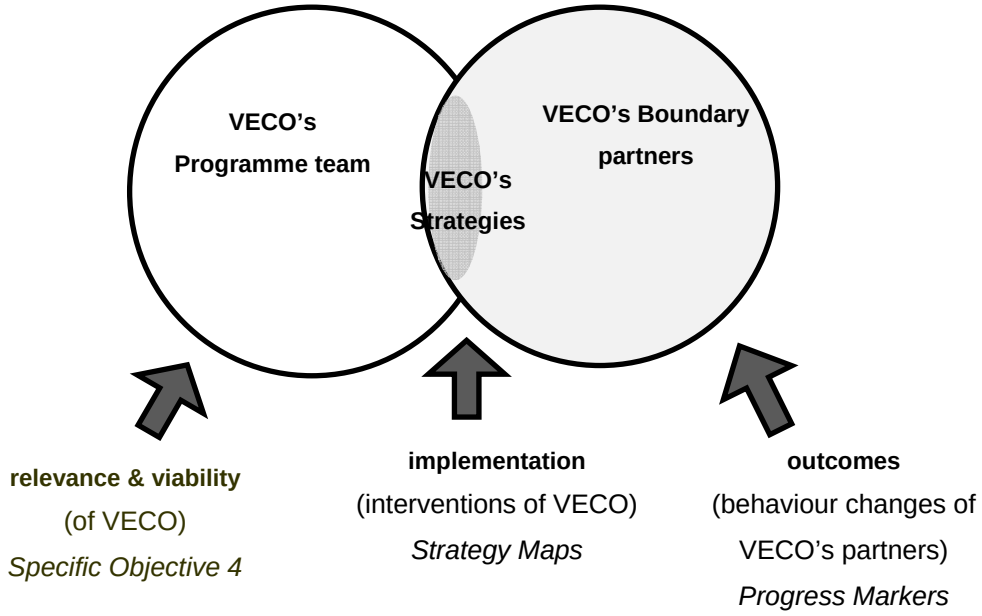

Figure 25: Focus of the monitoring process according to Outcome Mapping
(adapted from Earl et al., 2001:13)

Informal sense-making

Critical reflection, analysis and drawing conclusions do not only occur during planned events. Sense-making happens during all events listed in table 13 as well as during informal moments (section 5.6.2). Social interactions through informal process are critical as sources of information and as part of sense-making, and more efforts should be made to connect these informal spheres with the formal monitoring process (Guijt, 2008, p. 280). To anticipate the importance of informal events, VECO – as part of its o*rganisational learning* and *knowledge sharing*[12] practice – invests in processes which facilitate the sharing of experiences and knowledge. The following activities and approaches are examples of ways in which informal processes are connected to the PLA system:

- A conscious learning approach for particular activities.
  For example, VECO organised a four-day field visit with a mixed group of participants (programme officers from different VECOs, representatives from VE HO and visitors/experts). The programme of the field visit included a daily 45 minute group reflection during which participants shared observations and opinions, asked for clarifications and identified interesting topics for further inquiry for the next days. A final reflection at the end of the field trip resulted in some lessons learned and a list of recommendations for VECO, summarised in a two-page document.

[12] VECO uses the term 'Knowledge Sharing' instead of 'Knowledge Management' to emphasis that knowledge is not so much a product or object to be managed, but more a kind of process manifesting itself through human interaction.

- The use of specific learning-oriented methods in meetings and workshops
  For example, narratives and stories, ORID (Objective-Reflection-Interpretation-Decision), Consensus Building Technique, Open Space Technology, Fish Bowl, Ritual Dissent …

- The use of outside facilitators to guide certain reflective sessions
  For example, for a reflection session on food sovereignty, VECO and its NGO partners invited an outside facilitator to guide the systematisation process

- Embedding learning mechanisms into the organisational rhythms
  For example, debriefing sessions, peer assist groups, post-action reviews and knowledge cafés

- Specific KS-tools
  For example, the VECO DIGEST and VECO's programme database and intranet

VECO will also embark on two specific learning trajectories (see table 15), i.e., the *Regional Learning Initiative* (RELI) and the *Chain-Wide Learning* project. For these action learning processes a series of tools and mechanisms are installed specifically for sense-making such as face-to-face systematisation sessions, a 'google group' and a wiki.

5.5.6 DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATION

This step of the PLA design process focuses on how monitoring and learning results are documented and internally and externally communicated. *Internal communication* refers to the communication between the different sections and levels in VECO while *external communication* is directed to actors outside VECO such as the beneficiaries (farmers), partners, market chain actors, VE HO, donor organisations, government, the general public and the development sector.

The following *official* reports are identified within the PLA system:
- VECO partners produce a *monthly finance report* and *semi-annual/annual partner reports*
- VECO programme officers produce internal semi-annual and annual *field office reports*
- VECO produces an overall *semi-annual programme report* for VE HO
- VECO produces an *annual financial and programme* report for VE HO and its donors.

Official reports usually follow a standard format and tend to contain a lot of detailed data. Therefore, the key challenge for each of the reports is to balance the focus on overall changes, results and key findings with the inclusion of detailed information, which can make the reports heavier and less attractive. The general approach to generating useful and 'light' partner and field office reports is to focus on the key results (synthesis) of the monitoring and learning process rather than treating the reports as carriers of all the data collected during the process. This implies a separation between the collection/storage of data (figure 23) and the internal

reporting process. The new official report format focuses on the key activities carried out in that period, the key changes and results achieved, a narrative reflection and analysis part guided by a set of probing questions and visual aides (graphs, pictures …) and stories. The new format has reduced the average size of the partner report by half, i.e., from forty or fifty to fifteen or twenty pages.

The last two types of report listed above are compiled by VECO and used internally. They are the basis for the compilation of the semi-annual and annual reports for either VE HO or the donors. The piloting of the new semi-annual report format from VECO to VE HO generated quite a lot of internal discussion as it was perceived as 'too heavy' and 'too detailed' – and therefore time-consuming to compile. The debate made it clear that before designing and implementing reports, it is crucial to ask the questions: *'what is the main purpose of the report?'* and *'who is actually going to use the information (users/ use)?'*. In addition, reporting to donors mostly requires a standard report in line with the programme logic and framework and a set of pre-determined information needs. The report is compiled with data from the respective databases and the internal synthesis reports.

Besides the official reporting, VECO aims to produce other forms of documentation, publications and communication based on M&E results. The development of a publication and external communication strategy is embedded into the PLA system. The basic idea is that results and findings – among other information – can lead to (or be part of) *planned publications* such as the popular annual report, the VECO newsletter '*LONTAR*', commodity or market-chain briefs, topical booklets and case studies as well as *ad-hoc publications* such as papers, videos, newspaper articles and conference papers. Furthermore, interesting M&E results will be communicated through a variety of tools such as the VECO intranet, VECO website/blog, conferences/seminars and virtual communities of practice. The development of the databases, logic filing systems and internal communication systems are therefore crucial as well as requiring good cooperation between the coordinator of publications and external communications, the IT officer and the coordinator of M&E and learning.

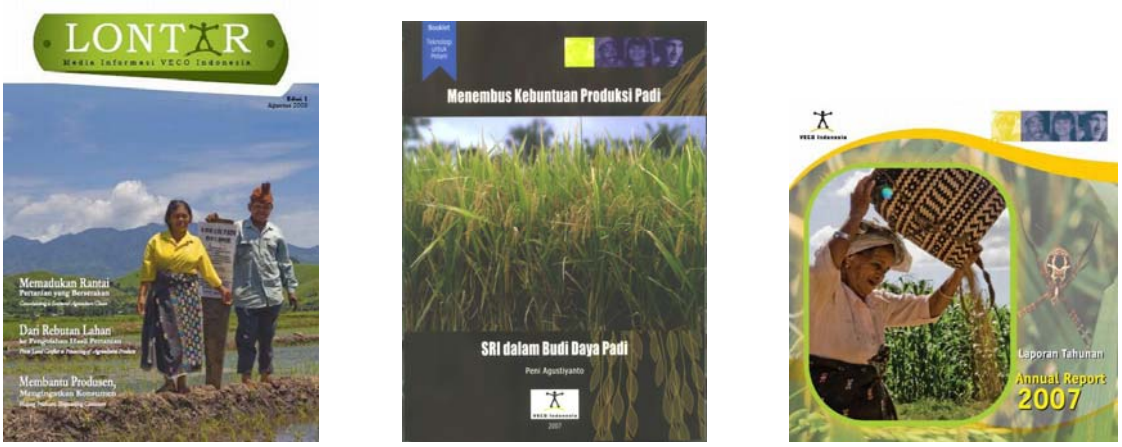

Figure 26: Alternative forms of documenting and communicating monitoring and learning results

(left: VECO Newsletter 'LONTAR', middle: technical booklet on Rice, right: annual public report)

Feedback

On many occasions, sharing and communicating M&E results is directed to higher hierarchical levels (VE HO, donors, government). The term 'reporting to…' mostly refers to the people to whom one is accountable within the organisational hierarchy. In the VECO system, official reports follow the same logic, i.e., partners report to VECO and VECO reports to VE HO, government and donor organisations. As official reports are often seen as the only to way to communicate M&E results, there is a danger of uni-directional flow of information, and other important communication and feedback loops are neglected, i.e., internal sharing of M&E results, communication from VECO to its partners and from VE HO and donors to VECO.

Communication to partners and farmers

Partners report semi-annually to VECO. The data from these reports, together with the information generated during the local partner meetings, are used to compile VECO's semi-annual programme report. However, this report is long, technical and in English. In other words, it is not a useful mechanism for communicating M&E results to the partner organisations and farmers. To circumvent this problem, VECO produces an Indonesian annual report for its partners and the general public. However, some respondents in this study highlighted the need for a quicker and simpler way of communicating M&E results to partners and farmers through VECO's website/blog, in the form of short Indonesian-language overview reports (fact sheets), a newsletter, a story collection and/or a presentation of results during the national partner meetings (attended by all VECO partners).

Internal sharing of results

It was observed that reports are often compiled by one person or just a few people. After they are sent out to the respective actors, these reports are hardly ever read or shared internally, although they include important and relevant information in a synthesised form. Therefore it was concluded during W4, that management should invest more in sharing M&E results in forms such as financial overviews and programmatic progress and results summaries through the notice board, VECO's intranet site and staff meetings.

5.6 ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS & CAPACITIES

… The PLA system cannot be developed and implemented successfully without investment of resources, commitment of the staff and a change in attitude towards monitoring …

(D9)

5.6.1 INTRODUCTION

The concluding step of the development of the PLA system focuses on the necessary organisational conditions to institutionalise the PLA system at VECO. An assessment of the organisational conditions was carried out based on the model described in section 4.3.7, the main idea of which is that the PLA system will be effectively and successfully implemented and maintained if VECO creates the right *motives, means and opportunities* (table 18).

CREATING MOTIVE	CREATING MEANS	CREATING OPPORTUNITIES
1. Guiding ideas	1. Human capacity	1. Integration into management & operations
2. Support from management	2. Specialist support	2. Structures, responsibilities & plans
3. Culture of learning	3. Concepts & methods	3. Information Management Infrastructure
4. Incentives	4. Financial resources	4. Relationships of trust

Table 18: Organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system

For the assessment of these organisational conditions, I used an *individual questionnaire* (see appendix 5) which was filled out by 11 respondents (management and programme staff). One month later, I organised a *focus group interview* (F6) with the same group of respondents to further analyse the twelve elements. The individual questionnaire only focused on a 'scoring' of the different elements guided by twelve questions (presented in random order). Respondents indicated their score without prior knowledge of the conceptual background of the organisational conditions. The focus group interview included a presentation of each of the twelve elements (table 17) followed by group scoring and further analysis of each element. The individual semi-structured interviews provided additional insights on the organisational conditions and triangulated the data obtained during the focus group interview.

Figure 27 presents the outcomes (scoring) of both the individual questionnaire and the focus group discussion. People could give their opinions about VECO's performance for each of the twelve elements by indicating one of the five options (scale): not true (0), barely true (1), somewhat true (2), largely true (3), very true (4). The results suggested that some elements were more developed than others. There were relatively high scores for guiding ideas, management support, concepts and methods, finances and integration in management. A rather low score was observed for incentives, human capacities, structure and responsibilities, and information management. There was no intention to take these results as absolute and make a judgement based on these figures alone. Rather, the results were used to trigger

discussion during the focus group and the individual semi-structured interviews with the aim to understand people's opinions and formulate suggestions for future action. In the next part I elaborate on each of the twelve elements.

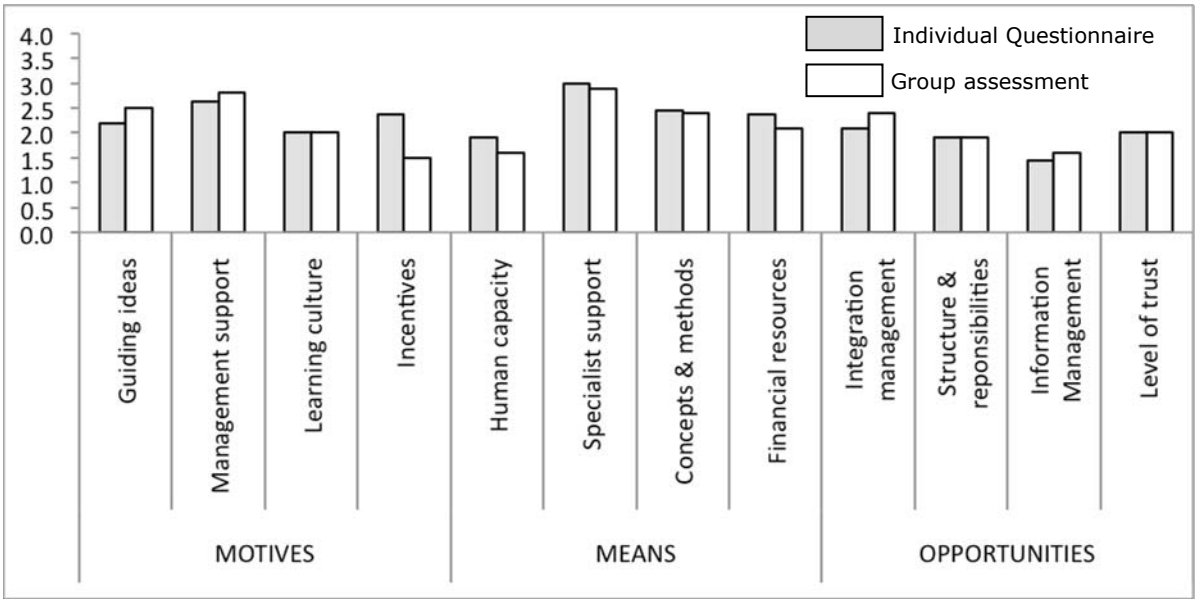

Figure 27: Results of the assessment organisational conditions per element

5.6.2 CREATING MOTIVES

Guiding Ideas

Management and programme staff acknowledged that throughout the PLA design process there had been a continuous emphasis on the purpose of the PLA system and why it was important for VECO. However, as one staff said: *'real "internalisation" of the system can only happen through practice … and will be necessary to fully grasp the real benefits and challenges of the PLA system'.* The administration and finance staff participated in the first two activities (F1 and F2) but did not attend the other events due to both time constraints and the strong focus on the programmatic component of the PLA system. Therefore, there was not (yet) a common understanding about the PLA system among all staff at VECO. In addition, some VECO staff were wondering whether VECO's partner organisations sufficiently understand the PLA system since they 'only' participated in workshop W2, focus group interview F3, the 'socialisation' process for VECO's new programme and the piloting of the new reporting system. Other staff argued they might not need all the details and conceptual background of the PLA system but rather would engage them actively in the implementation of the PLA events. Therefore, further 'promotion' of the PLA system to all VECO staff – especially the finance and administration management staff – as well as the partner organisations is required. It is also recommended that the purpose and expectations of each step be continuously communicated throughout the implementation.

Support from management

The respondents confirmed the results presented in figure 27. They stated that there was sufficient support from the VECO management team (MT) for the development of the PLA system, i.e., *'PLA was put on the agenda, the different development activities have been fully supported and resources have been made available'* (I3). However, the following areas of concern were identified: The MT needs to ensure the use of the information generated through the monitoring process for decision-making. Therefore it was recommended to invest in improving inter-personal relationships and internal communication at VECO level, and to more actively communicate key M&E results to VECO staff and partner organisations. In addition, since VECO is undergoing an organisational re-structuring, the MT needs to invest in 'socialising' the PLA system to newly hired management staff (since they did not participate in the development process).

Culture of learning

During the last two years, VECO has invested in enhancing a learning culture through a variety of initiatives, such as the establishment of the Learning and Information Management Section (LIMS), the communities of practice, the learning and reflection week, a VECO intranet site and a regular Knowledge Café. Respondents perceive the effects of the learning initiatives on the organisational culture differently.

