

The journey to ‘fit-for-purpose’

Developing a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) System for a Complex Project

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This Practice Note shares experiences of designing and implementing a monitoring, evaluation and learning system for a project that seeks to promote learning and capacity building in a multi-agency partnership. This was not a simple process of picking a ready-made tool off the shelf and applying it. Instead the experiences shared in this Practice Note are a story about how a number of approaches were tried yet failed, and how we eventually arrived at something useful. Or so we thought. The journey continues to be a work-in-progress and whether it is the right fit for such a complex project remains to be seen.

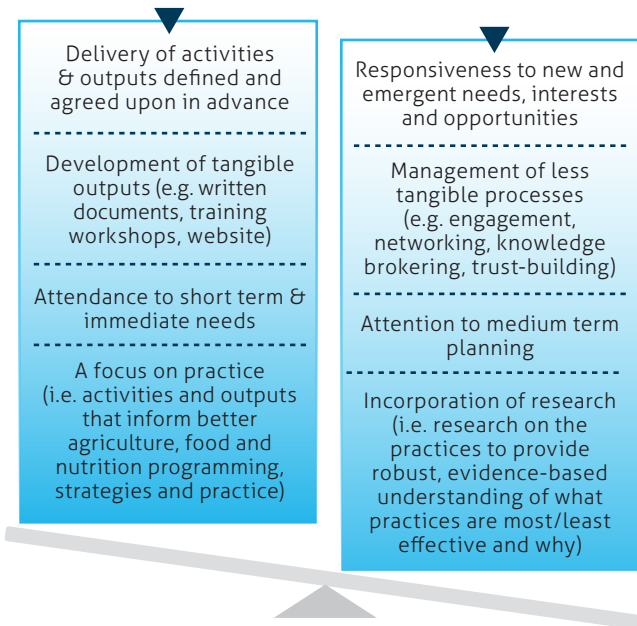
Project context

The experiences we share in this document come from the Food Systems Innovation (FSI) initiative. FSI is an ambitious project. It was launched in 2012 as a partnership between three Australian government agencies – the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). The main goal of FSI is to improve the impact of ODA-supported agriculture and food security programs in the Indo-Pacific region. At its core, FSI is about innovation. It has a focus on fostering innovation in agriculture, food systems development and practice. FSI achieves this by linking Australian and international expertise and partners through the exchange of knowledge and experiences; cross-sectoral, systems thinking; hands-on-experimentation with novel approaches; and partnership-building. FSI also takes an innovation systems approach to how it is implemented and governed. This includes:

- Accepting and working with uncertainty, and differences in perspectives among FSI’s partners about how to best achieve FSI’s goal of improving the impact of Australian-supported aid investments in agriculture, food and nutrition.
- Experimenting with different ideas, approaches and practices and being open to emerging opportunities, whilst responding to partners’ needs.
- Engaging in ‘boundary work’; i.e., building and managing the interfaces among FSI partners to effectively mobilise knowledge and networks into actions.

- The FSI team members taking on multiple roles: boundary workers/brokers/spanners, managers, communicators, researchers.

FSI not only involves multiple partners and operates across countries, it is also embedded in a broader Australian and international development environment where partners have to respond to their specific responsibilities, accountabilities, and dynamics. As such, FSI has adopted an adaptive management approach that aims to be attentive to this context and needs whilst also creating space for innovative thinking and practice to emerge. It has done so by trying to balance this with... ..this:



This complex nature of FSI has required an innovative and responsive monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system that is capable of:

- supporting the initiative's short, medium and long term objectives
- meeting the accountability needs of its donor agency, diverse partners and governance committees, and
- contributing to the different information, learning and adaptive management requirements and rhythms of each of these groups, as well as of the initiative as a whole.

Designing a MEL system that can efficiently and effectively address all of these dimensions, however, has been a significant challenge.

Our experiences designing a MEL system for FSI

The challenges

We were not challenged by a lack of availability of monitoring and evaluation approaches and tools. There is a huge range of M&E approaches and tools to choose from, and many are excellent. Our experience, however, highlighted that the majority of M&E – in cookie-cutter form or as stand-alone tools – are not suitable for meeting the multiple accountability, learning, and adaptive management needs and rhythms of complex initiatives such as FSI. The FSI team came to realise this 'lack-of-fit' problem after experimenting with different approaches and tools. In the next section, we provide a brief overview of our trial and error experience in search of the most appropriate MEL system for supporting FSI, and lessons learned along the way.

