

# Harnessing monitoring & evaluation for learning

Experiences from the RESILIM-O Program  
2019



USAID: RESILIENCE IN THE LIMPOPO BASIN PROGRAM (RESILIM) – OLIFANTS

## No progress without learning!

Resilience-building programs in social-ecological systems need monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems that respond to the complexity of the context and enable ongoing learning.

While this may seem obvious, using M&E in this way is not standard practice.

The RESILIM-O Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Learning [MERL] system was developed by AWARD leadership, MERL staff and members of the program's reference group, with support from USAID.

Key enabling factors in the collaboration included flexibility, trust and a willingness to experiment. Here we share some of the important features of the system that emerged and what we have learnt through the process of developing and implementing it.

For further details see: Rosenberg et al. (2019) Complexity-sensitive M&E in a coupled social-ecological system in southern Africa: A hybrid methodology developed in AWARD's RESILIM-O program (submitted for publication).

## Putting learning into monitoring & evaluation programs

M&E systems often end up being focused on accountability or compliance at the expense of learning - especially when they are imposed as a funder requirement. For example, it is common to report almost exclusively against quantitative indicators.

While this makes it easy for funders to aggregate data across projects, it reduces the chance that project implementers will reflect on (and report) unexpected outcomes, including failures, disruptions and contradictions - all valuable opportunities for learning.

### Complex social-ecological systems are:

- Based on relationships (connections can be more important than the components themselves)
- Open and difficult to define
- Context-dependent
- Adaptive and have self-organising capacities for change
- Dynamic, with non-linear pathways to change show complex causality and emergence, making them inherently unpredictable and the outcome uncertain.



Standard M&E frameworks tend to assume that what needs to be done is known from the start, and that project activities can therefore be planned in a linear sequence leading to the desired outcomes. They do not take into account that understanding of the very nature of the problem may change or emerge along the way! Monitoring and evaluation functions are often

separated, with monitoring (routine collection of data) being the task of program implementers while evaluation (sense-making based on the monitoring data) is undertaken by external experts, often only at the end of the project. This practice excludes implementers from the sense-making that could promote learning and improve practice.

## What is this innovation about?

A valuable opportunity and “innovation space” opened up within the RESILIM-O program (*you can read more about this at [www.award.org.za](http://www.award.org.za)*) as both funder (USAID) and implementing agent (AWARD) sought to address some of the above concerns.

The **Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Learning (MERL)** system was developed by AWARD leadership, MERL staff and members of the program’s reference

group, with support from USAID. We describe the basics of the MERL system in this brochure but you can read more about it in more detailed MERL documents and reports.

The MERL system was developed using the very processes it seeks to encourage in the program: **experimentation, reflection, social learning and iterative design.**



### RESILIM-O MERL team

(L to R) Karen Kotschy, Vhutshilo Mudau,  
Eureta Rosenberg

## Features of the RESILIM-O MERL system

The MERL system combines the value of monitoring against indicators with reflective process monitoring and more open-ended processes for obtaining explanatory data and evaluative insights (see Figure 1).

Key design features include:

- A **collaborative approach** to MERL, where staff and MERL team members interact regularly around monitoring, evaluation, reflection and planning.
- **Innovations in reporting** to increase its value for reflection and learning.
- Regular meetings and shared learning events with a **dedicated reflection component.**
- Collaborative, evaluative **case studies for formative evaluation** (rather than leaving evaluation to external experts at project end).

- Working with standard M&E elements such as indicators, targets and logic models in non-standard ways - in particular, **creating space for ongoing learning and refinement** of these tools.
- Combining breadth of data coverage (monthly quantitative and qualitative monitoring) with depth (evaluation case studies, synthesis and writing projects).