> *Although fertilisers …* [referring to the different learning initiatives] *… have been added to the soil, the soil did not seem to absorb and use the fertilisers … because the organisational culture was not supportive*
>
> *(I3)*

> *…Slowly, VECO staff are able to express themselves and give critical feedback in a positive way … [while] … before people did not tend to critique each other or there was sometimes a negative undertone to it*
>
> (I2)

The respondents recommended further investment in institutionalising learning and knowledge sharing mechanisms, especially within the programme section. The fact that the new M&E and learning coordinator is positioned on the programme team was seen as positive. Furthermore, VECO staff suggested continued adoption of a learning approach in the core programme events and the provision of regular spaces to talk, think and discuss together. Lastly, there was a suggestion that personal learning and development needs should be identified and openly discussed with other colleagues, and appropriate learning strategies decided (as part of the staff performance appraisal system).

Incentives

As shown in figure 27, there was a substantive difference – compared to any other element – between the results of the individual questionnaire and the results of the group assessment regarding incentives. Respondents argued that this was caused by the fact that the individual questionnaire did not include an explanation of what was really meant by incentives. There

was a tendency for individuals to relate incentives with direct benefits such as salary and training opportunities. After a broader picture of incentives was clarified during the focus group interview, respondents scored the 'incentives' element lower.

For further analysis on incentives, I developed a scoring sheet (see appendix 6) to guide a group exercise on the encouraging and hindering incentives currently present at VECO. The most outstanding encouraging incentive was the incorporation of the position of the M&E and learning coordinator into the program management unit. Since this is a new position, the respondents also commented that the involvement and recognition of this new coordinator should be monitored by the management team to ensure he or she had appropriate status. The first most hindering incentive (disincentive) was the lack of clarity about the M&E responsibilities of the different staff involved. It was argued that once the expected tasks within the PLA system were defined, they should be included in the job descriptions of the respective staff. The second was that although the programme team members acknowledged there were opportunities for training on a variety of technical topics, they expressed that there were limited opportunities for professional development with regard to programme management and M&E in particular. They argued that ongoing M&E support and capacity building for programme staff will be crucial in the future.

In addition, respondents discussed incentives in relation to other stakeholders. They clarified that the incentives for partners and farmers to participate in and contribute to the monitoring and learning process needs further attention. In particular, they felt that the feedback mechanism from VECO to partners/farmers – seen as an important motivational factor – needs to be further developed in the PLA design. Furthermore, programme staff argued that they need clearer PLA guidelines from VE HO as well as further clarification on how the collected information will be used by VE HO, '*We need to feel that we contribute to something when we provide data to VE HO*' (I2).

5.6.3 CREATING MEANS

Human Capacity

The 'human capacity' element scored relatively low compared to the other 'means' (figure 27). The respondents confirmed that they needed to improve their own M&E capacities for certain aspects of the PLA system. '*At the moment we know what the PLA system is, but the capacities to implement all the different elements of the PLA are not fully developed yet*' (I2). '*Through the years we have developed sufficient experience in collecting data and report writing, but other areas are still weak*' (I4).

M&E capacities in VECO were further analysed during the focus group, guided by a set of M&E capacities and related questions: 'who should have which M&E capacities?', 'what needs to improved?' and 'how can the necessary capacities be enhanced?' (appendix 7).

The areas for improvement identified were:

Reflective practice

- Developing a reflective attitude during the implementation of the programme, i.e., to systematically observe and reflect on the progress, changes and emerging patterns

Sense-making process (management, programme and finance staff)

- Improving the skills to analyse and synthesise data from the field
- Improving the skills to facilitate critical reflection and analysis (self-assessment or with partners)
- Improving the skills to conceptualise and take 'learnings' to the next step (follow-up).

Documentation and communication (programme staff and coordinator of publications and external communication)

- Improving the skills to document M&E results in forms other than official reports, such as publications, stories, newsletter and video
- Improving the skills and mechanisms to adequately communicate M&E findings internally (VECO and VE) as well as to the partners and other stakeholders.

In order to build capacity, respondents suggested a mix of specific M&E trainings, backstopping by consultants and experts, and learning by doing – *' … involve people and give people responsibilities …' (I2).*

Specialist support

The specialist support element was rated high during both assessments. Respondents referred to the presence of two people as key actors in the development and future implementation of the PLA system. As part of VECO's strategic choice to invest in learning, it decided to hire a learning and knowledge sharing programme advisor (myself). It is through this position that I was tasked with the development and implementation of the PLA system. In addition, VECO decided to hire a M&E and learning coordinator. However, a concern was expressed that the organisation should not rely only on one or two people and that VECO should strategise for the integration of M&E expertise into the different sections of the organisation and invest more in documenting the PLA system.

Concepts and methods

In general, the respondents felt that there was a sufficient base of concepts, methods and tools to implement the PLA system. However, '*the PLA system is not static. It means we cannot leave it as it is developed now, we need to constantly revise and adapt it, based on the feedback. It is a never ending story which requires constant negotiation, communication and adaptation of concepts and methods*' (I3).

The respondents also mentioned that VECO should more actively explore and experiment with new methods such as most the significant change technique, appreciative inquiry and storytelling. Furthermore, as the PLA system aims to provide a framework for organisational and institutional learning it has the potential to include methods and tools linked to the

practice of organisational learning and knowledge management. The VECO Programme 2008-2013 proposal document (2007) refers to the integration of multi-stakeholder processes, learning groups, peer assist groups, debriefing and post-action reviews, and knowledge cafés as well as an investment in appropriate information management and IT infrastructure (taxonomy files, intranet, databases, guidelines …) (p. 40).

Financial resources

The respondents argued that VECO had sufficient financial resources available for the implementation of the PLA system. Decisions on important budget lines such as human resources (e.g. M&E and learning coordinator) and the organisation of key PLA events have been taken. Additional – and new – expenses are the costs for M&E capacity building of staff/partners and hiring consultants for specific M&E tasks (e.g. database development). At VECO, expenses for M&E are normally included in the budget for programme management. However – in line with the intentions of the PLA system and VECO's programme (objective four on learning) – some monitoring and learning activities are embedded in the programme and field activities (e.g. local partner meetings, multi-stakeholder platforms with market chain actors, publications …). These activities will be incorporated into the operational budget of the programme. To guide the future budget planning of the PLA system, different budget categories have been developed (table 19).

BUDGET CATEGORIES	DESCRIPTION	PLA SYSTEM
Personnel costs	Permanent and staff salaries for M&E design, coordinating M&E processes, information management, documentation & reporting …	M&E and learning coordinator (100%) Learning & knowledge sharing programme advisor (x%) IM & IT officer (x%) Publication and external communication coordinator (x%)
Operational costs	Overhead costs, stationary, events and meetings, venues, travel, allowances, accommodation, documentation costs …	Baseline study & livelihood analysis Assessment of partner proposal documents (annual) Mid-year and final year reflection meetings (annual) Overall planning meeting (annual) Local partner meetings (bi-annual) National partner meetings (annual) External financial audit (annual) B3 (bi-annual) Regional Learning Initiative (RELI) VECO Asia
Development & capacity building	M&E design activities, M&E related training activities, study, exchange visits, seminars …	Ongoing training / study by the M&E and learning coordinator Language training (English) for VECO staff M&E capacity building activities for VECO staff and partners

		Exchange visits to other projects and programmes Workshops for further development of PLA system
Equipment	Publication materials, computers, software, database, presentation equipment …	Computers & other hardware Software (database, desktop publishing …)
External consultants & experts	Any external support for development, training, facilitation, specific M&E tasks, studies, evaluations …	External facilitator(s) for key PLA events Consultant for programme database development Consultant for baseline study and livelihood analyses Consultant for intranet and IM tools development Translators External evaluators

Table 19: Budget categories for the PLA system

5.6.4 CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Integration into management processes

The integration of the M&E and learning coordinator into the programme management unit of VECO is seen as one of the key factors for the integration of the PLA system into the management and operational processes of VECO's programme. Furthermore, programme management staff need to ensure that the PLA events are incorporated into the annual planning documents (operational plan and annual activity calendar). The respondents also discussed other crucial – but challenging – processes:

- Feeding monitoring and learning results into the decision-making moments, especially in the management team meetings.
- Including financial monitoring in the PLA system
- Revising operational procedures and work processes in view of the four new field offices
- Linking the monitoring process with documentation, publication and communication.

Clear structures, responsibilities and plans

In general, VECO staff found that the PLA plans were clear enough to guide the implementation of the PLA system. However, in the future, '*we need to internalise the planning into our normal flow of work. It's not only to put the different tasks in the calendar but we also need to follow up on how we implement the PLA system*' (I1). In addition, VECO staff expressed interest in continuing the 'specialist support' from the learning and knowledge sharing programme advisor during the implementation of the PLA system.

The organisational re-structuring implies a new and clear organogram. The coordination of the PLA system has been ensured by the newly installed position of M&E and learning coordinator. Although the role and responsibility of this person is clear (through the job description), respondents highlighted that more clarity was required with regard to the roles of other VECO

staff involved, especially – but not limited to – the programme officers and programme manager. In an additional group exercise, respondents discussed the core PLA tasks of the staff involved and identified the potential overlapping responsibilities and tensions. It was recommended that their job descriptions should be adjusted to enhance clarity on the expected M&E responsibilities and tasks.

Information management system

An information management system in support of the PLA system was perceived as the least developed element among VECO's organisational conditions. The respondents argued that although there was a good basis for IM (server, intranet and centralised filing system), there was no system (yet) for the systematic storage of data generated through the monitoring and learning processes. Reference was made to the lack of a structured way of filing monitoring data such as market chain analyses, key changes and results and lessons learned, as well as the lack of a computerised database system to improve the accessibility of the data for compilation of syntheses and to meet reporting requirements. The standard reports – the conventional way to store and communicate monitoring data and information – used within the PLA system were perceived as logical and useful, but respondents argued that the reports could still be further simplified.

Level of trust

This element is related to the second element, 'culture of learning' (for which the assessment resulted in an equal score). During the personal interviews respondents highlighted some issues with regard to trust at VECO level, such as personal conflicts, limited sharing of failures, personal challenges, and feedback among colleagues. The re-structuring of the organisation and the newly hired staff were perceived as positive – '*breaking some of the old patterns*' (I4) – and as potential leverage for improving trust among staff. '*Investing in team building and anticipating (reconciliation) of staff conflicts by management are crucial actions to support trust*' (I3). Specifically related to the PLA system, the respondents argued that investing in good communication, feedback and discussion among the people involved in the PLA system will be essential to build trust and to work together as a team towards the same goal. Respondents related the issue of trust mainly to the level of VECO. However, interpersonal relationships and trust building between VECO staff and the staff from partner organisations are an important element in the partnerships. It is commonly acknowledged that the 'aid-relationship' (Anderson, 2000) – in which VECO can be seen as the 'giving actor' – is rather ambiguous. Some formal and informal PLA events (local partner meetings, field visits, informal meetings and multi-stakeholder platforms) heavily depend on the quality of the interaction between partners and VECO. Therefore, continuous reflection on the quality and nature of the partnerships should be incorporated into the PLA system. '*We need to further develop our methods and approaches to involve partners and farmers more in the monitoring process … walk the talk of participation*' (I1).

5.6.5 FOLLOW-UP

This self-assessment exercise triggered a discussion on how the different elements could be improved and which aspects required further attention and action in the near future. Since it was carried out at the start of the implementation of the PLA system, the results can be seen and used as a *baseline* for the organisational conditions for the institutionalisation of the PLA system. These reference data – among others – may be useful for future (ongoing) assessment of the PLA system.

The results presented in figure 27 provide interesting insights about my past and future role as – to use the terms of the model – a 'specialist support' provider. As stated in section 4.3.7, this is a 'champion' function and role which involves the coordination of the development of the PLA system, helping people and the organisation to learn, developing competencies to learn, facilitating analysis and developing appropriate tools and methods. On the one hand, the results reflect the focus of my support during the development process, i.e., on establishing *guiding ideas,* creating *management support,* developing *concepts and methods and integrating M&E into the management processes*. On the other hand, they show which areas were less developed and/or not covered, and require further support during the implementation of the PLA system, i.e., fostering a *culture of learning*, enhancing *human capacity*, supporting the establishment of appropriate *incentives*, providing clarity on the M&E *roles and responsibilities,* and the development of *information management systems.*

5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the action research process and its results. It is entirely based on the results of the focus groups, document analysis, personal observation and face-to-face interviews. It started with an overview of the main characteristics of the M&E system used in the previous programme and highlighted how VE and VECO came to the decision to develop a learning-oriented M&E system - the *planning, learning and accountability (PLA) system* - for its new programme. Since monitoring, evaluation and learning cannot be divorced from the design and planning stage of the programme, this chapter included an overview of the core elements of the *intentional design* – based on Outcome Mapping – of the VECO programme 2008-2013. The main body of this chapter then provided a detailed, step-by-step presentation of the seven development stages of VECO's PLA system. It focused on the process, the activities and the design decisions taken for each of the first six steps of the PLA design and concluded with an in-depth assessment of the necessary organisational conditions to institutionalise the PLA system at VECO. Now that the action research design process of the PLA system, which can be seen as the core of this study, has been presented, Chapter 6 turns to reflect on the process and its result – the PLA system itself – and to provide recommendations for the further development and implementation of the PLA system.

CHAPTER 6 REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter critically reflects on both the process and the result of the PLA design process, and the lessons that may be drawn from them so far. The first section is a critical reflection on the action research design process of the PLA system. The second part is a first analysis of the PLA system itself and its relevance for planning, learning and accountability. The concluding part presents an overview of recommendations for the further development and implementation of the PLA system.

6.1 CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE PLA DESIGN PROCESS

6.1.1 INTRODUCTION

The action research development process was carried out from April 2007 to October 2008. I take April 2007 as the starting point of the process, i.e., the workshop introducing Outcome Mapping as the guiding framework for VECO's programme design. The final event of the action research was a focus group interview organised in September 2008, followed by the systematisation and documentation of the results of that event. This section reflects on the *process* of the action research design of the PLA system during this period.

6.1.2 A LOGICAL MESSY PROCESS

The development of the PLA system unfolded through a series of events and processes (appendix 8). Guided by the seven PLA design steps (figure 12), the focus groups and workshops presented in section 3.2 can be seen as the backbone for the data generation and sense-making of the action research. Each event focused on particular elements of the PLA system and built further on the previous steps. The focus groups and workshops included a mix of processes such as discussion, debate, consultation, feedback and decision-making resulting in specific (tangible) outputs. The fact that VECO staff and partners were already used to participating in facilitated group methods made the data generation and sense-making process easy to organise and effective.

However, the PLA design process was carried out over a relatively long period and people did not perceive it as a continuous process (I1, I2, I3, I5). In between the core events, the new insights and decisions taken were systematised, documented and communicated, and the PLA framework was fine-tuned. During these interval periods – from one to four months – VECO staff took up their normal busy work and '… *we somehow lost momentum*' (I5). All respondents stated that it was not easy to stay tuned to the overall process and progress made, or to see how all the different pieces connected to each other (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5).

A strong element of the process was the logic and structure of the process, a step-by-step plan consistently followed over a longer period … and by each step new decisions were taken. On the other hand, the process did not feel as a continuous process … and during each workshop I needed to catch up again with the process … the refreshers on the different steps and the progress made in the previous steps were therefore useful and from there we could move on again …

(I5)

Although the seven steps and the respective guiding questions (appendix 3) suggest a linear step-by-step sequence, the real process was less straightforward and at some stages messy and confusing. The following aspects – mentioned by the respondents – resulted in non-sequential and overlapping processes:

- The PLA system was built up gradually. However, the steps are connected and need to be developed together. This implies that new inputs require revisions in previous or subsequent steps;
- The PLA design process took place in a busy, action-oriented NGO and the different activities and inquiry processes had to be embedded into the existing organisational events and rhythms of VECO (e.g. planning meetings, bi-annual reflection moments, budget meetings, management meetings, programme section meetings and partner meetings);
- The action research had to accommodate real life processes and deadlines. For example, workshop W3 on organisational spaces and rhythms (step 2) also included the design of the new reporting formats (step 6) because it was required at that time in the year;
- The VECO programme 2008-2013 had just been launched and the programme design still required changes during the period of this study (choice of new boundary partners, integration of market chain monitoring into the PLA system …) and subsequently influenced the PLA design process;
- New guidelines and directives from VE HO and donors with regard to the monitoring and learning process resulted in additional information needs;
- New insights, theory and experiences were incorporated into the PLA design process, resulting in the adaptation of the process and the inclusion of new elements. For example, the adoption of organisational spaces and rhythms as a key step in the PLA design process was not part of the initial plan;
- The rather drastic organisational changes at VECO during the PLA design process resulted in a new organisational structure for VECO, new job profiles and staff changes which affected the flow of the process.

The PLA system was intended to cover the three general components, i.e., the programmatic component, the specific learning needs and the internal functioning of VECO. However, time constraints and the organisational re-structuring of VECO meant that the *internal organisational functioning* component (financial management, HRM issues, organisational change process and the PLA system itself) was not taken up in this study. Furthermore, the *evaluation part* of the PLA system was not covered during the period of the research.

6.1.3 FOUR SEASONS

During the period of the research (April 2007 to October 2008), I observed that the action research process unfolded in four stages, each with their respective characteristics, which I refer to as the *four seasons* of the development process. Appendix 8 gives a detailed overview of the activities carried out in each 'season'.