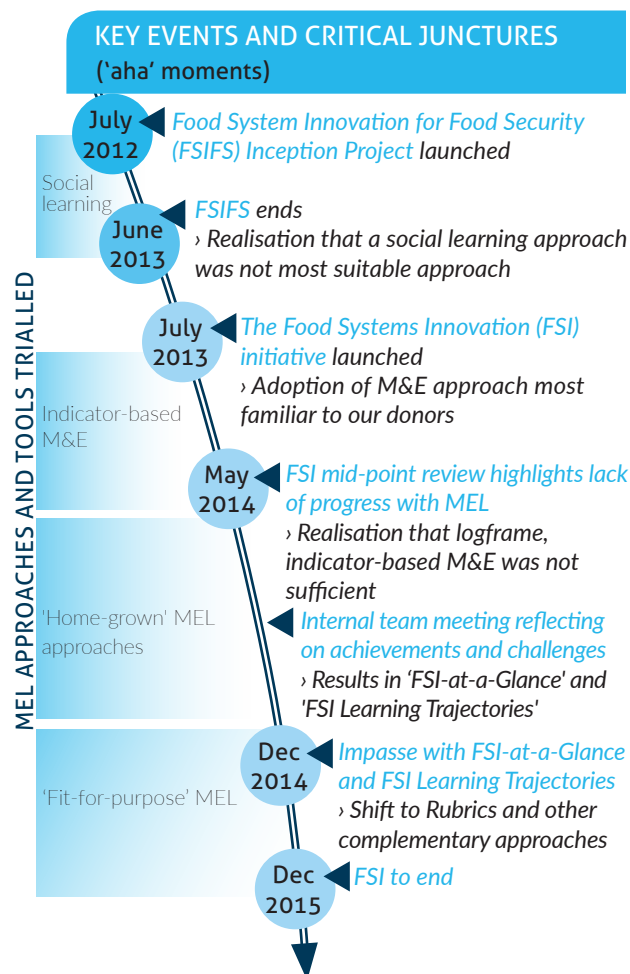
The challenge encountered by the FSI team was not difficulty in finding 'best practices' in MEL but rather identifying a suite of approaches and tools that are a 'best fit' with the complex nature of the agriculture, food and nutrition issues FSI is trying to tackle, and with the complexity of FSI itself.

Moving from a 'best practice' to a 'fit-for-purpose' MEL system

WHAT WE DID

Over the course of FSI – from its launch in 2012 as an 'inception project' to its current form as an initiative – we trialled a variety of MEL approaches and tools (summarised below).

We started with 'best-practices'. In the first two years of FSI (July 2012 – May 2014), we strove to develop a MEL system based on 'best practice' approaches and tools in the field. We started with a **social learning approach** to MEL. That is, an approach that attempts to engage a group of people (in our case, a multi-agency team and partners which included our donor) in a participatory process of reflection on what works, what doesn't and what needs to be done differently. However, the FSI project team and partners were not only geographically dispersed but also did not have, at that point, enough common ground regarding the project's mission and each other's roles. But, perhaps most critically, there was insufficient trust in engaging in what is often perceived to be a 'touchy feely' process (i.e., involves delving into personal and emotional aspects).