An **iterative approach to the design of the MERL system itself**, recognising (as in Quinn-Patton’s 2010 concept of *Developmental Evaluation*) that a program or organisation will need different things from its M&E system at different times in its life. The MERL system was developed using the very processes it seeks to encourage in the program: **experimentation, reflection, social learning and iterative design.**

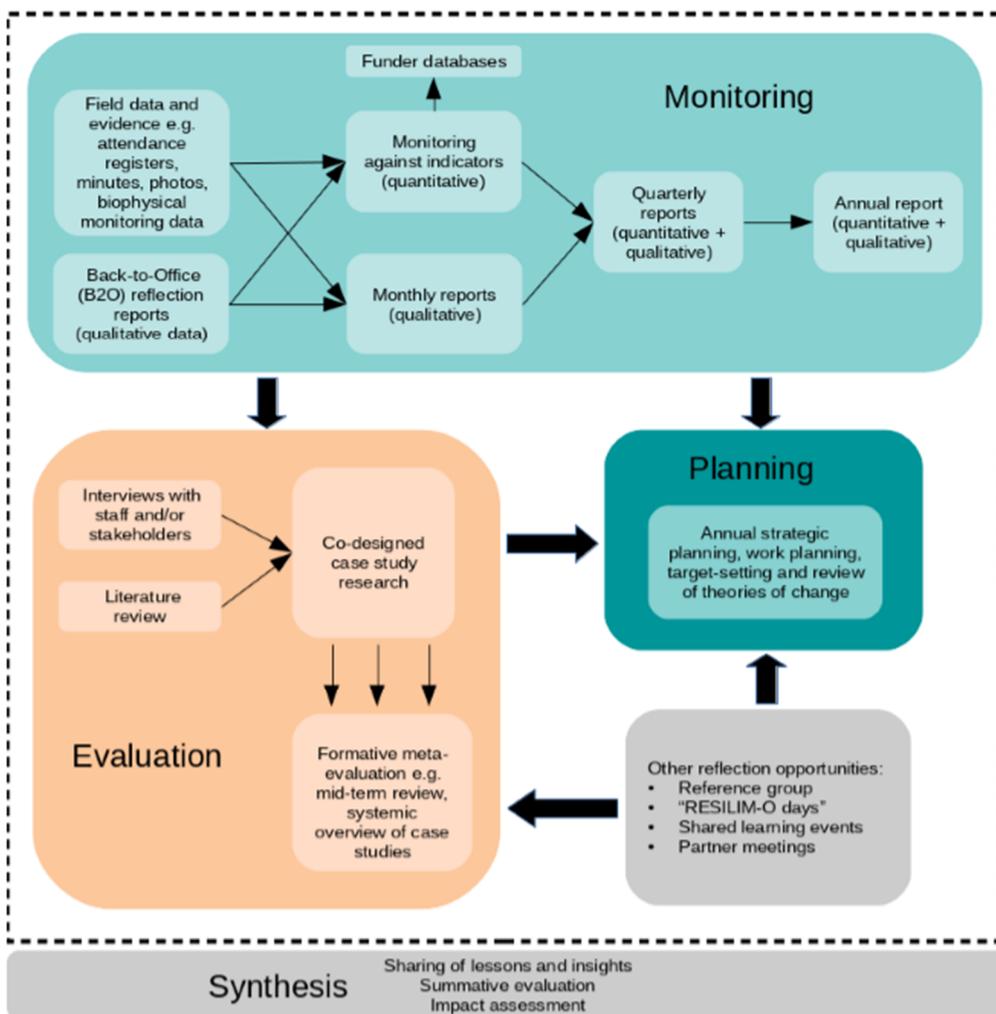
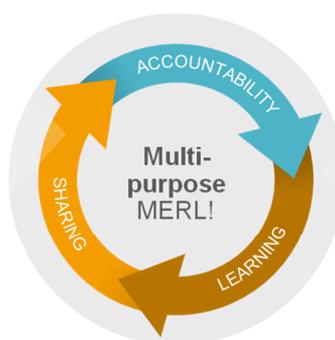


Figure 1: Overview of RESILIM-O MERL system

## The Roles of MERL in RESILIM-O

### Accountability

Some monitoring and reporting are designed only to meet the needs of the funder. These needs are important, but programs are also accountable to their own managers, staff, partners and intended beneficiaries. Accountability is about counting \$ spent and # of people engaged; *but also* about making sure that the numbers of people reached have indeed benefitted – that capacity and resilience is indeed being built. In complex systems this is difficult to achieve and ascertain and so we also need to *learn*.