1.	Inquiry & dreaming	5 months	April 2007 - August 2007
2.	Exploration & confusion	6 months	September 2007 - February 2008
3.	Direction & focus	3 months	March 2008 - May 2008
4.	Decision & action	5 months	June 2008 - October 2008

Inquiry & dreaming

This period was characterised by a critical reflection on the previous M&E system as well as an inquiry into Outcome Mapping and 'dreaming' about its potential to facilitate a more effective, relevant and learning-oriented M&E system for VE and VECO. The discussions with regard to monitoring and learning were still general, idealistic and not yet connected with the realities of VECO's programme. The *'how to'* questions were not yet raised. Three interview respondents (I1, I4, I5) mentioned the Outcome Mapping workshop (April 2008) as one of the key moments of the PLA design process. This is surprising because the workshop focused on the alternative design approach and not on the M&E process as such. Respondents identified the new and inspirational ideas promoted by Outcome Mapping as the key elements marking this event as a significant moment.

Exploration & confusion

During this period there was a lot of debate among VECO management and programme staff on how the M&E part of Outcome Mapping could work practically in the VECO context. Through the different PLA workshops in this period – focusing only on the identification of the PLA components, the respective information needs and some initial ideas about the data collection – the practical consequences of the PLA system slowly became apparent to VECO staff and partners. This generated mixed feelings and reactions, ranging from resistance (*'why do we need to change our approach?'*), to cautious interest to *'let's go for it'*. This period was not only the longest in time (six months) but also the time during which the new VECO programme was implemented (January 2008). There were still many unknown factors and limited direction from VE HO as to how the PLA system would work with the new programme. It was a period of coming to terms with reality and confusion for many staff – including me – and for the partners.

> *The exercises to develop the progress markers and the strategy maps were very motivating … also the workshop where we decided on the information needs was a crucial step … On the other hand, we discussed and understood only bits and pieces of the monitoring system, but we could not see the full picture … that made some people uncomfortable and confused*
>
> (I3)

There was confusion at that time, because we wanted to know what exactly would be different in the new system … but that took time

(I4)

Direction & focus

The global PLA workshop resulted in an overall PLA framework with guidelines. This provided the necessary common understanding, focus and enthusiasm among VE staff worldwide to go for it. At VECO level, PLA events W3 and F5 brought the development process to the next stage. This focus group and workshop resulted in decisions on the key PLA events and timeframes, the prioritised information needs and the draft reporting formats. It provided clear directions for the programme and management staff, whereby people could connect with the practical aspects of the monitoring and learning process. '*At that moment, the PLA system became practical and it was clear what it would mean in real life and how it would affect my work.*' (I1).

Decision & action

During this period, some major decisions with regard to the PLA system and its events were made at both global and VECO levels: the newly developed reporting formats were piloted both at VECO and partner levels; the mid-year reflection meeting was established; and a new sense-making event emerged, i.e. the local partner meetings. Piloting these new initiatives provided a first reality check of the PLA system and was seen by four of the five respondents as the highlight of the PLA development process.

The moment where I really started to understand the PLA system was during the mid-year review

(I4)

When we filled in the new reports, I really started to see what the difference was with the old system and how we could reflect on the data. It was then that we saw the consequence of what we designed

(I2)

The testing of the reporting system and the try-out of the mid-term review was a powerful moment because people really started to grasp what it was all about. I think it was a turning point for quite a few people

(I5)

6.1.4 FACILITATION: A BALANCING ACT

Due to my position at VECO it was my role to facilitate the PLA development process. This mainly involved the overall coordination of the process, the preparation and facilitation of the core events, the systematisation and documentation of the workshop results, and the support of the implementation of the PLA system. Respondents saw my role as follows: *'to prepare the workshops, guide us through the different steps and provide the information and decisions in a digestible way,'* (I5), or '*to facilitate our thinking during the formal and informal discussions about PLA' (I1),* and *'to facilitate the process for us to provide the content and actually 'fill' the framework' (I2).*

I experienced the facilitation of the PLA design process as an act of balancing between two opposing forces. On one hand, I was expected to provide sufficient structure and direction, to continuously move the development process to the next level and to guide parts of the implementation. On the other hand, it was my intention to guide the participants through a self-exploratory process during which they could discuss different opinions and options, generate new ideas, take their own decisions and formulate suggestions on the way forward. The latter was inspired by the idea that through these negotiative processes, participants would better understand the relatively complex new VECO programme, to build a sense of ownership and ensure that a coherent and useful PLA system was developed and that the key elements of the PLA system were thoroughly discussed and cross-checked before it was implemented. As stated above, this resulted in a rather long process with a series of adjustments along the way. This was perceived by some people as confusing and as a lack of steering. One respondent suggested that it would have been easier if I had developed the system for them and then invested my time in guiding the implementation of that system.

> *Although the process steps were clear, we did not see the full picture for a long time. It seemed like every time we changed and revised issues and postponed the final decision … that made some people insecure and confused. It was as if there was no ending to the process*
>
> *(I3)*

6.1.5 COMPROMISED PARTICIPATION

Ideally, as promoted by participatory M&E, the end users of the PLA system should be part of the development process. In the case of VECO, the end users are the different sections within VECO, VECO's partner organisations, farmers, VE HO and donors. However, the participation of all these actors throughout the whole process was neither practical nor relevant. Below, I give an overview of the participation and interaction of each of the actors in the development process.

The *VECO programme staff* – a team of six people – participated in all the core events and other related PLA processes. Their participation was relevant and crucial throughout the entire process as their understanding and experience of the VECO programme was essential to develop the PLA system as well as to enable them to understand and own the the PLA system. At least two *VECO management staff* – including the country director – participated in each focus group and key workshop. This was crucial for leadership support and the integration of the PLA system into the organisation. In addition, their participation was essential since the PLA system aims to provide a framework for monitoring and learning for the entire organisation and not only for VECO's programme. The *VECO finance and admin staff* joined the first and second focus groups, but they did not participate in the further process due to time constraints and the fact that it focused only on the programmatic component of the PLA system. However, respondents saw this as a weakness of the PLA development process which also resulted in a less clearly developed finance monitoring system.

VECO's partner organisations were involved in the focus group and workshop (F3 and W2) during which the outcome challenges, progress markers and strategy maps were formulated and the respective information needs identified. This was an important moment for the 'socialisation' of the new programme framework and the negotiation of future information needs (which guide the format of the partner reports). For the remaining steps of the process, the partners were not involved directly. VECO supports more than thirty partner organisations located on five different islands in Indonesia, which makes it difficult to involve partner representatives on a frequent regular basis. Programme officers updated progress on the PLA system through informal contacts with partners in the field. However, respondents suggested that '*… efforts need to be made to clearly communicate and share the PLA system and its logic to our partners, especially the purpose and ideas behind the local partner meetings*' (I2).

Local farmers will be participating in some future PLA events (baseline studies, sustainable livelihood analyses, multi-stakeholder processes and EVAPERCA) but they did not participate in any of the core events of the PLA development process. Besides practical reasons, it was observed that in line with the new programme framework, the monitoring process was to be focused only on the boundary partners and the market chains, rather than on changes at the level of the farmers. Some respondents thought that it was more important to infuse our new ideas on monitoring and learning into the existing field activities with farmers and invest in engaging in participatory processes than trying to involve them in the sometimes rather conceptual discussions on monitoring and learning (I1, I3).

VE HO is based in Belgium and was not directly involved in the PLA development process of VECO in Indonesia. However, there were regular and important informal interactions between VECO, VE HO and other VECOs by email and telephone and through the virtual community of practice (PLA forum). In addition, the global PLA workshop was an essential workshop to develop a common understanding of PLA, discuss the various expectations and connect the different levels of the PLA system. The *donor organisations*, based in Europe, were not directly involved in the core events of the development process, but have, through their visits, official communications and reporting formats, influenced the PLA system.

It may be observed that VECO took a rather *intra-organisational approach* to the development process of the PLA system, i.e., developing the monitoring and learning system from the perspective of VECO with strong participation by VECO's management and programme staff. Section 6.3 elaborates further on this.

6.1.6 PROCESS USE

Process use in M&E refers to the fact that the application of evaluative thinking and engagement in the process of M&E can be useful in themselves, apart from the findings which might emerge from these processes, i.e., the M&E results (Patton, 1997, pp. 63-113). Process

use also applies to the PLA development process, which – aside from producing the desired results and outputs (see section 5.4) - also fostered some additional (un-)intended thinking and processes.

Enhancing M&E knowledge

The PLA design process and this study were inspired by the idea that practice (approaches, methods and tools) goes hand in hand with theory (concepts and ideas) – *'practice informed by theory'* (praxis). I aimed to foster debate on the underlying theoretical concepts of mainstream and new emerging M&E and learning practices such as utilization-focused evaluation, PM&E, single-, double- and triple-loop learning, organisational and social learning, the use of stories, process use and sense-making. This was done during the different core events but also at other organisational events such as the B3 and Knowledge Café, in regular meetings, or by providing access to relevant reading material and websites. Doing so was intended to enhance VECO staff and partners' interest in and knowledge of M&E.

> *Throughout the process, we enhanced and changed our understanding, perceptions on M&E, especially the importance of analysis and drawing conclusions instead of just focusing on the collection of data*
>
> *(I1)*

Creating ownership

The rather long-term development process also aimed to create the necessary conditions for the VECO management and programme staff, and the implementers and facilitators of the monitoring and learning processes to take ownership of the PLA system. I observed during the period of the research that the use of language changed. For example, the term 'learning' is now far more often used by management and programme staff and has gained a richer and more tangible meaning (than before). Furthermore, in meetings with partners and external actors, I observed that VECO staff now regularly refer to some of the core principles of Outcome Mapping (e.g. the concept of boundary partners and behavioural changes compared to result-oriented changes) and the new PLA system (e.g. by questioning '*is this useful data to collect?*' or '*who will actually use the information?*')

> *The fact that the process took so long resulted in a deeper process than usual and people could slowly absorb the new ideas and reflect on the consequences for their job and this supported the ownership of the PLA system*
>
> (I5)

However, some respondents took a more cautious and critical stance towards ownership.

> *We have provided the content for the development of the PLA system and we are somehow the creators, but in terms of real ownership I would not rate it too high. I think that programme officers still have the perception that M&E is an extra task and that they HAVE to make a report for the head office and the donor … and not that it is seen as a process which will assist our work*
>
> *(I1)*

There was definitely interest and good cooperation for the development of the PLA system but I also observed some resistance from some VECO staff – which is of course normal in any change process. So, ownership should not be too easily assumed

(I4)

Improving programme design

Although the discussions on PLA mainly focused on the future monitoring and evaluation systems, they could not be disconnected from the initial programme design. The PLA development process was very supportive to identify the missing or unclear elements in the programme design, and facilitated the required adjustments. In other words, exploring the intended monitoring and learning process of the programme seemed to strengthen the design of that programme (which is in fact one of the intentions of the PLA system).

We did not only discuss our new monitoring system, but we also changed our planning design. The whole process was actually a process of understanding the actual planning side of VECO's programme in full depth. So, it was a combined process

(I4)

Facilitating thinking and analysis

The PLA design process induced many formal and informal interactions and debates among VECO staff, partners and VE HO on a variety of topics: the programme strategies and content, the programme logic, VECO's interventions, VECO's role in support of its boundary partners, impact measurement, and how to initiate private chain actor relations. In general, the PLA design process led to open and sometimes lively discussions about the future of VECO and the programme, which – since VECO has a new programme – is essential in building common understanding, motivation and commitment to creating that future.

The piloting of the new partner report format and the discussion it has generated with our partners has already led to different kinds of discussions on the partner programmes and a more in-depth analysis of what we are doing, and that is better than before

(I1)

Basically, the PLA development process was a powerful process in itself to *support planning* and *facilitate organisational learning.*

Strengthening organisational capacity

The PLA design process strengthened VECO's organisational capacity. It generated discussion about the *organisational functioning* of VECO – in areas such as internal and external communication, partnership development, documentation and publications, knowledge sharing and information management systems – which would lead to new or adjusted internal procedures, systems and working processes.

6.1.7 A DYNAMIC AND EVOLVING PROCESS

The PLA system resulting from this action research is not intended to be 'static'. In other words, it is not simply designed once – at the onset of the development interventions – and expected to remain valid for the entire period of the programme. Monitoring and learning are evolving processes and the PLA system will need continuous adjustment to stay relevant. Some of the steps can only be fully understood or finalised during the actual implementation of the monitoring process (e.g. sense-making). Furthermore, during the implementation of the programme, the actors involved will develop their own cognition on monitoring and learning (Guijt, 2008, p. 284) which will result in new practices or procedures. Just as the development process needs to be subject to ongoing monitoring, so do the monitoring and learning processes themselves. In other words, a regular assessment of the PLA system needs to be taken up as part of the 'internal organisational functioning' component of the PLA system (section 5.5.1).

6.2 CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE PLA SYSTEM

At this stage of the process, it is too early to assess whether the PLA system is fulfilling the planning, learning and accountability needs of VECO. During the last four months of this study, VECO started to implement the PLA system and piloted some of the systems and events. The lessons drawn from this initial experience, together with the outcomes of the assessment of the organisational conditions, serve as a basis for the current critical reflection. Furthermore, I have also integrated the initial reflections of the interview respondents, my personal observations and the informal feedback from internal (VECO staff) and external actors (VE HO staff, partner representatives and colleagues from other INGOs). The intended purposes developed in step one of the design process (section 5.6.1) – i.e., planning, learning and accountability – are used to give structure to this section. It presents the new or improved aspects of the PLA system (compared to the previous M&E system), the challenges and possible pitfalls, and a set of remaining critical questions which could – among other questions – be used for future assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of the PLA system. This section concludes with an overview of recommendations for VECO to implement and further develop the PLA system.

Figure 28: Purposes of the planning, learning and accountability system of VECO

6.2.1 PLANNING

The PLA system aims to support the short-term and strategic planning and management process of VECO, leading to improved action. *Short-term planning* refers to the compilation and adjustments of the detailed operational (action) plans (including budgets) made by VECO for its programme and by VECO's partners for their programmes. The detailed operational

(action) plans cover periods from three to twelve months. *Strategic planning* refers to the overall strategic choices and budget allocations related to the selection of new boundary partners or out-phasing existing boundary partners, inclusion of new commodities into the programme and new geographical working areas. Overall strategic choices are made before the start of a new (calendar) year or for a longer period (up to three years).

New or improved systems and processes

A first analysis of the PLA system – based on the inputs mentioned in the introduction of this section – indicates some improvements in comparison to the previous system:

- The PLA system comes with a clear annual PLA calendar, which specifies key events, timeframes and people responsible for the planning process of VECO and its programme, which directly supports the planning activities and (programme) management in general (including the overall strategic planning meeting, the operational planning process, the 'home weeks' during which all field staff gather in the country office, and the mid- and final year reflection meetings).
- While previously, the M&E process focused merely on the programmatic aspects of VECO, the PLA system includes additional aspects such as the monitoring of the programme finances, documentation and publication, learning and knowledge sharing, and elements of VECO's internal functioning.
- The information needs and data collection of the PLA system are structured around general information needs (section 5.6.3). Clear information flows and reporting systems have been worked out and connected with the key PLA events to ensure that the right (type of) information is available at the right time and for the right event.
- The collected data include a mix of quantitative and qualitative data (description of changes, cases …). In addition, due to the focus on analysis as well as synthesis, the monitoring process should result in the generation of richer data and information.
- The programme's *intentional* design has clear objectives for the programme. These are meant to be valid and guide the programme for a longer period of time (up to six years). However, the choice of boundary partners, their respective desired outcomes, and VECO's strategies are not 'written in stone'. Through the systematic monitoring and learning process, VECO and its partners have the possibility to verify whether the approach taken is still relevant or requires revision (new boundary partners, changes to the role of a boundary partner or adjustments in VECO's support strategies). Also, the PLA system encourages people to monitor and to anticipate unexpected changes at all levels.

Challenges and pitfalls

<u>Moving beyond a symbolic reporting process</u>

The PLA system includes a variety of reports such as the partner reports, VECO's synthesis reports and the (bi-)annual VECO programme reports. Reports are commonly perceived as an important end product of an M&E process. However, it is also a common practice – also experienced by VECO in the past – that actual use of the information in the reports as well as

the feedback on their contents are rather limited or even non-existent. This can lead to a practice whereby 'having a report' becomes more important than the actual content of the report – referred to as the *symbolic use* of reports (Watson, 2006, pp. 3-7). In the PLA system, the reports are seen as important documents to be used and discussed (feedback) in the next steps of the monitoring and learning process (e.g. during a PLA event). Therefore, the quality of the reports needs to be assessed and feedback needs to be given to the producers of the report. In addition, one needs to assess whether the information in the reports is actually being used (a particular challenge for the bi-annual VECO report to VECO HO). The use of internal synthesis reports is a new practice. While in the past, programme officers provided quantitative data from their respective working areas for the compilation of the annual report, the current report format includes a synthesis and analysis component. Although programme officers have experienced the benefits of doing this during the mid-year and final year reflection, it is still perceived as an additional task. Therefore, guidance, support and assessment of this practice will be required.