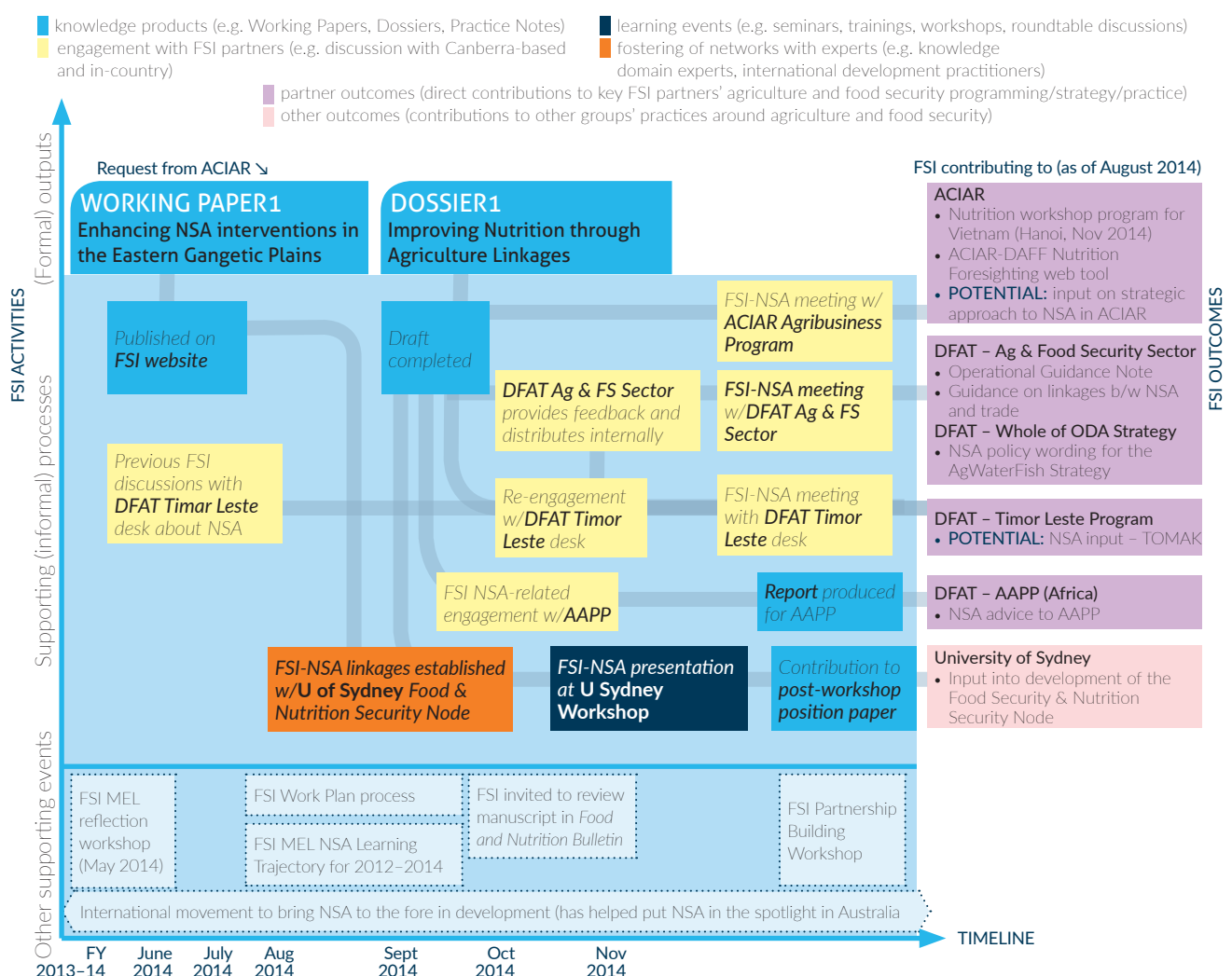


We decided to shift to what was familiar territory to most involved in FSI: a **logframe-oriented, indicator-based approach**. It failed. We ended up finding that it was too narrow and rigid for a project where the planned activities and indicators of success were constantly changing as the project unfolded and evolved in response to new opportunities and changing needs of the project's partners. This became even more apparent in the difficulties we encountered in identifying a set of indicators that the majority of FSI team members and partners agreed upon as important to monitor and evaluate.

We then experimented with a 'home-grown' approach. In mid-2014, our lack of progress with developing an MEL system that worked for FSI was not only apparent to us, but was highlighted in a mid-term review. At this point, we decided to take stock and seek the advice and guidance of MEL experts with experience in working in highly complex projects/programs.

Around the same time (May 2014), a small group of FSI team members met to jointly reflect on the achievements and challenges encountered over the year. Using a loosely-facilitated discussion format (a.k.a. intense discussions over endless coffees and sandwiches), and aided by a series of flow diagrams on a white board, this two-day workshop proved to be useful for FSI team members. The experience of sitting together and jointly making sense of what felt like a messy, incoherent and busy year enabled the team members to pinpoint some of the key activities, outputs, and processes that had led to positive outcomes for FSI. Most importantly, it helped us 'connect the dots' between what appeared to have been disparate activities, outputs, and processes and to understand why some had been successful and others not. The reflections and lessons learned in those two days culminated in the development of a diagram we called a '**Learning Trajectory**' (see Figure 1 below).

FIGURE 1 The Learning Trajectory. The process of building a 'Learning Trajectory' enabled the team to visually and succinctly capture key accomplishments, and bottle-necks, and the underpinning processes that led to key outcomes. Below is an example of the Learning Trajectory for the Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture component of FSI (last updated August 2014). The extent of this component's contribution to FSI outcomes became apparent only after the Learning Trajectory. Before then, the highly dynamic character of FSI and the extensive number of activities unfolding at the same time had rendered these accomplishments relatively invisible.