### Learning & Sharing

So, learning is part of being accountable to ourselves, our funders and other stakeholders. Implementers need learning for adaptive management: what works or not, what to change, drop or expand, how best to build capacity and resilience. Such learning must be shared with the donor partner and with other development practitioners beyond the catchment, to advance broader knowledge & practice. *MERL must support learning.*

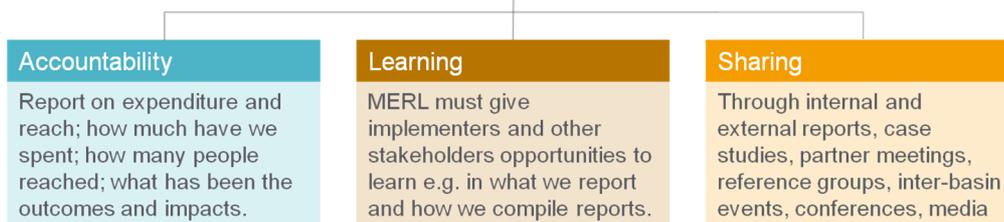


Figure 2: MERL has multiple, mutually supportive roles in RESILIM-O



## THE RESILIM-O MERL SYSTEM IS DESIGNED TO ACHIEVE MULTIPLE PURPOSES:

Internal learning	Strategy and management	Accountability	Communication	External learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to guide internal strategy and build the capacity of implementers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>which projects should continue, change or stop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to funder, management and partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>success stories and areas that need attention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to guide development partners and build communities of practice</li> </ul>

## Lessons from experience

- MERL must be well integrated into day-to-day operations as well as strategic planning. This works better if MERL staff are full- or part-time members of the organisation rather than short-term consultants.
- At least one MERL staff member should be of sufficient seniority to allow easy interface with senior management (to allow for the above).
- Support from senior management is essential for success.
- MERL staff need understanding of system relationships and transformational change as well as technical skills. Important competencies include openness to working in a pioneering context, organisational sensitivity, interpersonal communication and advocacy skills, and the ability to “make sense of” data - which in our experience requires a sound understanding of the nature of the program.
- A MERL system can promote learning through developing reflection skills, enhancing access to data, and promoting interactive sense-making (e.g. joint reflection, collaborative compilation of reports, working out a theory of change with others).
- Reflection skills take time and need to be cultivated in an organisation with patience and consistency.
- A “supportive” stance on the part of the MERL team is more effective than a “punitive” stance.
- Appropriate resourcing means not only an adequate budget, but also a flexible budget.
- In addition to a responsive design, a successful MERL system requires a responsive disposition from implementers, funders and MERL team alike.



AWARD is a non-profit organisation specializing in participatory, research-based project implementation. Their work addresses issues of sustainability, inequity and poverty by building natural-resource management competence and supporting sustainable livelihoods. One of their current projects, supported by USAID, focuses on the Olifants River and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems to sustain livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment.

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### About USAID: RESIIM-O

USAID: RESILIM-O focuses on the Olifants River Basin and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems that support livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment. The 5-year program, involving the South African and Mozambican portions of the Olifants catchment, is being implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD) and is funded by USAID Southern Africa.

The PMERL conceptualisation & implementation reflected in this brochure involved are Karen Kotschy as MERL coordinator, Vhutshilo Mudau as MERL officer, Jane Burt as initial MERL team member, Sharon Pollard as Programme Director, Eureka Rosenberg as MERL developer & advisor on AWARD's Reference Group. The paper on which the brochure is based is by Rosenberg, Kotschy, Burt, Mudau and Pollard.

### Acknowledgements: Project Funding & Support

The USAID: RESILIM-O project is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under USAID/Southern Africa RESILIENCE IN THE LIMPOPO BASIN PROGRAM (RESILIM). The RESILIM-O project is implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD), in collaboration with partners. Cooperative Agreement nr AID-674-A-13-00008



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