The art of synthesis

Critical reflection and analysis in groups, especially if multiple actors are involved, will be enhanced when participants present and share synthesised information. Through the piloting of the mid-year reflection meeting and three local partner meetings, programme officers and VECO partners experienced that compiling a good synthesis of the progress and results – in a relatively complex programme (involving many VECO partners and market chains) – is a challenge. It requires another type of preparation for the meetings and guidance in the synthesis process to improve the quality of analysis and ultimately, the understanding of the programme. The format and guiding questions for the reports are aimed to assist the synthesis process. The synthesised information will be directly useful for future documentation and publications.

Linking analysis with planning and decision-making

> *If we can further develop good analysis with partners and VECO staff and link the follow-up actions to our operational planning process it will definitely improve the management process of our programme*
>
> (I4)

In terms of planning and action, it is crucial that lessons learned, recommendations and follow-up actions find their way to the decision-making levels, i.e., partners, VECO field offices, VECO programme management or VECO management. Without a conscious capturing and dissemination of the most important lessons learned and recommendations generated during the PLA events, the sense-making process – although relevant in itself – might not lead to changes in action. I have observed cases whereby information and recommendations from previous meetings are not taken up in events where final decisions are taken. This is a challenge, particularly when planning and decision-making moments are scheduled in separate events (sometimes at a much later stage).

Working with progress markers

A new programme element is the use of *progress markers* as a gradual set of changes to mark the progress of VECO's partners in support of the bigger objectives. It is the systematic reflection on the progress markers – facilitating insights on the achieved changes and the effectiveness of VECO's interventions – which aims to influence the planning processes of both VECO and its partners. As this is a new approach, it will require attention and conscious efforts by the programme officers, VECO partners and M&E and learning coordinator to ensure systematic reflection on the progress markers and make adjustments if necessary. If this is not done, there is a danger that the progress markers will be seen as pre-set indicators or as a simple 'check-list' of activities to be carried out by the boundary partners (see also next section).

Remaining critical questions

- Is the collected information actually used by VECO to revise planning and to make decisions?
- Is the PLA system also supporting the planning and management process of VECO's partner organisations?
- Is the PLA system improving the quality and effectiveness of the VECO programme?
- Is VECO able and/or willing to adapt its planning according to emerging insights and changes?

6.2.2 LEARNING

The PLA system aims to facilitate learning in VECO in a number of respects. First, it is designed to foster a learning approach in the management systems of VECO in order to make sense of the collected data and anticipate change adequately (adaptive management). Second, it is developed to support organisational learning and knowledge creation. This includes improving understanding and knowledge of particular themes such as specific commodities, market chain development, the organisation of producer groups and multi-stakeholder processes. Furthermore, VECO wants to document and share its knowledge and experiences within VE and to the wider (development) community. Third, the PLA system is intended to support VECO's aims to invest in meaningful interactions with its programme actors (partners, farmers and other relevant stakeholders) in order to build common understanding, foster negotiation and decision-making on concerted action, and improve relationships and trust.

New or improved systems and processes

- The PLA system includes some specific learning events which are formalised in the annual calendar, such as the B3 (VECO learning week), CoP's per section, Knowledge Café's and the Regional Learning Initiative.

- Some programme planning and management events have a built-in learning focus. The local partner meetings and the VECO mid-year and final year review meetings are two such key learning events in VECO's programme.
- The programmatic component of the PLA system includes a particular (and new) learning-oriented practice in line with the Outcome Mapping approach. It involves the monitoring of changes in practice by the boundary partners (guided by the progress markers) and their link with the chain development, advocacy or consumer awareness objective. Furthermore, it entails the monitoring of the strategies and activities (strategy maps) carried out by VECO to support these boundary partners. The systematic monitoring of these aspects of the programme should lead to an improved understanding of the role and contributions of VECO and its partners in the change process, and subsequently lead to improved actions.

  The current PLA system forces us to think how we can best support the partners. In the previous system, we did not really plan and monitor this aspect, in many cases we were planning and carrying out the activities with the partners to support the bigger goals of the programme. It means that VECO's contributions or the strengths and weaknesses of partners would not come out during the monitoring

  *(*I2)
- For each specific learning topic, a learning 'trajectory' and a set of guiding learning questions are developed which support and facilitate the reflection and systematisation process.
- All reports include an analysis and lessons learned part which aims to foster sense-making for the individual or teams producing the report.

  I can express my opinions in the report and I am forced to think deeper about the programme … This is different than before where the report focused mainly on objective and quantifiable data

  (I2)

  The new reports are good for my individual learning. Through the questions, I have to analyse the progamme and the partners. By doing so, I understand things better

  (I1)
- A newly appointed coordinator of publications and external communication will work closely with the M&E and learning coordinator to identify opportunities for documentation, publications and the sharing of knowledge and experiences.

Challenges and pitfalls

Learning to learn

Improving the programme also means better anticipation of the (changing) realities in the 'field'. This implies the integration of an analytical process as part of the monitoring and learning process, to move from data to sense-making towards improved (concerted) action. The PLA events during which this process can take place are identified and scheduled in the planning. However, the fact that there is no blueprint approach to facilitating this kind of process means that a continuous search for and experimentation with reflective and analytical

methods and approaches will be required. If not, there is a chance that these PLA events will become static 'presentation-of-results' meetings.

> *...Organisations find their own rhythms, their ways and means of being learning organisations, some successfully and some not so. There are no quick how-to methods or tools. But in terms of "how-not-to"… those that don't get off the ground tend to be those who are too tentative, who give say, only a day a month for reflection, i.e., with no immersion into learning, or those who give up too soon, expecting quick dividends. We have to learn our way into new habits by experimenting with different processes. Of course the biggest challenge is dealing with resistance …from over-active practitioners who validate themselves by how much work they do rather than the quality of it … from the many of us who have bad experience of learning processes or who have been exposed and abused by harsh "honest" criticism or feedback, or because donors demand good … learning but don't pay for the time and skill it takes ...*
>
> *(Reeler, OM learning community e-mail, 12 August 2008)*

VECO and its partners will need to further invest in formally embedding learning mechanisms into their organisational and programmatic processes. Learning requires an open, flexible and reflective attitude, an openness to giving and receiving feedback, and a commitment to change. It involves changes at relational and communication levels both between individuals and in teams. It became clear from the self-assessment of the organisational conditions (section 5.7) that this is still a challenging aspect for VECO.

Outcome Mapping puts an emphasis on the changes in practice of VECO's partners and the strategies undertaken by VECO staff to support these changes. Then the monitoring process 'un-covers' more clearly the changes that have happened (and not happened) and the activities carried out (and not carried out). It was observed during the PLA design process that this practice made some people uncomfortable because it resulted in a clearer picture of the performance of partners and the effectiveness of VECO's support. Facilitating and participating in these kinds of feedback processes and openly reflecting on the – sometimes limited – achieved outcomes calls for a sufficient level of trust among the people involved.

<u>Learning with beneficiaries</u>

The enhanced focus on the market chains, boundary partners and role of VECO resulted in a monitoring process with reduced information needs at the level of the farmers. Whereas the previous programme was merely focused on food sovereignty among family farmers, the new programme focuses on the entire market chain (From production to consumption) and its actors. Not only are there less specific information needs at the level of the farmers but the programme focus has changed from farmers in a specific geographical area to farmers producing a specific commodity in that geographical area. Through these changed foci, there is a danger that VECO might lose important social interactions and learning opportunities with local farmers. The main interactions happen during the ad-hoc multi-stakeholder fora – albeit with a limited group of farmers. An important local event is EVAPERCA, an institutionalised monitoring event (installed at the end of the 1990s) organised by the local NGOs in a specific area. It is a (bi-) annual meeting/forum of local NGOs, farmer organisations, farmers and local government working in the respective area. As described in section 5.2, this meeting is both a data collection mechanism and a space for debate. The data collection process during

EVAPERCA does not match with the information needs of VECO's programme and the main discussion points are not directly aligned with the current VECO programme. EVAPERCA is (so far) not included in the PLA system. However, it is an institutionalised local sense-making event and an ideal opportunity for social interaction with farmers and a 'reality check' for VECO's programme. It would be worthwhile to explore how the ideas and recommendations generated during this meeting can be fed into the partners' and VECO's monitoring and learning process.

Accessing external knowledge and experiences

The learning initiatives incorporated into the PLA system (section 5.6.1) merely focus on specific learning topics such as private sector cooperation, chain-wide learning, multi-stakeholder processes or gender mainstreaming, and are based on the systematisation of the (work) experiences of VECO staff and its partners with regard to these topics. Although these initiatives are seen as powerful experiential learning processes, one of the respondents mentioned that VECO should invest more in accessing and integrating external knowledge and experiences instead of only relying on its own experiences. In other words, a more outward looking and network-oriented learning approach should be developed for the existing and future organisational learning initiatives.

Internal communication and knowledge sharing

A particular organisational challenge in the near future is the fact that VECO will open four new field offices. As the quality of monitoring processes, organisational learning and knowledge sharing depends on interpersonal relationships and social interactions, VECO will need to invest in adequate internal communication and knowledge sharing mechanisms.

Remaining critical questions

- Is the PLA system bringing out the discrepancies between the organisation's values and objectives versus the organisation's actual practices?
- Is the PLA system actually leading to changes in the programme and to improved (concerted) action?
- Is the PLA system capturing and using information from informal (sense-making) interactions?
- Is the PLA system enhancing people's capacity and knowledge related to the identified learning topics?

6.2.3 ACCOUNTABILITY

Through the PLA system, VECO aims to fulfil its programmatic and financial accountability requirements. *Programmatic* accountability refers partly to the provision of evidence for the summative or 'judgement-oriented' evaluation of VECO's programme. Often, this is carried out at the end of the programme and on the request of the donor organisations and is centred

around the 'typical' five evaluation elements: the effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, relevance and impact of VECO's programme. Furthermore, it entails communication and documentation on the progress and intermediate results of the programme to a variety of actors (donors, government, VE HO, partners and farmers). *Financial* accountability refers to the provision of evidence of a sound financial system and sound financial management by VECO as well as evidence of adequate and correct expenditure of finances (funds) by VECO's programme staff and partners.

New or improved systems and processes

A first analysis of the PLA system indicates some improvements in accountability in comparison to the previous system:

- The PLA system has integrated the information needs required for annual donor reporting as 'non-negotiable' or 'must-know' information needs into the data collection process in order to fulfil programmatic accountability responsibilities towards the donor.
- Improved accountability between VECO and its partner organisations is potentially supported by the new programme logic and PLA practice. Twice a year, during the bi-annual local partner meetings, VECO and partners engage in a mutual feedback process, i.e., partners give feedback on the strategies and activities carried out by VECO (strategy maps) and VECO staff provide feedback on the progress made (progress markers) by partners.
- Programmatic accountability is often related to impact measurement, with the idea of 'proving' and attributing impact to the inputs and interventions of the programme. These impact changes are normally 'proven' by facts and figures in line with pre-determined impact indicators. However, through the systematic monitoring of progress markers and strategy maps, VECO will also be able to provide information on the 'story' or the process behind the impact changes and how partners and VECO have contributed to it (or not). In other words, the particular focus of the programmatic monitoring and learning process will provide more and richer data on the process.
- The financial accountability process between partners and VECO will continue. Funding to partner organisations is endorsed by a formal contract and partners report to VECO through monthly finance reports.

Challenges and pitfalls

VECO is quite experienced – through the previous programmes – in fulfilling its *upward* programmatic and financial accountability requirements towards VE HO, donor organisations and local government departments.

However, in terms of *downward* accountability, respondents still identify some challenges. Although VECO has established long-term relationships with some of its partners, it can still be observed that giving and receiving feedback (between partners and VECO staff) is still a challenge for both partners and programme officers. A few factors are at play: giving formal

and direct face to face feedback is not common in the Indonesian context; critical feedback in written reports (e.g. the feedback partners are requested to give in their reports on VECO's support in a given period) is hardly ever provided. The power relationship between VECO – in the role of funder – and partners – in the role of 'receiver' – interfere with these feedback processes and should not be underestimated. Therefore, VECO and its programme officers must continuously look for the best and most cultural appropriate approaches and ways to give and receive feedback (most likely during local partner meetings and informal interactions) which is essential for an improved (two-way) accountability between partners and VECO.

As mentioned in the previous section, VECO needs to further investigate how interactions with the beneficiaries (farmers) can be enhanced and incorporated into the PLA system. Interaction and negotiation is an essential part of downward accountability.

VECO produces a popular annual report in Indonesian for the general public, partners and development actors. However, this is a very general report published up to six months after a monitoring cycle. VECO might need to re-strategise how it can improve its feedback to partners and farmers – on both the data and information that they produce in the monitoring process as well as on the results and findings of the monitoring and learning process itself. However, the process of 'reporting' to higher levels in the hierarchy (donors, government) is still dominant and valued as higher in importance.

Remaining critical questions

- Are VECO's partner organisations assessing the work and performance of VECO and influencing decision-making and possible intervention strategies of VECO? How?
- Are the needs and preferences of the beneficiaries (farmers) being incorporated into VECO's and partners' programmes? How is this ensured?
- Are the results and findings of the monitoring and learning process communicated to donor organisations, VE HO, government, partners, farmers and general public in a transparent and accessible way?

6.2.4 IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

One of the key principles of Outcome Mapping states that any change requires correlating changes in behaviour, relationships and actions of people in the system (Earl et al., 2001:1). This also applies to the PLA system: the implementation and further development of the PLA system will only be as good as the people who use it. Section 4.3.7 highlighted the importance of specialist support for the coordination and facilitation of the PLA system and for enhancing the M&E capacity of VECO's staff and partners. By positioning an M&E and learning coordinator in the programme management unit, VECO made a strategic choice to invest in human capacity to integrate and facilitate the PLA system. As this is a new position for VECO, it will be important to support and acknowledge the authority of the M&E coordinator. Furthermore, the M&E capacity of VECO and partner staff needs to be enhanced. This can be done by

providing training opportunities and support where necessary, opportunities for critical reflection on the different PLA processes, the provision of feedback to the staff and partners involved, and – probably most important – by adopting a *'just do it'* approach, to make sense of it together and adapt if necessary.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

I conclude this chapter with an overview of recommendations to further develop the PLA design process as well as to enhance the organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system. These recommendations are based on the critical reflections presented in this chapter and the self-assessment of the organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system (section 5.7). Further follow-up actions with regard to the PLA design process are presented with reference to the first six PLA design steps. Recommendations to enhance the organisational conditions are structured around the twelve elements presented in section 5.7. In both cases the level at which the adjustments or improvements are required is clearly indicated.

6.3.1 IMPROVING THE PLA SYSTEM

STEP 1: Purpose and scope

- Develop and integrate the monitoring and learning of the PLA component *'organisational functioning'*, i.e. revise the financial monitoring process, update the VECO personnel performance monitoring system, develop an approach to monitor the implementation of the organisational changes at VECO level and the monitoring of the PLA system itself.
- Develop and integrate the evaluation plan for VECO's programme
- Discuss how the monitoring of the nature and quality of VECO's partnerships can be integrated into the PLA system
- Incorporate the learning alliance project on chain-wide learning into the PLA system.

STEP 2: Organisational spaces and rhythms

- Develop clear info. sheets for each key PLA event stating the purpose, desired outputs, information needs, participants, communication approaches and so forth.
- Further update / revise the internal working procedures to ensure optimal flow of information between the different PLA events for the purposes of data generation, analysis, decision-making, planning and so forth.
- Investigate the future role of EVAPERCA – as an important local sense-making event – in the current PLA system.

STEP 3: Information needs

- Further update and revise the information needs for the ongoing monitoring of the market chains.

- Decide on the monthly, quarterly, semi-annual and annual information needs of management and programme staff with regard to financial data.

STEP 4: Data collection, storage and synthesis

- Further develop an approach for relevant and realistic ongoing chain monitoring
- Further develop relevant and efficient guidelines on how information from the different field offices and programmes is summarised, synthesised and internally communicated
- Develop a useful partner and programme database

STEP 5: Critical reflection, analysis and conceptualisation (sense-making)

- Further develop the agendas and methodological aspects of the key PLA events in order to improve critical reflection, analysis and the formulation of lessons learned (to be included in the info sheets for each PLA event)
- Further investigate how the reflection on progress markers and strategy maps can best be organised and facilitated with VECO's partners.

STEP 6: Documentation and communication of M&E results

- Further update and revise the partner and internal reporting system in line with the information needs of VE HO and donor organisations (and with the aim to simplify the report formats as much as possible)
- Further investigate how VECO can improve feedback to partners and farmers and communicate the M&E results in a transparent way
- Further develop and integrate the overall plan for documentation, publication and external communication for VECO.