The Learning Trajectory exercise was valuable in a number of ways. It provided a way of understanding how different, and often what appeared to be disjointed, small-scale activities and achievements added up to something that was actually helping FSI progress toward both planned and unexpected goals. It was hugely useful in building, at that point in time, a common understanding across the team of what we were trying to achieve and how we were doing it. This proved to be critical in helping us articulate an approach and strategy in the subsequent project work plan for the next year. Over and above these direct contributions to FSI planning and management processes, the discussions that revolved around the development of the Learning Trajectories were essential in reenergising the team as the apparent lack of progress in the project and individuals' roles had left the FSI team's morale at rock bottom. For us, the learning trajectory exercise was a turning point.

Moving to a 'fit-for-purpose' approach. We thought that the learning journey exercise, its documentation of specific outputs and direct links to outcomes could be used as a routine method for both assessing progress along different routes to impact and reporting achievements externally (a.k.a. the initiative's key partner organisations and donor). This proved not to be the case. While the Learning Trajectory approach was useful, it was a time-consuming exercise. It also struggled to deliver to the management team relevant information in a timely fashion and it was hard to

communicate to external audiences. Moreover, the value of this approach came from the joint discussions and reflections; yet, it was logistically too difficult and expensive to have our partners and collaborators, in Australia and overseas, engage in a process that required face-to-face interaction.

Despite not having found a 'winner' with the Learning Trajectory approach, this experience – along with our earlier trials with social learning and indicator-based approaches – made it clear to us what was needed. FSI needed an MEL system that had at its centre an M&E method that could capture the non-quantifiable, process-level aspects of FSI that proved in the Learning Trajectory exercise to play a central role in the initiative achieving its outcomes. The MEL system also needed to be capable of incorporating and reflecting, in a concise way, differences in perspectives and opinions regarding FSI's achievements, including those of our key partners as well as of others (e.g. people who participated in FSI events). And it needed to be easy to update information and progress on a regular basis; as well as be succinctly communicated to FSI's governance committees. Finally, we also wanted a tool that had the potential to be used as a platform for reflection and learning. We decided that an approach called **Rubrics** came the closest to meeting these criteria. Since January 2015, we have been re-designing our MEL system around the rubrics approach (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 *The Rubrics approach. Rubrics is a qualitative descriptive assessment tool. We built our Rubrics for FSI on the initiative's programme logic. For each set of core activities, we revisited the outcomes and identified the key qualities or changes that would tell us that FSI was achieving its purposes and progressing towards its goals. An example of the Rubrics table for one of FSI's targeted short-term outcomes is provided below:*

RUBRICS FOR FSI'S FOSTERING EXPERTISE & PRACTICE NETWORKS ACTIVITIES

Targeted outcome: An expanded range of experts and international development practitioners who actively contribute to FSI Australian and in-country partners' and their networks' discussions, designs, and practices in ways that are perceived as collaborative, salient, credible and useful, and are effective in progressing FSI's medium-term outcomes

EVALUATION CRITERIA	RATINGS					EVIDENCE
	Poor	Adequate	Good	Excellent	Insufficient evidence	
Expanded range						SOURCES OF INFORMATION: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • survey responses • anecdotal evidence • partners' feedback • post-activity FSI debrief reflections • quarterly progress FSI reflection meetings • 'Most Significant Change' chats and vignettes • 'What I got out of it' soundbites
Actively contribute to discussions, designs, and practices						
Collaborative						
Salient, credible and useful						
Effective: enhance knowledge-exchange						
Effective: enhance learning						
Effective: enhance networks						

How well does it work? It is early days yet. Once we have had a few attempts at road-testing it, we will report back in a separate Practice Note. However, what we can say at this stage is that it is giving us a way of qualitatively reporting progress to external audiences. It also has helped us identify the types of both qualitative and quantitative information that we need to collect as 'evidence'. From a project management perspective, it is helping communicate better with our donor (not an inconsequential achievement). But more importantly, it is helping us identify weaknesses in achieving our outcomes. For example, it has alerted us to the poor performance of the project in achieving international credibility and recognition (one of FSI's goals) and this in turn has highlighted the need to re-think and re-vamp the way we have conceived of and developed 'knowledge products' (such as reports, documentation of lessons learned or best practice). The project is actively addressing this.

Are Rubrics the answer? Maybe. For the time being, we intend to make the Rubrics the cornerstone of FSI's MEL system and the central mechanism through which to communicate the initiative's progress to the governance committee in the form of FSI MEL Reports. This is currently being developed, as is a set of other complimentary MEL reporting approaches, summarised in the table below. This mix of reporting mechanisms and formats was designed to ensure that the MEL system can support FSI's different adaptive management cycles and its associated information and reporting frequency needs. This includes monitoring FSI's commitment to deliver on activities and outputs defined in advance in the project's formal workplan, as well as monitoring, evaluating and learning about the initiative's capacity to respond to short term, immediate, and emergent needs and opportunities.