6.3.2 ENHANCING THE ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS

Motives

Guiding ideas

- Further promote and 'socialise' the PLA system to all VECO staff (especially admin, finance and newly recruited staff)
- Further 'socialise' the PLA system to partner organisations (in daily contacts and partner meetings)

Support from management

- Make sure that the monitoring results are taken up and used in the management team meetings
- Communicate M&E findings to VECO staff and partner organisations

Culture of learning

- Improve the learning and knowledge-sharing mechanisms in the programme section, both in the field offices and during the 'home-weeks' (whereby all field coordinators gather in the country office)

- Identify personal learning needs for all staff and integrate these into the performance appraisal system

Incentives

- Clarify the M&E responsibilities of the VECO staff involved in the PLA process
- Provide training opportunities on topics such as programme management, M&E and learning
- Install and more clearly articulate the feedback mechanisms (internally as well as to and from partners and farmers) in the PLA system
- Advocate for clearer guidelines with regard to the PLA system at VE global level.

Means

Human capacity

- Enhance the M&E capacity of the new M&E and learning coordinator through training and backstopping
- Provide backstopping and feedback to all programme staff to improve their reflective and analytical skills as well as skills in compiling synthesised data
- Provide training and stimulate 'learning by doing' to improve the group facilitation skills of programme staff for critical reflection, analysis and drawing lessons
- Provide training on story-writing and the documentation of experiences

Specialist support

- Document and communicate the PLA system to all staff and partners (develop a clear PLA manual)
- Provide the necessary support to build the M&E capacity of VECO staff and enhance the organisational conditions in support of the PLA system
- Ensure specialist support for the programme and partner database development

Concepts and methods

- Adopt and develop participatory methods and approaches for critical reflection, analysis and drawing lessons learned
- Stimulate VECO staff to experiment with a variety of relevant methods and approaches
- Further develop appropriate learning, knowledge-sharing and information management methods/tools in support of the PLA system

Financial resources

- Develop an annual PLA budget and integrate it into VECO's management and operational programme budget
- Ensure there is a budget for the key PLA events, capacity building and consultants.

Opportunities

Integration into management

- Include the key PLA events in the operational plan and in VECO's annual activity calendar
- Make sure that the management team uses the results of the PLA process
- Adapt and update the financial monitoring system and include it in the PLA system
- Revise the operational work processes in line with the PLA system and the new field offices

Structures, responsibilities and plans

- Support the M&E and learning coordinator in his new position and acknowledge his 'authority'
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of the different staff involved in PLA and include the key M&E tasks in their respective job descriptions
- Develop a clear and accessible PLA framework and calendar
- Develop a documentation, publication and external communication strategy for incorporating M&E results

Information management

- Development of a computerised partner and programme database
- Investigate the further simplification of the report formats
- Improve the communication systems within VECO and with partner organisations, especially in view of the new field offices

Level of trust

- Anticipate and reconcile staff conflicts (by management staff)
- Facilitate and encourage a culture of providing feedback to each other
- Organise team-building activities
- Include the monitoring of the quality and nature of the VECO's partnerships in the PLA system.

6.4 CONCLUSION

Chapter 6 has critically reflected on both the process and the result of the PLA design process, and the lessons that may be drawn from them so far. The first section presented a critical reflection on the action research design process of the PLA system. It highlighted the characteristics of the process and how it unfolded in four stages. This included a reflection on my facilitation, the participation of the different actors and the (un)intended 'process uses' such as enhancing M&E knowlegde, creating ownership, improving the programme design and strengthening organisational capacity. The second part offered a first analysis of the PLA system itself and its relevance for planning, learning and accountability. For each of these three main purposes of the PLA system, the reflection included an analysis of the new or improved systems and processes, challenges and pitfalls, and the remaining cirtical questions. This chapter concluded with an overview of recommendations for the further development and implementation of the PLA system for each of the seven design steps.

CHAPTER 7 ANTICIPATING CHANGE: EMERGING FUTURES

The previous chapter presented a critical reflection and analysis on the experiences and results of the PLA design process. It was based on a common analytical approach whereby the reflection and analysis process happens during and largely after the process/events. This conventional approach is in line with the ideas and practice of *retrospective learning*, i.e., learning from the past.

For this concluding chapter, I formulate some additional reflections and conclusions using a forward-looking approach based on the principles of *anticipatory learning*. I use a future scenario technique to generate information about what might happen with the PLA system and on the probabilities of future events. The chapter concludes with an overview of potential future research directions emerging from this study.

7.1 FUTURE SCENARIOS

Future scenario-building methods facilitate creative planning for the future and are particularly useful where complexity and uncertainty are high. They aim to stimulate *creative ways* of thinking that help people break out of established ways of looking at situations and planning their actions. Future scenario-based tools improve *anticipatory* rather than *retrospective* learning and help managers to make decisions based on an anticipated range of changes. Scenarios are *stories of what might be*. Unlike projections, scenarios do not necessarily portray what we expect the future to actually look like. The value of scenarios comes from learning to think in new ways about the future and make decisions appropriate to uncertain conditions. The only real limiting factor is the imagination of the people using them, and people's interest in participating in creating them (Wollenberg et al., 2000, pp. 2-5). Normally, future scenarios are developed in multi-actor settings and through group debate and used for long-term, complex systems and processes such as agricultural policy, forestry management or sustainable agriculture chain development.

Future scenario-building did not form part of the PLA design process and is only used in this concluding part only to facilitate my own personal thinking on possible futures for the PLA system. This means that I did not consult the other people involved in the PLA process. I use a simplified scenario-building tool – the *future scenario diagram (*Claes, 2009*;* Vermeulen et al., 2008, pp. 76-78) – as an individual reflection tool and as an alternative approach to formulate recommendations in the light of possible future scenarios for the PLA system.

7.2 FUTURE SCENARIO DIAGRAM

7.2.1 TWO UNCERTAINTIES

Developing a basic future scenario diagram starts with the identification of *two uncertainties* among the drivers and trends affecting the issue at hand. The uncertainties should be critical to the future of the issue and unpredictable enough that different directions are possible (Vermeulen et al., 2008, pp. 76-78).

Based on the reflections in the previous sections I identified two uncertainties in relation to the monitoring and learning processes in the context of VECO.

1. The degree to which the programme understands and responds to complexity
Development programmes often use programme models which are based on simple and causal relationships between inputs and predictable outputs/outcomes leading to the ultimate impact (section 2.1.1 and 2.1.2). Those models assume that the change process is evolving in an ordered way. However, most development programmes operate in un-ordered contexts in which causal relationships are often unknown until after the results have been achieved. This requires planning, monitoring and learning processes which support the actors in understanding and responding to/acting on the complexity – *embracing complexity* – in the context in which they are operating.

2. The 'unit of analysis' for monitoring and learning
Monitoring and learning processes can take an intra-organisational perspective '*for which the location of responsibility for decision-making is centralised*' (Guijt, 2008:274). Indeed, many *organisational* development and *organisational* learning initiatives take the organisation as the 'unit of analysis'. However, institutional transformation is not achieved by one societal actor, and involves many actors to co-create understanding, develop common intentions and decide on concerted actions, referred to as *institutional* or *social learning* (section 2.1.3).

7.2.2 FOUR SCENARIOS

The next step of the future scenario diagram technique is to draw a horizontal and vertical axis representing the two uncertainties and to label the polar ends of the axes with the possible extremes of the two uncertainties. By doing so, four possible future scenarios can be constructed (figure 29). Constructing the scenarios forces people to think beyond the known here-and-now into imagining unknown but possible futures. Through this process, people can improve their preparedness for the future and their capacity to adapt. However, the scenarios facilitate a '*big picture*' analysis and are not meant to be used for detailed and specific problem-solving but can be used to provide directions for future actions towards a desired future scenario (Claes, 2009; Vermeulen et al., 2008, p. 76; Wollenberg et al., 2000, p. 5).

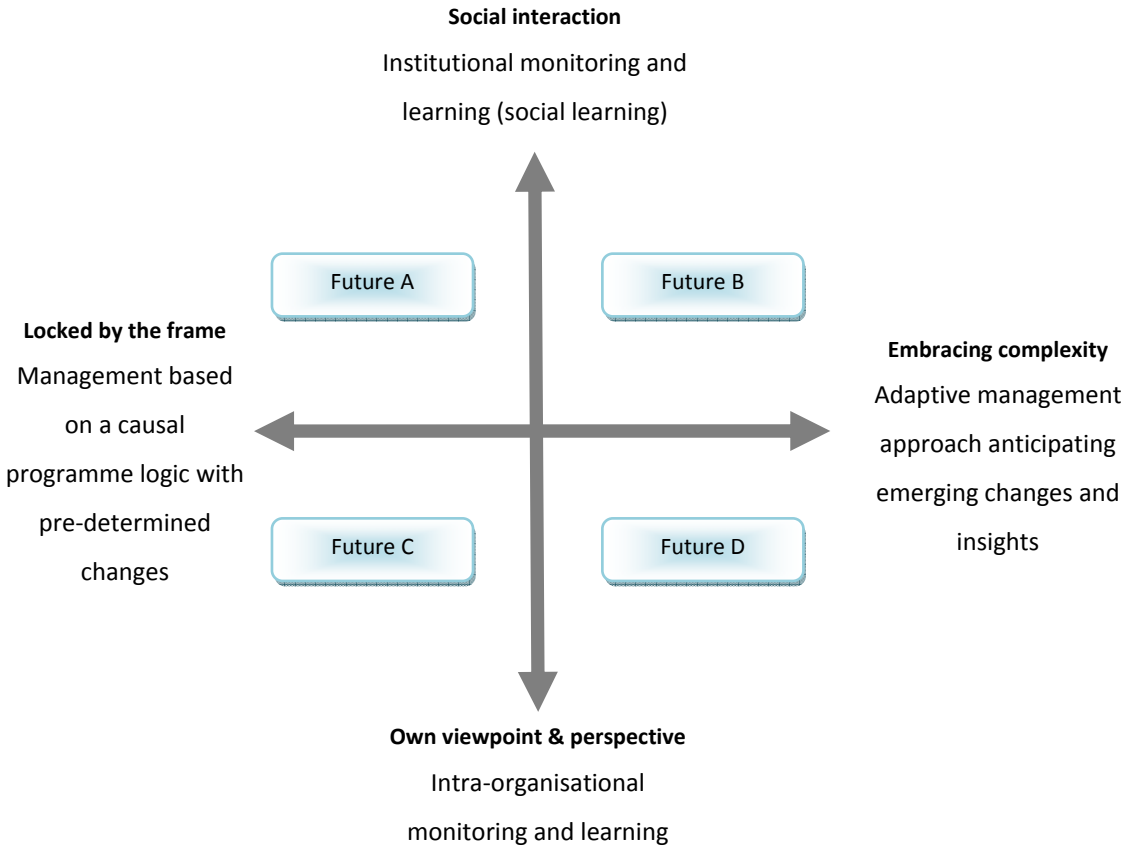

Figure 29: Future scenario diagram for the PLA system of VECO

Table 20 describes the characteristics of the four possible scenarios. A closer look at the four scenarios shows that future A might not be a realistic scenario. If a development programme regularly engages in dialogue and interactions with a variety of societal actors, it would be unlikely to maintain a rigid management approach. If this did occur, it would imply that the interactions do not involve sense-making and changed actions (social learning). It seems that these two polar ends are too mutually contradictory to form a possible future scenario.

7.2.3 TOWARDS A POSITIVE SCENARIO

Taking the analysis a step further, I used following probing questions:

- Where can the newly developed PLA system be positioned in the diagram?
- What are the desired scenarios and what needs to be put in place to achieve these scenarios?
- What are the negative scenarios and what needs to be put in place to avoid the occurrence of these scenarios? (Vermeulen et al., 2008, p. 77)

Based on the scenarios and the critical analysis presented in 6.2 and 6.3, I argue that the current practice of planning, monitoring and learning within VECO can be positioned at the borderline between future C and future D (figure 30).

Future A	**Future B**
• More participatory approaches but unlikely to have influence on changes in programme focus • Feedback is part of the system but has a limited effect on the programme planning • De-motivating for programme actors • Programme teams understand the context and reality better • Narrow-minded perspective of the development process • Include outside perspectives in programme management • Connect with reality • Imposing the steps of the change process • People think and act within the boundaries of the original programme framework (inside the box) • VECO, partners and other actors enhance their understanding of the issues at hand • Capacity development of the actors • Change process is guided by VECO's perspective on change • Rather easy to plan and easy to monitor • Learning and understanding of the change process • Monitoring and learning are useful for partners' and other actors' work	• Programme teams understand context and reality better • Participatory monitoring and learning • Better understanding of the context, connection with reality • Negotiation of (concerted) action • Relationship and trust building • Feedback from actors matters • The systems and its agents get wiser • Open and inclusive mind-set and programme approach • Anticipates unintended changes • VECO as the facilitator or one of the actors at play • Thinking outside the box – allows for creativity and innovation • VECO, partners and other actors enhance their understanding of the issues at hand • Change process is based on the perspectives of different actors • Non-fixed planning models and experimentation • Monitoring focuses on emerging patterns and macro data • Monitoring and learning are useful for different actors
Future C	**Future D**
• Narrow-minded perspective of the development process • VECO as the centre-point • Limited outside perspectives used for programme management • Chance that programme is divorced from context and reality • Change process is imposed • Paternalistic approach; an outside actor delivers development • Focus on VECO's organisational learning and capacity development • Change process is guided by VECO's perspective on change • Rigid planning but easy to monitor • Limited learning and understanding of the change process • Monitoring and learning are not useful for partners and other actors	• Narrow-minded perspective of the development process; limited interaction and feedback from partners and other actors • An adaptive programme but based on the organisation's own sense-making and perspective of reality • Anticipates unintended changes • Chance that the programme is divorced from the context and reality • VECO 'delivers' development • Focus on VECO's organisational learning and capacity development (staff understand their context and role better) • VECO gets wiser at the expense of partners and farmers • More flexible planning and monitoring focusing on patterns and macro data • Limited learning and understanding of the real change process

Table 20: Characteristics of four possible scenarios for the PLA system in VECO

As will be clarified in the next section, it is still uncertain whether VECO will use the programme framework as a causal and rigid model for the implementation of the programme or apply and further develop the PLA system towards an adaptive management approach. Furthermore, the PLA system – as developed so far – takes a rather intra-organisational approach to its monitoring and learning processes.

The most positive scenario in the VECO context is future B, while the most negative scenario is future C, as this would lead to a planning, monitoring and learning practice opposite to the intentions of the PLA system. Future D is not an ideal scenario as it might lead to an adaptive management approach but in a rather 'isolated' way. Limited interactions and involvement of other societal actors might lead to a development programme that is not carried and owned by a wide group of stakeholders and risks being divorced from reality. However, this scenario might resonate with a reality whereby development organisations embrace and apply a learning approach but are 'stuck' in intra-organisational learning and change.

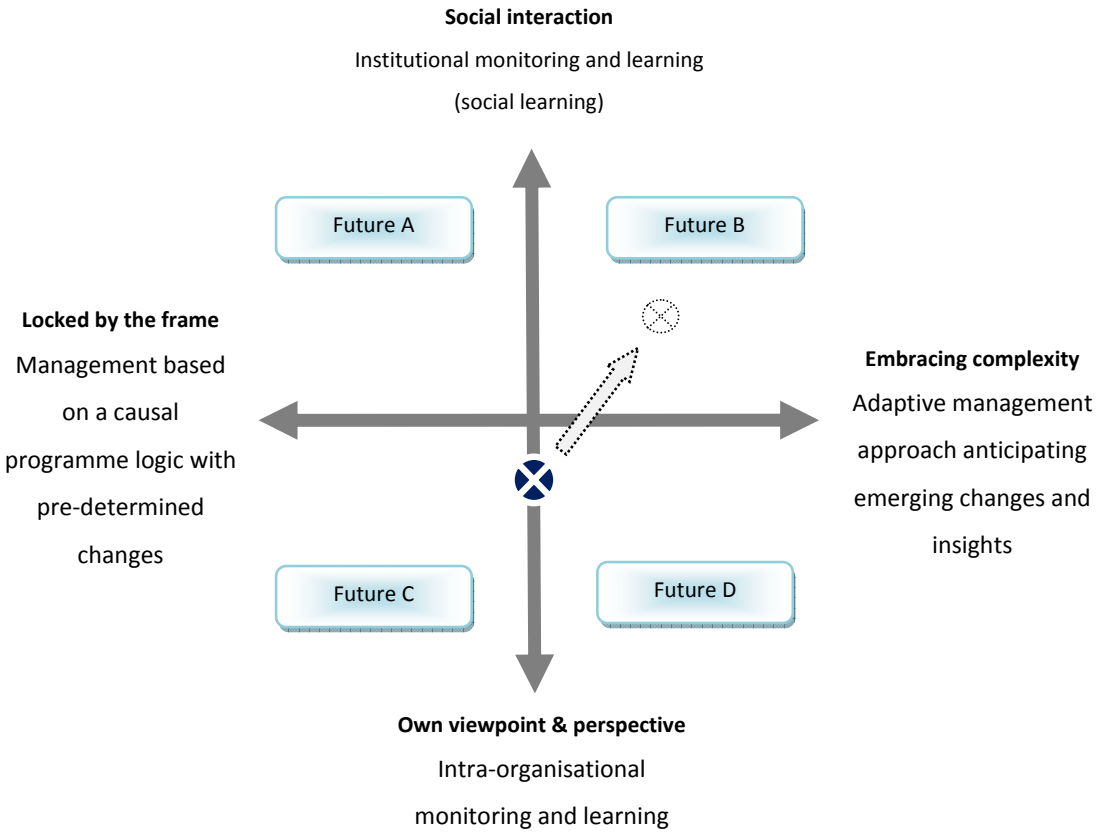

Figure 30: Towards the most positive scenario
current position: and most positive scenario:

The next and concluding section presents a further interpretation of the current position and draws some potential future routes towards future B (in the context of VECO). It also considers possible practices required to achieve this scenario as well as to avoid future C.

7.3 EMERGING FUTURES

7.3.1 FROM INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL TO INSTITUTIONAL MONITORING AND LEARNING

Based on the approach taken to the development of the PLA system and the types of actors participating in the design process and the PLA system - as developed so far – one can conclude that VECO took a rather ***intra-organisational approach.*** I conclude this based on the observation that the monitoring and learning system is mainly developed from the perspective of VECO, i.e., taking itself as the 'unit of analysis' and focusing on its own monitoring needs, learning process and information flows (Guijt, 2008, p. 261). The aim of the PLA system – as initially intended – is to support the planning and management of VECO's programme, leading to improved interventions and actions in the field. The mechanisms for learning are geared towards *organisational* learning (B3, KBAs, mid-year reflection meetings, RELI …) and the inclusion of the PLA component 'internal organisational functioning' is obviously VECO centred. Figure 31 illustrates VECO's intra-organisational approach to monitoring and learning. The border indicates that the different components and elements of the PLA system are seen from the viewpoint of VECO (e.g. the programmatic elements spelled out in the programme framework, such as VECO's objectives, VECO's learning needs, VECO's strategies, VECO's boundary partners, etc.).

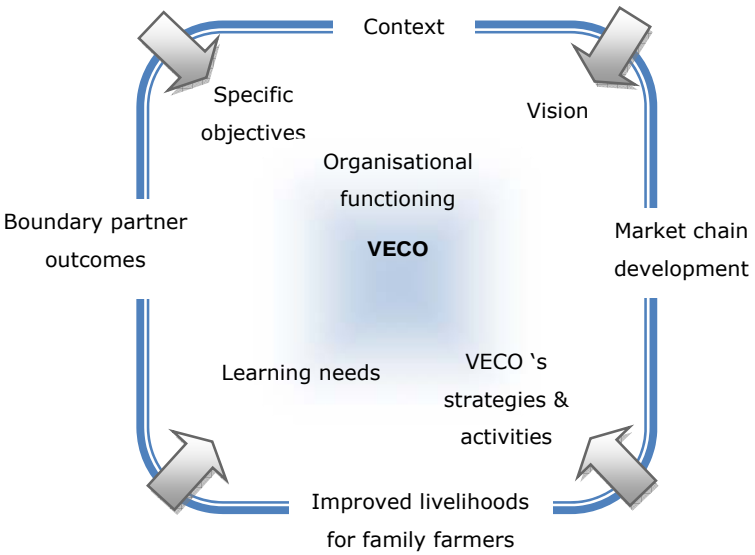

Figure 31: Intra-organisational monitoring and learning in VECO

This approach is in line with the intentions of the PLA system and, in my opinion, at this stage – namely the beginning of a new programme for VECO with a new organisational structure – a crucial, relevant and useful approach to support VECO's programme and enhance VECO's organisational capacity and performance. However, a desired future scenario is for the PLA system to move beyond the intra-organisational perspective and evolve into a PLA system which facilitates a change process based on the viewpoints of and in collaboration with the local actors, that is, *institutional monitoring and learning*.

In the case of VECO, I identify four potential entry-points to institutional monitoring and learning which can enhance VECO's role as a facilitator of sustainable agriculture chain development. The four elements (entry-points) are already incorporated as monitoring components in the PLA system. However, at this stage, I argue that those components have not yet been developed – and 'lived' – to their full potential. Each of the entry-points focuses on enhanced (social) interactions with a specific set of actors. Social interactions and relationships are the primary channel through which financial and human resources achieve their ultimate aim: working with actors to design and implement policies and actions that lead to pro-poor outcomes (Eyben, 2004, pp. 16-17). Institutional/social learning is based on the idea of mutual learning which fosters participation and responsibility, both individual and collective, and promotes human creativity and solidarity, instead of reinforcing power and patronage (Eade, 1997, pp. 191-205). Conscious efforts to establish and engage adequately in meaningful social interactions with these actors will be required. Taylor (2001) states that this requires forming and maintaining a trusting relationship, which not only takes time, but … *quality time.* Figure 32 presents the four potential entry-points for VECO to engage in institutional monitoring and learning.

Context

Monitoring of the context refers to the identification of (new) relevant stakeholders as well as the follow-up of (new) trends in sustainable agriculture, market chain development, advocacy and consumer awareness. Investing in monitoring the context allows VECO and its partners to share their experiences and to access external knowledge to become an expert in its field and to better anticipate changes. It involves active interaction with the actors by engaging in networks and participating in collaborative actions, seminars and research with (I)NGOs, business development services (BDS), networks/platforms, government and research institutes.

Market chain development

The monitoring of a specific market chain requires not only an assessment of the key characteristics (chain variables) of the market chain (an approach which I categorise as an intra-organisational perspective) but an ongoing interaction with the key chain actors. The same principle applies to the advocacy programmes at local and national level and to the pilot programme on consumer awareness. Multi-stakeholder processes (MSP) are a common approach to chain-wide learning. The term MSP applies to any set of activities that enables different groups – for example, producers, traders,

processors, policy-makers and business development services (BDS) – to interact with each other for shared learning, joint decision-making and collective action. Generally, a multi-stakeholder process is not a just a one-off event, but rather a series of activities carried out over time.

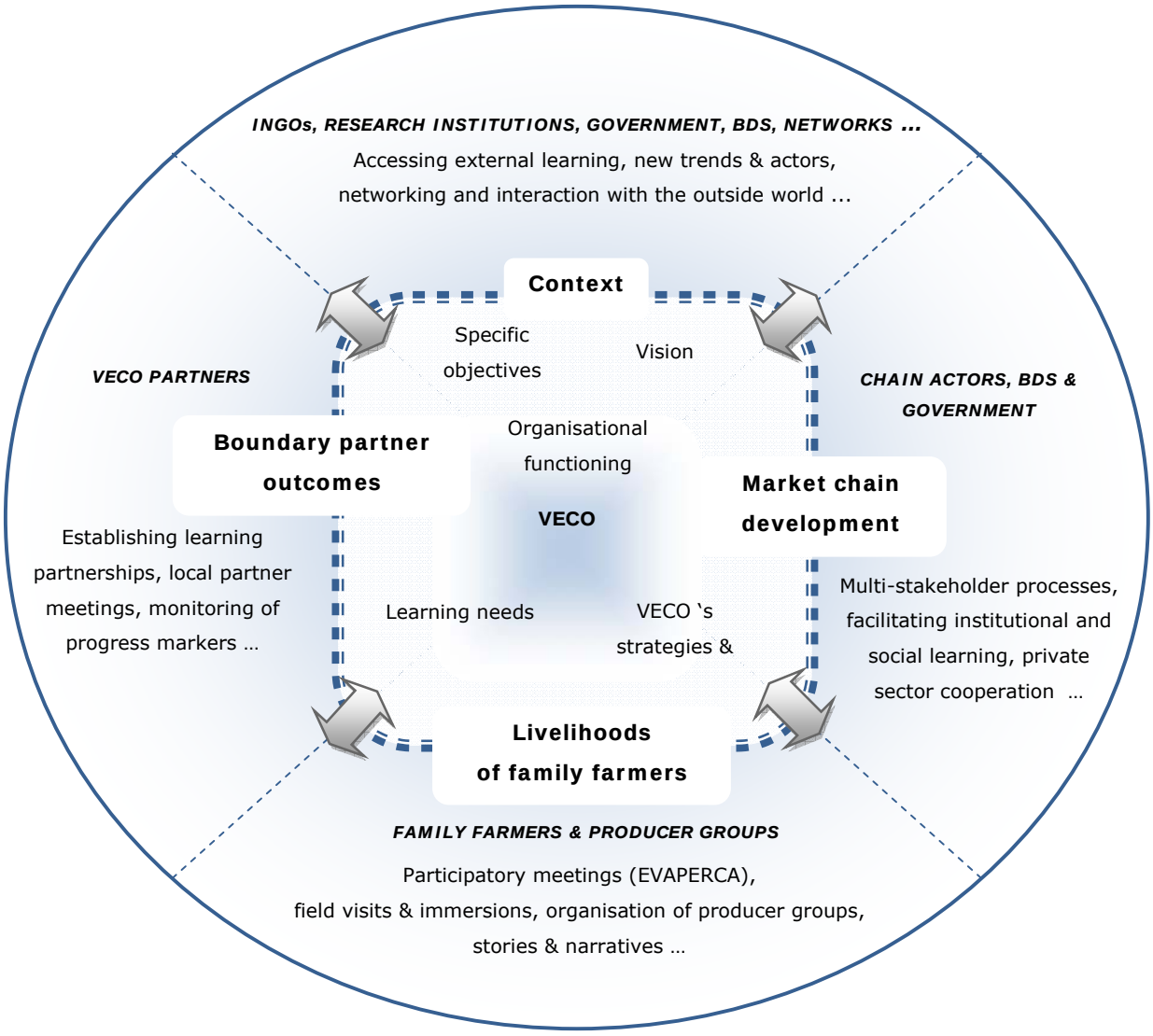

Figure 32: Towards institutional monitoring and learning

Activities may include one-on-one meetings and discussions with single-stakeholder groups as well as events and workshops that bring representatives of different groups together. An effective multi-stakeholder process also involves much informal "behind the scenes" networking and communication (Vermeulen et al., 2008, pp. 14-15). Engaging in MSPs enhances understanding of the market chain, its context, dynamics between actors, motivations, expectations, and so forth. It assists VECO and its partners to develop appropriate strategies in support of the development of the respective market

chains. In this way, MSPs become crucial sense-making events in the PLA system. At this moment, multi-stakeholder processes have only been organised as one-off events and VECO has not yet developed a strategy for an ongoing multi-stakeholder approach to chain development.

Livelihoods of family farmers (producers)

The ultimate beneficiaries of VECO's programme are the family farmers in Eastern Indonesia. Due to the new focus of the programme, the direct beneficiaries are the producers of specific agricultural products such as coffee, organic rice, cashew, groundnut and cocoa. In terms of monitoring, a sustainable livelihood analysis and a survey on average income have been carried out with a sample group of farmers. Often, these kinds of monitoring exercises are uni-directional activities whereby farmers produce information for the benefit of the programme team with little incentives or feedback to the farmers. However, social interaction with family farmers on a regular basis is important for the programme team to understand the realities and to validate their own work, ideology and practices in relationship to the realities that poor people face (Chambers, 2007, p. 9). It is difficult to interact with the entire farmer or producer population in a certain area and therefore it is more realistic to meet with a particular group or ad-hoc selection of groups. Some possible scenario's for enhanced interactions with the farmers in the context of VECO are:

- VECO can include producer groups and associations – even immature and non-registered – as boundary partners and/or engage together with them in some shared projects focused on activities such as organisational strengthening of the producer groups, initiating collective marketing and supporting post-harvest processes. By doing so, the farmer representatives become actors in the ongoing monitoring and learning process with the boundary partners (see next paragraph).
- VECO and partners continue to support and engage in the existing participatory 'institutionalised' local event, EVAPERCA, attended by partners, farmers and local government from a specific geographical area.
- VECO and its NGO partners continue to meet (e.g. twice a year) with the 'sample' group of farmers/producers who participated in the baseline survey and sustainable livelihood study. In this way VECO can build up a relationship with a farmer group of a manageable size and engage in a mutual learning process focusing on issues related to their livelihoods, production and position in the market chain.
- VECO could institutionalise 'learning field trips' whenever people come to visit VECO. Throughout the year, VECO receives visitors from (potential) donors, VE HO, other INGOs and so forth. A substantial amount of staff time and resources are spent on guiding these visitors to the field. However, these field trips offer opportunities for learning and engaging with beneficiaries in a different way. When VECO staff, partner organisations, guests and even other invited external individuals (e.g. a marketing specialist, a commodity expert, a rural development practitioner, a journalist or an anthropologist) spend time together in the farmer community for a certain period, it could be organised as a more conscious learning field trip. During daily reflection moments,

people could share and debate about remarkable observations, assumptions, perceptions of problems and solutions – making sense of the experiences together with the farmers.

Boundary partner outcomes

VECO supports a variety of boundary partners (local NGOs, local farmer organisations, national farmer organisations, network organisations and private chain actors). Those partner organisations are carefully selected by VECO for their contribution to chain development, advocacy or consumer awareness. For many years, VECO has developed strong relationships with local NGOs (five to fifteen years) and established regular (at least monthly) interactions with them. The other (type of) boundary partners are relatively new (less than two years or in some cases still to be developed). Local NGO, network and national farmer organisation partnerships are characterised by a funding relationship endorsed by a formal annual contract and reporting system. However, cooperation with private chain actors and local farmer organisations require other types of partnership – rather informal – mainly based on personal relationships and trust. In fact, an investment from VECO in formal and informal interactions and relation/trust building will be essential to establish all the partnerships. Many authors highlight the importance of systematic monitoring and procedures for learning with partners as a crucial element of successful partnerships, i.e., to develop *learning partnerships* (Bond, 2003; Earl et al., 2001; Fowler, 2000; Horton, 2003; IDS, 2001; Taylor, 2001). An ongoing assessment of the nature, quality and effectiveness of the relationships and partnerships of VECO is not included in the current PLA system.

Mutual reflection on the negotiated progress markers – or outcomes – of the boundary partners is an essential learning process in Outcome Mapping. Especially for local NGOs, national farmer organisations and network organisations, VECO needs to consciously invest in providing the appropriate conditions, methods and approaches to facilitate sense-making during local partner meetings. For private chain actors and local farmer organisations (the two new types of boundary partners), VECO can foster mutual learning and relationship building by engaging together in common projects or in responding to common challenges.

7.3.2 FROM CAUSALITY AND PREDICTABILITY TOWARDS ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Intentionality and complexity meet in tension[13]

VECO has adopted Outcome Mapping (OM) as the guiding framework for its programme. Some characteristics of OM indicate its potential use for managing un-ordered processes. The intentional design is actor-centered, i.e., it spells out the intended roles and responsibilities of the actors

[13] Westley et al. (2006:21)

involved; it focuses on the *intended* behavioural changes (outcome challenges and progress markers) of boundary partners contributing to the bigger developmental change; it allows for adjustments and inclusion of important unexpected changes in the course of the programme; and the monitoring process fosters reflection and focuses attention on the contributions (the process) made by the programme team and its partners rather than on the attribution of the impact (results) to a particular intervention or series of interventions they have made.

On the other hand, OM is still based on the formulation of a logical process with projected desired changes (outcome challenge and progress markers) and programme strategies (strategy maps) contributing to the ultimate aim – which in the case of VECO is spelled out by a set of specific objectives. The specific objectives and their respective indicators are fixed for a period of three to six years.

The intentional design developed by VECO can *potentially* lead to a flexible and adaptive management approach. However, this will entirely depend on the quality of the monitoring and learning process linked to the intentional design, as well as the ability and willingness of the programme actors to adapt initial plans and strategies according the new emerging insights. For this reason, I position the current PLA system at the border line between future C and D.

On one hand – as stated in section 5.7 - it will be a challenge for VECO to provide the necessary organisational conditions to effectively implement the PLA system as it is currently designed. In addition, I can foresee two scenarios which could prevent the PLA system from becoming an adaptive management approach – and shift its position towards the left quadrants (A and C).

In the first case, the intentional design is used as a linear and causal model during the monitoring process. The boundary partners, outcome challenge, progress markers and strategy maps designed in the beginning of programme are not subject to review during the lifespan of the programme. Progress markers are used as a checklist of activities to be carried out by the boundary partners whereby data are collected to verify whether changes have happened according to plan.

In the second case, although OM allows for adjustments during the process, the adjustments still remain within the boundaries of the (intentional) programme framework and logic. There is a danger that people will see the programme framework and logic as the reality of what happens, instead of looking at the 'real' reality. As the information needs are derived from the programme logic and the data collection, most likely the analysis will be done within the logic and boundaries of the framework. However, the data may also generate information and patterns which challenge the framework and create future opportunities outside the boundaries of the guiding model – opportunities which may be missed if the actors involved are not willing or not able to '*think outside the box*'.

Both cases require a certain *mindset* whereby the programme team and partners – and donors – have the ability to leave the safe zone of pre-determined outcomes and actions. That is, the programme actors need to become 'searchers' who are geared towards inquiry rather than certainties, who make sense of the world as they engage in action and allow multiple perspectives – a *shift from a 'fail-safe' design to a 'safe fail' experiment* (Snowden, 2008). Two forces make this kind of approach a challenge for VECO. The first is an external force – the requirement of the main donor for VECO to report on (and account for) the programme's progress, achievements and finances according to the original intended outcomes and objectives. The second is an internal force I have consistently observed, which is that people (VE HO, VECO staff and partner organisations) prefer a clear framework to guide their work. The fact that OM allows for changes during the process and that there is no clear-cut approach for the analysis of data makes some people uncomfortable and poses the question: *to what extent are people willing or able to deal with uncertainty and adapt their views and strategies*?