TABLE 1 FSI's MEL reporting approaches and mechanisms

REPORTING APPROACH/ TOOL	M, E, OR L?	OF WHAT?	FREQUENCY AND FORMAT	PRIMARY PURPOSE	PRIMARY AUDIENCES
FSI Fortnightly Updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring 	FSI activities & outputs	Approx. every 2 weeks (via e-mail)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability Sharing where everyone is at Day-to-day management 	Internal: FSI leader, team members, Management and Steering Committees and immediate partners
FSI MEL Reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring Evaluation Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short and medium-term outcomes Deviations from plan & wins Lessons learned 	Approx. every 3 months: FSI Steering Committee meetings Succinct report: rubrics & narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability Critical decisions and directions (management) 	Internal (as above)
FSI Quarterly Progress Reports & Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring Learning 	Medium and longer outcomes, goals	Every 3 months Report followed by a meeting for reflection and learning among team and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Accountability) Sharing where everyone is at Key lesson learned and insights 	Internal (as above)
FSI Practice Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning 	Medium and longer outcomes, goals	As 'critical mass' of lessons learned gathered Succinct, reader-friendly 'notes'	Synthesis and sharing of key lessons learned and insights	Internal and external audiences

Learning from our experience with MEL

Our key lessons to-date:

1. DESIGNING AND TRIALLING MEL APPROACHES AND TOOLS FOR COMPLEX INITIATIVES TAKES CONSIDERABLE TIME

While the FSI team was fortunate to have been given the time to experiment, it has resulted in considerable delays in having a functioning and running MEL system for FSI. This has detrimentally impacted the FSI teams' capacity to demonstrate and communicate progress. Linking earlier on with MEL experts who have had extensive experience working in complex projects would have speeded the process.

2. THERE IS NOT ONE, DEFINITIVE, PERFECT MEL SYSTEM, AND THERE WILL ALWAYS BE DIFFERENCES IN PERSPECTIVES WITHIN PROJECTS AS TO WHAT IS THE MOST APPROPRIATE MEL APPROACH AND TOOLS – THE KEY IS THAT THEY ARE 'FIT-FOR-PURPOSE'

The important thing is to develop a set of tools and to refine them so that they are a 'best fit' or 'fit the purpose', rather than 'hop' from one tool to another in search of the 'best practice' approach and tools. In other words, all MEL approaches and tools selected should have a clear and tangible purpose. In our case, the MEL approach had to contribute to the specific information, learning, and adaptive management needs of FSI management and implementing teams and FSI partners, with the ultimate goal of helping FSI achieve what it was set up to do.

3. A FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE MEL SYSTEM IS PARAMOUNT FOR COMPLEX PROJECTS OR INITIATIVES

The MEL approach and tools need to be able to be adjusted and refined. We found that as the MEL system was implemented, problems, disjunctures, and new insights emerged. Moreover, as FSI evolved, the activities and needs of the FSI teams and partners also changed. The MEL system needed to be flexible enough to respond to these changes in order to ensure that it remained 'fit-for-purpose'.

4. SOME OF THE MEL APPROACHES AND TOOLS ARE COMPLICATED AND TIME-INTENSIVE TO COMPILE

As our experience with the Learning Trajectory approach taught us, while complicated MEL tools may have great value, they need to be made easier and faster to collate and communicate if they are to be useful and effective.

5. INVOLVING THE PEOPLE/GROUPS WHO WILL MAKE USE OF THE INFORMATION AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MEL APPROACHES TOOLS IS CRITICAL TO MAKING THE MEL SYSTEM USEFUL, APPROPRIATE, AND EFFECTIVE

For us, feedback from FSI team members, the management team, the Steering Committee and staff from partner organisations has been critical in guiding our journey. It helped us better understand what information is important and what is the best way to communicate the information. ■

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About the author

Dr Samantha Stone-Jovicich is an anthropologist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Her research focuses on understanding why innovative and creative approaches (such as social learning approaches) that have emerged to address global social-environmental challenges are so difficult to implement effectively. Her primary interest is strengthening science's contribution to on-the-ground impacts by rethinking scientists' roles, practices, and the communication of scientific knowledge. Prior to joining CSIRO in 2006, she was an applied researcher working with small scale farmers and loggers in Brazil and other Latin American countries.

This series of Practice Notes facilitate shared learning and innovation to improve practice amongst research and development practitioners. The series is a deliverable of The Food Systems Innovation (FSI) Initiative, a partnership between the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and the Australian International Food Security Research Centre (AIFSRC).

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