Mainstream monitoring processes are heavily based on the principles of experiential learning, or *learning from the past* (2.1.3). The core question underlying this monitoring and learning approach is '*what do we need to know and learn from the past in order to act?*'. The PLA system has also been developed based on this principle. The pre-defined information needs induce the collection of data and information. It is assumed that this will generate the necessary insights and information to fulfil the planning, learning and accountability needs. According to the Cynefin framework (section 2.1.2), this is the common planning and monitoring approach for ordered (simple) systems. However, to understand and act in unordered systems, there is need for *anticipatory learning* which starts from another core question: '*how do we make sense of the world so that we can act in it?*' (Snowden, 2008). This view acknowledges that individuals and groups do not only act based on knowledge and 'learnings' derived from the past but also based on (collective) imagination, intuition and discourse about the future. This is – to my knowledge – an 'under-explored' field in mainstream M&E practices. As the PLA system is built on a series of sense-making events, it offers opportunities for VECO to experiment with a variety of methods and approaches which facilitate anticipatory awareness, such as future scenario-building, appreciative inquiry, the delphi-method, future backwards and the use of future-oriented probing questions.

From data to sense-making[14]

The previous paragraphs highlight the importance of the (type of) data collected and the nature and quality of the sense-making process. During the PLA design process, participants went through a gradual screening process from 'nice-to-know' to 'must-know' information needs linked to the purposes of the PLA system. From a retrospective learning point of view, the information needs and subsequent data collection and information flows make sense and have been reduced to a minimum. However, one could argue that there are still a lot of data to be collected and analysed. An overload of

[14] Guijt & Ortiz (2007).

data can undermine the monitoring and learning process, lead to confusion or frustration for the people involved, and might prevent people from seeing the bigger lines and patterns. Therefore, as the PLA system is implemented, it is recommended to critically reflect on the relevance and usefulness of the data collected and look for opportunities to further prioritise the information needs. Also, it is important to keep in mind that decisions for action are also based on insights gained through the informal interactions as well as tacit knowledge, experience and intuition of the people involved.

Besides the prioritisation of information needs, it is also crucial to keep reflecting critically at *the type/form of data* to be collected. I refer back now to the sphere of control, influence and interest (section 5.5) to further analyse the different types of data to be collected (figure 33).

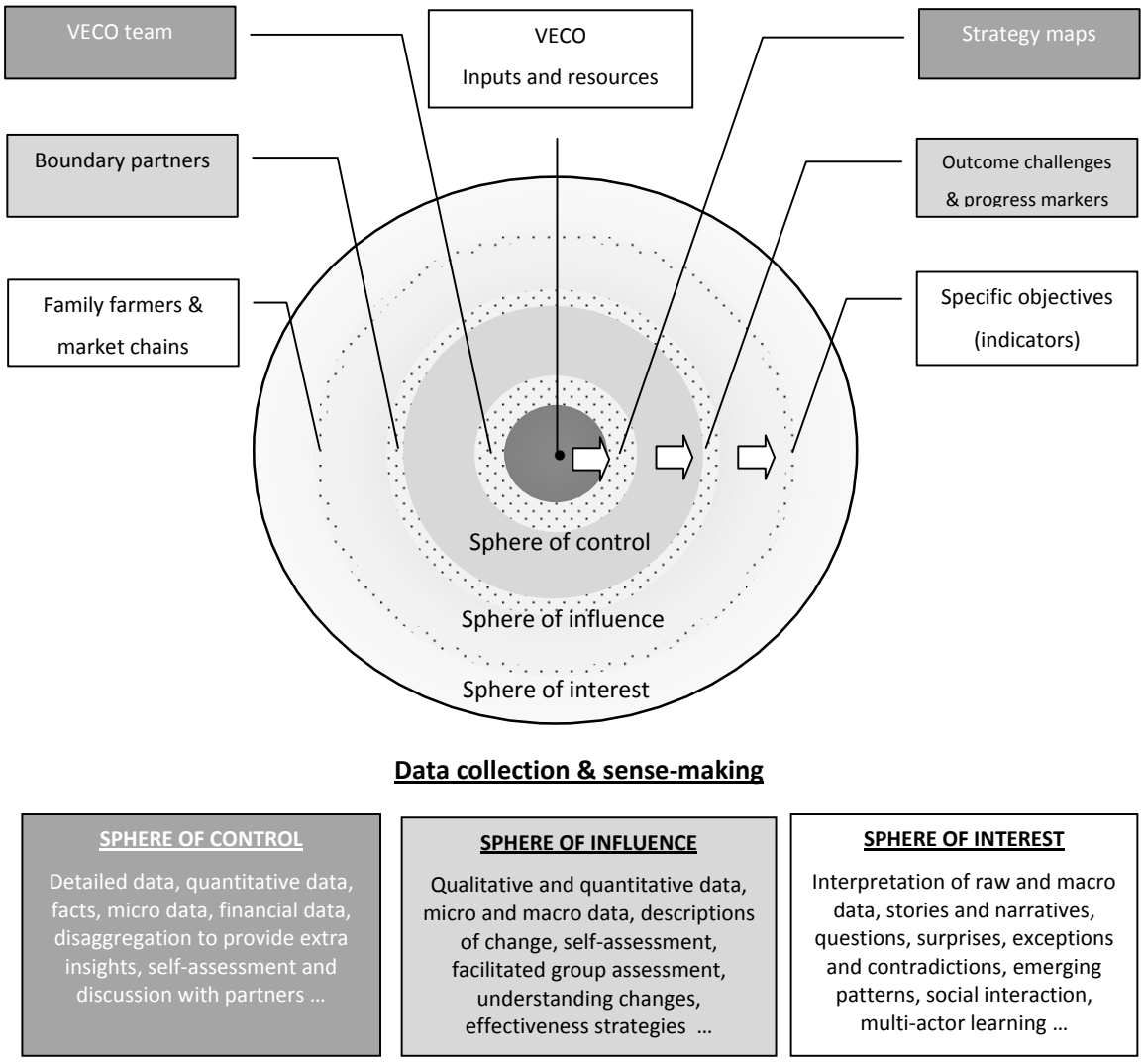

Figure 33: Data collection and sense-making in the spheres of control, influence and interest

The inputs and means that VECO provides and the strategies and activities (strategy maps) it carries out to support its partners and the programme are all within the *sphere of control* of VECO. The collection of data connected with the monitoring of these elements is rather straightforward, as all the information can be generated through the activity reports of the programme officers and the financial management system. The data can be quite detailed and include the inputs and activities, timelines and expenses, which can be disaggregated per specific objective, boundary partner, field office and/or market chain.

The monitoring of the changes within VECO's *sphere of influence* is focused on the outcomes of the boundary partners. Guided by the progress markers, the data collection process results in *qualitative data* such as descriptions of changes of practice of the partners as well as *quantitative data* such as the number of farmer groups supported, types of activities carried out and the number of male/female participants in training activities. Depending on the information needs linked to the progress markers, the data can range *from general (macro) to detailed (micro)*. As promoted by OM – and institutionalised in VECO by the PLA system – the main data collection methods are *self-assessment* at the level of the boundary partners (the results of which are reflected in the partner reports), *observation* by VECO's programme officers, and facilitated *group assessment* during local partner meetings (twice a year). The focus of the monitoring is as such is not on the collection of the 'right' quantifiable data but rather on a shared and negotiated understanding of the changes (based on real facts and data) in order to decide on possible future actions.

The sphere of interest refers to the community and farmer level as well as the respective market chains. Although potentially interesting, it is not possible and affordable to monitor a range of detailed data at this level. Even if relevant detailed data could be collected, it would be time-consuming and require adequate capacity to analyse and process the data. The less clear the situation and the larger the number of variables (in a complex context) to be considered for monitoring, the less useful predetermined indicators will be. The information process can be left more free and more qualitative, with a focus on the interpretation of raw and macro data, i.e., a focus on the emerging patterns rather than the collection of facts. Especially, when people are puzzled, face disturbances, are surprised, discover exceptions and contradictions, insights and emerging patterns occur and deep learning might happen (Guijt, 2008, p. 281; Patton, 2008; Snowden, 2008; Williams, 2008).

Narratives and stories are increasingly being recognised as important sense-making tools for complex situations, as they constitute an amalgamation of facts, ideas, opinions, ideas, theories and ideologies (Snowden, 2005, pp. 126-127). Inspired by the *Most Significant Change* (MSC) technique (Davis and Dart, 2005), the PLA system has also planned to make use of stories as a form of data collection. However, there is a danger that stories are merely used as communication tools and as a 'nice and fun little extra'. Furthermore, it also often leads to a practice whereby the 'right' stories are selected to justify pre-determined changes. However, the real power of stories for sense-making lays in its use as

a *knowledge disclosure method* (Snowden, 2005:5) - an under-explored practice in the development sector.

The 'data collection' and sense-making process for VECO's sphere of interest are closely connected with the institutional monitoring and learning process for the context, market chains and livelihoods of farmers, and even the outcomes of the boundary partners, i.e., the four elements or entry-points (identified in figure 32). In fact, the two positive polar ends of the future scenario diagram **–** social interaction to promote institutional monitoring and learning, and embracing complexity to promote an adaptive management approach which accommodates emerging changes and insights – seem to mutually reinforce each other.

It has been observed that the current PLA system is mainly focusing on these four elements in terms of pre-determined 'indicators' (chain analysis parameters, livelihood indicators, progress markers of boundary partners …) to guide the data collection and sense-making process. However, the (facilitated) social interaction and multi-actor events – as suggested above – are powerful learning mechanisms to construct meaning – through interaction – and identify emerging patterns and act upon these. They hold the key to the future evolution of the PLA system from an intra-organisational system to one that facilitates and engages in institutional learning and transformation across the programme's spheres of control, influence and interest. Again - to refer to one of OM's core principles - it is what happens between individuals, groups and organisations that brings about change and innovation.

7.4 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A variety of future research directions are emerging from this study. Some of them are directly related to the implementation of the PLA system in the context of VECO and VE. Others focus on issues related to the monitoring and learning practice in the development sector in general.

7.4.1 RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES AT VECO AND VE

The following *evaluative studies* would benefit the further development and implementation of the PLA system at VECO and VE.

- A first evaluative study could focus on how well the PLA system is supporting the planning, learning and accountability processes within VECO, including an assessment of the contributing and hindering (f)actors.
- Further research on the elements of the organisational 'architecture' supporting the PLA system could be carried out based on the the framework which was developed for the initial assessment of the organisational conditions for successful implementation of the PLA system.

The remaining (or less developed) aspects of the PLA system offer opportunities for further *action research*.

- The evaluation part of the PLA system provides an opportunity for action research similar to this study, i.e., the development and implementation of an innovative evaluation system for the programmes of VE in line with the intentions of the current PLA system and newly emerging trends in the theory and practice of evaluation in the development sector.
- An investigation into and the development of relevant approaches, methods and tools for sense-making during the key PLA events to facilitate critical reflection, analysis and conceptualisation in and among groups would assist VECO in enhancing its sense-making process.
- As the programme framework and monitoring process has a particular focus on the boundary partners and the facilitation of market chain development, it is worth investigating how VECO can ensure and improve its downward accountability to family farmers, i.e., the ultimate beneficiaries of VECO's programme.

Although VE has developed general guidelines for the development of the PLA system, each VECO (in thirteen different countries) has developed its own PLA system in line with the needs of its own programme and context. There is merit in a *comparative study* of the different PLA systems developed by the different VECOs worldwide and how these were contextualised and implemented. Such a study would not only provide valuable insights on the respective PLA systems but could also engage the different VECOs in a shared learning process and enhance the PLA system and M&E capacity of VE at the global level.

7.4.2 SPECIFIC DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON MONITORING AND LEARNING

The role of informal interaction

Current monitoring and learning practice in development organisations is mostly based on pre-determined information flows and formal sense-making events. However, as argued in this thesis, informal interactions among programme actors seem to be powerful sense-making events which (in)directly influence programme management and learning processes. How important are informal sense-making events in monitoring and learning processes? What is the role of informal events? How can the sense-making generated during informal meetings be linked and integrated with, or support M&E practice? Is it worth investing in the institutionalisation of informal meetings and if so, how can this be done?

Anticipatory learning

Mainstream monitoring is based on the principles of experiential learning, i.e., learning from the past. However, as this study highlights, there is merit in investigating the importance of intuition, visionary thinking, anticipatory awareness, 'tuning-in' to emerging futures and so forth by the individuals and groups involved in the process of planning and managing development programmes. To what extent is

decision-making actually based on knowledge derived from past experiences? In other words, how much should a programme invest in data collection and analysis of past events for sense-making and improved action? To my knowledge, the role of anticipatory learning – and the creation of anticipatory awareness – in programme management, monitoring and learning is under-explored and provides a range of opportunities for research which could significantly enhance the capacity of development organisations to plan and manage change in complex, unordered systems.

Towards institutional monitoring and learning in SACD

Most development programmes take an intra-organisational monitoring approach. That is, they take the organisation as the 'unit of analysis' whereby the monitoring and learning needs are mainly seen from the perspective of the implementing team. As I have argued in this chapter, a desirable future scenario is one in which the programme facilitates and engages in an ongoing institutional monitoring and learning process with a variety of societal actors. Further exploration of how to organise and operationalise these kinds of practice – including the role of multi-stakeholder processes, network learning, learning partnerships and so forth – would form a relevant action research topic for the development sector.

Is Outcome Mapping a suitable programme framework to manage un-ordered systems?

How well does the practice of Outcome Mapping cater to monitoring and learning in/for development programmes in unordered, complex systems? It is commonly accepted that the intentional design stage of OM resonates better with the realities of how development processes actually evolve. However, the applications of OM as a monitoring and learning framework are still limited, and consequently, the body of knowledge is still immature. VECO and other OM-based programmes provide opportunities for further research to validate some of the propositions and assumptions attached to OM. Does OM really stand up to or overcome the critiques of the LFA (see chapter 2)? What is the merit of its application to the management of complex, unordered systems?

Managing complex systems

The rise of systems thinking and complexity science offers new directions for the development sector. It inspires development researchers and practitioners to develop concepts, approaches and methods to support the management of development programmes in complex systems. However, a management practice applying these concepts and methods seems to be hard to operationalise in a donor-driven context dominated by programme frameworks based on prediction and causal logics. More research and study on the operationalisation and contextualisation of development practice based on the principles of systems thinking and complexity science are imperative.

The power of stories

The use of stories and narratives as a knowledge disclosure method (Snowden, 2005) – instead of merely as a communication tool – is seen as an important sense-making process within complex systems. Sense-making from stories and narratives – e.g., based on the principles of narrative research promoted by Cognitive Edge (www.cognitiveedge.com) – has the potential to be used for ongoing monitoring and impact assessment as well as to assist in more adequately anticipating the occurrence of changes, especially at levels where accurate and detailed data cannot be collected (for example, in the 'sphere of interest' of a programme). Further investigation of this innovative sense-making approach – which to my knowledge has so far had a very limited application in the development sector – could enhance monitoring and evaluation practice as well as the body of knowledge related to M&E methods and tools based on story telling such as the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique.

Impact measurement

How does one measure the impacts of development initiatives in a meaningful way? For some this is seen as the heart of M&E practice and the core element of any evaluation process. For others, as promoted by Outcome Mapping, impact assessment is not perceived as useful as it looks for changes beyond the sphere of influence of the programme team and often generates 'clueless feedback' for the programme. However, not measuring impact at all, is usually not an option for programme teams and donor organisations. Further research on how impact assessment can be organised in such a way as to provide more relevant and useful feedback is a research topic that is ongoing and far from exhausted.

The human dimension of aid

In general, the development sector pays much more attention to frameworks, concepts, methods, tools and procedures than to the human dimensions at play within the aid system. However, the literature indicates that aspects such as trust, interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, power relations, intercultural communication, motivation, incentives, competencies and so forth play a crucial role in the success of any development initiative. An investigation on the importance of the personal and relational aspects of monitoring and learning processes – and how they can be fostered and managed – could lead to an interesting study.

7.5 CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter has used the future scenario diagram method to investigate possible future scenarios of the PLA system. An analysis of four future scenarios and their respective characteristics and an exploration of the implications of the most positive future scenario triggered new insights on, and articulated some possible emerging futures for the PLA system. This future scenario approach proved to be useful to generate an additional layer of reflections and conclusions to those offered in

Chapter 6. This chapter has also outlined some directions for the further development and implementation of the PLA system and possible future research opportunities. It closes the journey of this study. A new chapter can begin …

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APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 1: VISION AND MISSION OF VECO INDONESIA

Vision statement

Vredeseilanden considers agriculture as one of the most important and widespread manifestations of our cultural heritage. Worldwide this heritage was and is conserved and further developed under the stewardship of family farmers, taking into account economic, social, cultural and ecological elements and equilibria. This stewardship has increasingly come under enormous pressure, especially because of the industrialization of agriculture, liberalization and general structural adjustment of economies in the South. The world is changing faster than ever and is characterized by a growing duality in economies where a few people are extremely rich, while a growing number of people experience hunger, poverty an injustice. Paradoxically, most of the hunger and poverty is still occurring in rural areas where most of the family farming happens. Bad governance, irresponsible citizenship, omnipotence of big corporations and weak international institutions disrupt agriculture further. On the other hand, we can see each day new seeds of an alternative world, a fairer form of globalization. Innovative initiatives that aim for sustainable agriculture at human scale and with respect for the environment. Carried out worldwide by female and male farmers and their organisations, supported and nourished by consumers, private companies, public authorities and civil society organisations.

Mission statement

In enhancing the position of organised farmers, VECO-Indonesia contributes to their viable livelihoods by supporting the development of sustainable agriculture (SA) chains in selected geographical areas in Indonesia. Its support focuses on the use of innovative SA processes for improved production such as LEISA (low external input sustainable agriculture), the value adding of SA produce and improved access to markets for a number of specific commodities, and stimulating sustainable consumer purchase practices. Furthermore, VECO Indonesia supports policy change for the realization of food sovereignty, just landownership and sustainable agriculture, through advocacy and lobbying at local, national and, where possible, international levels. In its work, VECO-Indonesia pays special attention to involving the younger generation of farmers, promoting gender as an integral part of agricultural practices and reconciling 'traditional' and 'modern' knowledge and practices. VECO-Indonesia is not a direct actor in the development of SA chains and advocacy initiatives but rather, a collaborating and supporting partner for local NGOs, farmer organisations, networks, alliances and the private sector. The role of VECO-Indonesia is to support organisational and technical capacity development of the partner organisations; to facilitate multi-stakeholder platforms; to 'bridge' local, national and international advocacy and lobbying efforts; to document and disseminate lessons learned and good practices for evidence building; and to establish continuous learning and knowledge management processes and systems.

APPENDIX 2

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE FACE TO FACE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. **On the previous M&E system**
   - Briefly describe how the M&E system worked in the previous programme?
   - What were the main characteristics of the previous M&E system?
   - What were the strengths of the previous M&E system?
   - What were the weaknesses of the previous M&E system?
   - Which aspects of the previous M&E system should definitely be maintained?
   - Which aspects of the previous M&E system should definitely be changed?
   - **…**

2. **On the PLA development process**
   - Do you feel the development process of the M&E system created interaction and ownership of the PLA system among the staff? *Why? How?*
   - Was the process participatory enough? Explain?
   - Did you change your views and ideas on M&E systems and processes? How?
   - Which aspects / actions of the development process did you like most? What was for you the highlight or most inspiring moment in the PLA process? Why?
   - Which aspects /actions of the development process were not good? Why? What should have been done differently?

3. **Initial thoughts on the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the PLA system**
   - We changed the term M&E system into *PLA* system. Could you explain in your own words what this means for you?
   - With the knowledge & experience you have so far, how useful will the PLA system be:
     - To support the planning & management of VECO's programme? Why?
     - To facilitate the learning process within VECO and with partners? Why?
     - To fulfil the upward and downward accountability needs of VECO? Why?
     - *What aspects need to be further developed or changed*?

4. **On organisational conditions and capacities**
   - *Show the chart with the results of the survey on organisational conditions and capacities.*
     - Do you have any comments? Are there any surprises for you?
   - *Show the organigram of VECO*
     - Is the organisational structure of VECO clear with regard to the implementation of M&E?
     - In your opinion, who are the key people for M&E in the VECO office and their responsibilities with regard to M&E clear & transparent?
     - Are the M&E plans and timeframes clear?

5. **Anything you would like to share?**

APPENDIX 3

GUIDING QUESTIONS FACILITATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLA SYSTEM

GUIDING QUESTIONS *FACILITATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLA SYSTEM*	
STEP 1: PURPOSE & SCOPE OF THE PLA SYSTEM *The key task of this step is to identify, clarify and share the main purpose, focus areas and scope of the PLA system for VECO Indonesia*	
1.1	What are the main reasons for/purposes of the PLA system? What are the results of the monitoring & learning process going to be used for?
1.2	What are the focus areas of the PLA system (M&E components)? What is the scope of the M&E process?
1.3	Who are the main users of the PLA system (the main end users/primary users) and what do they want to get out of the monitoring and learning process and its results?
1.4	Which people or groups should participate in the monitoring and learning process and at what stage (planning, data collection, reflection & analysis, use & documentation)?
1.5	What are the underlying principles guiding the PLA system?
STEP 2: IDENTIFYING ORGANISATIONAL SPACES & RHYTHMS *The key task of this step is to identify the key moments (events) and their frequency for planning, learning & accountability in VECO*	
2.1	What are the existing formal key events/moments (spaces) and their frequency (rhythm) for planning, learning & accountability?
2.2	What are the important informal events/moments for planning, learning & accountability?
2.3	What spaces need to be added, deleted or transformed in order to fulfil the PLA requirements?
2.4	What is the purpose & function of each PLA event?
2.5	How do the different spaces link with each other? Is the link effective and logical in view of PLA? *Develop a draft PLA calendar*
STEP 3: IDENTIFYING INFORMATION NEEDS *The key task of this step is to clearly define and prioritise the M&E questions as well as the specific information needs.*	
3.1	What are the general information needs (for the respective M&E components defined in step 1)?
3.2	What are the respective M&E questions?
3.3	What are the specific information needs?
3.3	Which specific information needs require a 'baseline'? What data are required for the 'baseline'?
3.4	Which M&E questions and information needs are part of the ongoing monitoring process and which ones are part of the impact assessment and/or an in-depth evaluation process?
3.5	Which information needs are 'must-know' information needs directly linked to the needs/uses (step 1) and are required for the respective organisational spaces? (prioritisation)
3.6	What are the timeframes (incl. frequency) of the information needs (and the subsequent data collection)? *Update the PLA calendar*

STEP 4: PLAN FOR DATA COLLECTION AND SYNTHESIS *The key task of this step is to plan how all the data will be collected, stored and synthesized*	
4.1	Which methods will be used to collect the necessary data/information for the specific information needs?
4.2	Has the use of different types of data and data collection methods been explored? *Primary/secondary data? Qualitative/quantitative data? Micro/macro data? Group/individual methods? Participatory methods? Use of stories and narratives?*
4.3	How will the collected data be recorded?
4.4	How will the recorded data be stored? *Electronic? Hard copy? Database?*
4.5	How will the information be organized, synthesised and presented in a logical and presentable way?
4.6	Who is responsible for data collection, recording, storage and synthesis?
4.7	Can the data collection methods be applied within the required timeframes and frequency? *Update the PLA calendar*
STEP 5: PLAN FOR SENSE-MAKING *The key task of this step is to plan how critical reflection & analysis of the data/information will be organised and how lessons learned are drawn (conceptualization)?*	
5.1	What are the key moments for sense-making and decision-making? When do they take place and how are these events linked to each other?
5.2	Who needs to participate and who needs to interact with whom?
5.3	How will the critical reflection, analysis and conceptualization be organized and facilitated? Methods? Process?
5.4	Who will facilitate the sense-making events? Internal or external?
5.5	How will the informal events or outcomes of informal events be integrated into the PLA system? *Update the PLA calendar*
STEP 6: PLAN FOR DOCUMENTATION & COMMUNICATION *The key task of this step is to define how the M&E results will be documented and communicated to relevant stakeholders*	
6.1	Who are the key users of, or actors interested in the M&E results? What for?
6.2	How will the M&E results be documented and communicated to each user? Type & format of documentation? Form of communication?
6.3	Who is responsible for compiling the documentation materials and communication?
6.4	Is the documentation & communication of the M&E results part of an organisational communication strategy?
6.5	What is the timeframe for each documentation material? *Update the PLA calendar*

APPENDIX 4

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THE ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLA SYSTEM

(Adapted from Britton (2005))

1. Creating Motives

1.1 Do VECO staff have a common understanding of the purpose, aspirations and expectations of the PLA system and why it is important for VECO?
Which aspects of the PLA are not clear yet?

1.2 Is there sufficient support from the Management Team and Vredeseilanden Head Office for the development and implementation of the PLA system?
What kind of support is provided by management? What extra support is required?

1.3 Does VECO have an organisational culture that encourages, values and uses learning?
Provide examples that show elements of a learning culture. What could be improved? What are the factors hindering a learning culture?

1.4 Does VECO have sufficient incentives, stimuli or sources of encouragement in place for its staff to participate and carry out the different processes of the PLA system?
What kinds of incentives are in place? What should be improved?

2. Creating Means

2.1 Do VECO programme staff have sufficient human capacities to participate in, manage and contribute adequately to the PLA system?
Which capacities are well developed? Which capacities need to be enhanced?

2.2 Does VECO have sufficient specialist support available to coordinate and assist the monitoring and learning process?
Who is providing specialist support in the organisation? What support is missing?

2.3 Is the PLA system built on appropriate conceptual models and are the right methods and tools available to support/facilitate the PLA system?
Which models are underpinning the PLA system? Which methods/tools are used and well developed? What needs to be improved?

2.4 Are there adequate financial resources available for the different aspects of the PLA system? Are the costs for PLA/M&E budgeted for separately? Is the budget known to the staff coordinating the PLA process? How much is the total PLA budget + % of total budget?

3. Creating Opportunities

3.1 How well is the PLA system integrated into the management and operational process of VECO and its programme?

Which procedural changes or adjustments of work processes have assisted the integration of the PLA system? Which aspects of the PLA system could be further integrated?

3.2 Does VECO have an appropriate organisational structure and clear/transparent plans & responsibilities for M&E in place?

Where and how are M&E functions structured in the organisation? Are the M&E plans clear and transparent? Are the roles and responsibilities clear to all staff?

3.3 Does VECO have an operational and useful information management infrastructure in place to support the PLA system?

Which information systems are in place and work well? What needs to be further developed?

3.4 Is there a sufficient level of trust and respect among VECO staff and between VECO and its partners?

Do VECO staff feel free to speak out, challenge each other and share experiences? (Why? Why not?); Do VECO partners feel free to speak out, challenge VECO, provide feedback and share experiences? (Why? Why not?)

APPENDIX 5

QUESTIONNAIRE: ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLA SYSTEM

QUESTIONNAIRE

ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLA SYSTEM

NAME (optional): **SECTION:**

Please read through each of the following statements and place an 'x' in the box that best describes the current situation at VECO.

STATEMENTS	Not true 	Barely true 	Somewhat true 	Largely true 	Very true 
VECO staff have a common understanding of the purpose, aspirations and expectations of the PLA system and why it is important for VECO.					
VECO programme staff have sufficient human capacities to participate in, manage and contribute adequately to the PLA system.					
The PLA system is well integrated into the management and operational process of VECO and its programme.					
VECO has an appropriate organisational structure for M&E and clear M&E responsibilities in place.					
VECO has sufficient specialist support available to coordinate and assist the monitoring and learning process.					
There is sufficient support from the Management Team and Vredeseilanden Head Office for the development and implementation of the PLA system.					
VECO has an organisational culture that encourages, values and uses learning.					
The PLA system is built on appropriate conceptual models and has the right methods and tools available to support/facilitate the PLA system.					
VECO has an operational and useful information management system in place to support the PLA system.					

There is a sufficient level of trust and respect among VECO staff and between VECO and its partners.					
There are adequate financial resources available for the different aspects of the PLA system.					
VECO has sufficient incentives, stimuli or sources of encouragement in place for its staff to participate and carry out the different processes of the PLA system.					

APPENDIX 6

INCENTIVES ENCOURAGING OR HINDERING LEARNING-ORIENTED MONITORING

(Based on IFAD (2002:7-21)

Incentives		Disincentives
Giving high status to the M&E staff in the organisation	1	Using the M&E unit as the place to park demoted or unqualified staff
Embedding M&E staff into the programme management unit	2	Isolating M&E staff from programme management & operations
Clarity about the M&E responsibilities of all staff involved (clear job descriptions & plans)	3	Incomplete or no job description for staff involved in M&E
Providing a variety of opportunities for professional development (training learning initiatives, etc.)	4	Not supporting any training or learning opportunities
Recognition of staff: listening to and acting on their recommendations, publicly recognising staff, etc.	5	Repeated complaints to staff about their incompetence in M&E
Communicating M&E data & findings (newsletter, message board, etc.) and how the data assisted programme improvements	6	No feedback on M&E data and how they are used and how they had an impact on programme development
Hiring staff who have an open attitude	7	Hiring staff with an unconstructive attitude towards participatory processes and the partners
Including learning and innovation as important elements in the performance appraisal	8	Focusing performance appraisal only on the activities carried out
Adequate financial rewards	9	Salaries that are low and/or not paid on time

APPENDIX 7

ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN CAPACITIES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLA SYSTEM

Required M&E capacities	Who should have these capacities?	What needs to be improved?	Actions for capacity building?
Good understanding and overview perspective of the whole PLA system (incl. procedures and communication flows)			
Good understanding of different data collection tools and ability to organize/facilitate data collection			
Ability to check the quality of data			
Being able to facilitate learning events (reflection, analysis, …) with VECO staff, partners and farmers			
Ability to adequately store the data and information (filing system, field reports, database, …)			
Ability to synthesise and aggregate data & present to VECO and/or partners in a useful way			
Ability to use M&E results and apply the learning in operational or strategic decisions/planning			
Ability to compile accurate and attractive official (donor) reports			
Ability to document M&E results and communicate within VECO and VE			
Ability to document and use M&E results through/in a variety of publications and communicate them to the outside world			
Ability to translate data & information from Bahasa Indonesia into English			

APPENDIX 8

ACTION RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF THE PLA SYSTEM: FOUR SEASONS

1. Inquiry & dreaming				
Date	**Event**	**Purpose**	**Participants**	
10 April 2007	Strategic planning workshop	Workshop concluding the strategic planning process of VECO	All VECO staff + VE HO programme manager + consultant	
11 April 2007	Outcome Mapping (OM) training	Introduction to Outcome Mapping as an alternative PM&E method	All VECO staff + VE HO programme manager	•
12-13 April 2007	Intentional design (OM) workshop	Design of the new VECO programme using OM as guiding framework	VECO management and programme staff	•
30 July-3 Aug 2007 (3 hr. session)	VECO's bi-annual learning & reflection week	Discussing and identifying the purpose, use and the scope of the new PLA system	All VECO staff	•
23 August 2007 (2 hr. session)	VECO's national partner meeting	Presenting VECO's new programme and discussions about the new M&E framework	All VECO programme staff Representatives of every boundary partner of VECO	•
2. Exploration & confusion				
19 September 2007	VECO staff meeting	Discussing and identifying the PLA components and general information needs	All VECO staff	•
23-24 October 2007	Programme intentional design meeting	Discussion and formulation of the information needs of the VECO programme: 1. PMs (obj. 1-2) 2. SMs (obj. 1-2) 3. PMs (Obj. 4)	VECO management and programme staff	•
20-22 November 2007	National Partner Meeting	Clarification, discussing & negotiating of the programme objectives, OCs, PMs and SMs and M&E timeframes	Management + programme staff VECO Representatives of every boundary partner of VECO	•
10-12 December 2007	2nd generation OM training workshop (external training)	Introduction to OM with a special focus on the M&E process	1 VECO staff 4 VE HO staff	
13-14 December 2007	VE HO PLA meeting	Planning of the development of a global PLA system	1 VECO staff VE HO staff + consultant	

December 2007-January 2008	Further 'socialisation' of the new VECO programme focus & framework	Programme Officers of VECO further explain the new programme to their respective partner organisations and assist them in compiling annual proposal documents + operational plans	Programme officers Partner organisations	
3. Direction & focus				
5-8 March 2008	Global PLA workshop	Development of a PLA system for the different levels of the organisation	Country representatives and M&E officers from all VECOs (10) Staff, VE HO Consultant	
2 April 2008	Programme section meeting	Discussing and defining the organisational learning needs of VECO in view of the new programme	VECO management & programme staff	•
9-11 April	VECO Asia regional meeting	Design + action plan of the Regional Learning Initiative (RELI)	Management & programme staff from VECO Indonesia, VECO Laos and VECO Vietnam Head CDU of VE HO Regional SACD Advisor	•
28-30 April 2008	PLA design workshop	Identification of the main M&E events (spaces), timeframes, data collection & partner reports	VECO management & programme staff	•
4. Decision & action				
June 2008	VECO mid-year reporting	Piloting the new partner and internal reporting system	VECO partners VECO programme staff	•
July 2008	VECO mid-year reflection meeting	Reflection on the progress outcomes (PM's) + revision of programme strategies (SM's)	VECO programme staff	•
August 2008	VE HO mid-year report	Piloting of the new mid-year reporting system to VE HO	VECO programme staff VE HO global PLA coordinator + programme staff	•
22 September 2008	PLA design meeting	Clarification of the aim of each M&E event, discussion of sense-making, documentation & communication, and group assessment of M&E capacity	VECO management staff VECO programme staff VECO publication coordinator VECO office manager	•
6-8 October 2008	Executive meeting	Update & reflection on the PLA systems in each VECO	Country representatives of each VECO (10) + VE HO management & programme staff	

(•) Activities facilitated by the researcher