The Evidence and Impact Hub

MEL Learning Paper
1. Introduction
In April 2019, WFD launched a new and innovative activity and outcome monitoring system called the Evidence and Impact Hub (EIH). Over the last six months, the MEL team have worked to train staff, troubleshoot, and embed the EIH into WFD processes, and we are taking the opportunity to reflect on that work and assess the outcomes of the new system. As a framework for analysis, we will return to the assumptions that were made about challenges the EIH would face and about the impact it would have within WFD. This paper utilises the results of a survey that was sent to WFD staff and the informal feedback that the MEL team have received throughout the implementation of the EIH.

Our overall assessment is that the introduction of the EIH has been successful in achieving the following:

| Increase visibility of work across WFD |
| Pilot a time-efficient method for reporting |
| Establish a data model fit for portfolio-level analysis and comparison |
| Produce information relevant for decision-making at strategic level |

2. The Problem
The EIH was introduced as part of a wider overhaul of the MEL system in April 2019 and as with any new system, it was designed in response to a problem.

At the time of design, WFD had experienced a significant amount of growth in a short space of time. Income had increased by 49% from 2017-18 to 2018-19, with a 71% increase in staff between 2015 and 2018. The number of programmes had correspondingly increased.

However, information on those programmes remained:
- decentralised,
- difficult to access, and
- stored in incomparable formats,
making analysis on overall successes and challenges impossible.

All programme materials and monitoring data including logframes, work plans, and reports were held on programme pages on SharePoint or in country offices. In fact, reports were the only place that monitoring data was consolidated, leading to the two being incorrectly synonymous. None of this was easily accessible to anyone who wanted to ask, for example,

- Which programme designs are the most impactful?
- What work are we doing on women’s political leadership and why?
- Which programmes are achieving the most or least outcomes?

Being able to ask (and answer!) these questions enables us to conduct dynamic, real-time analysis and evaluation that can be fed back into WFD’s programmes while they are still running, as well as increase transparency within the organisation, and demonstrate our impact to a wider audience.

At the same time, country teams were spending considerable time on increasingly complex and lengthy quarterly reports. Without an easy overview of programme activities and outcomes, they were being asked to summarise their work
in narrative form for corporate and senior management. We regularly heard of teams feeling the need to spend the last fortnight of the quarter collating their monitoring data and writing up their reports. At the same time, these reports were not generating information of sufficient quality and detail to meet management and donor needs.

The EIH was designed to tackle this problem. It is an online database, which captures what programmes are doing, who they are doing it with, and the changes they are supporting. It was designed and created within the MEL team, highly customisable to suit our work, and affordable at less than £1,000 per year. Tracking activities in this way makes WFD an innovative leader in a sector that has so far struggled to find a way to categorise, organise, and track international democracy assistance.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>806</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>122</td>
<td>Products</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Research-, policy-, strategy papers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1655</td>
<td>Organisations (partners, beneficiaries)</td>
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<tr>
<td>266</td>
<td>Experts</td>
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<tr>
<td>7309</td>
<td>Activity participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Programme outcome matrices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32/785</td>
<td>Progress markers on outcome matrices (partially) achieved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We estimate that this covers 87% of WFD programming, suggesting broad uptake. We are using this data to report to senior management, governance bodies and donors, to support internal and external comms, and to manage and gain insights on our programmes. Some issues remain in collecting full and complete data and getting real-time updates on the status of activities. However, we are mindful of teams’ capacities and understand that our support needs to facilitate the work of country teams and not overburden them. From programmes teams’ there is clearly support for the system:

75% of staff ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they could see how the EIH would improve our work at WFD

Survey Oct 2019

3. Results

Embedding the EIH remains an ongoing priority for the MEL team, as we hone and fine tune our support and guidance, as well as the functions and use of the EIH. However, two quarters into the year is a good place to reflect on the introduction of the system and ask what we have learnt through the process.

Firstly, we do believe it has largely been a success. At the time of writing, there were:

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<td>32/785</td>
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</tr>
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For MEL, we are constantly finding new ways to use and interact with the data and are working on how to make it accessible.
and useful to as many people as possible. Previous efforts to roll out similar tools at WFD have not made it this far. To understand why that is, and to examine some of the nuances behind this apparent success, we will now move on to examining some of the assumptions that were made about why the EIH would or would not work.

3.1 Time
The EIH collects the activity data that would previously have been expected in a report, as well as additional information that was not available before. For example, specific information about each individual participant and participant feedback, both connected to activities.

The biggest concern that staff had was that updating the EIH with this data would take too much time. For MEL on the other hand, the assumption was that while inputting data would generate an additional task, it would actually reduce the amount of time spent collating the same information for narrative reporting purposes.

We asked country teams how much time it took them to enter an activity on average. While the answers varied, the average was 10.5 minutes.

This rose when we included adding participants to activities, which took an average of 27 minutes. Clearly this number comes with the caveat that it will vary depending on how many participants attend an activity. The additional time is a result of two factors. One is that participant data is usually collected manually on paper, which then needs to be typed up. The second is that the system we have built the EIH on has limitations. While it allows us to add participants in bulk, they need to be manually connected to activities. This workload does reduce over time though, as the initial addition of participants only needs to be done once. One country team member told us:

“...In the beginning, it took a long time because we had to add all the participants to the database. But now, most of the participants are the same across activities (though not all!) so it’s fine. I actually love the Hub!”

We are actively working with teams to find and trial new methods for collecting participant data to make this process quicker and easier. If at any point additional funding was available to procure a new data collection system, easing the participant upload process would be a key priority.

Returning to the question of timing, the new MEL section of the quarterly report has removed all requirements to summarise activity and outcome level data. From the Hub data we know that programmes have an average of three new activities per month\(^1\), meaning that based on the estimates they provided, country teams spend an average of 90 minutes a month inputting new data into the EIH. This excludes time spent collecting data for the Hub, such as participant information and feedback, and is likely to be an underestimate overall. However, it is still a useful indication that the Hub is taking significantly less time than reporting used to. While there will always be variation depending on activity numbers and team capacity, it seems that the EIH has reduced workload overall, while

\(^1\) WFD programmes vary in size and so this average hides significant disparities in both directions. However, larger programmes tend to have more staff capacity and it is still useful as an indication of volume.
3.2 Technological Proficiency
For some, staff’s ability to understand and use a technological solution was assumed to be prohibitively low for the EIH to be a success. Certainly, a considerable amount of training and capacity development have been required from the MEL team over the last six months, but this appears to have paid off.

We are continuing to invest in capacity building, having recently created a series of training videos which staff can refer back to. By keeping a close eye on the quality of data on the EIH, we have been able to identify gaps in technological ability and deliver targeted support to rectify this. We also designed the system with ‘foolproofing’ tools to ensure that the data is accurate. There are a number of fields that are populated automatically in the background, fields that are only visible in certain circumstances, and required fields to ensure that the most important data is always collected.

3.3 Duplication of Work
The EIH is not just a MEL tool. It overlaps with reporting, programme management, and internal comms, and as such, there were concerns that it would result in duplicated work processes. There are mixed messages about the extent to which this concern is still accurate. MEL have been vigilant for areas of duplicated work and for opportunities to integrate other WFD working processes with the Hub more generally. In many cases this has been very successful. For example, the comms team now sources the information for their communication plans from the EIH, having previously relied on manual email updates. This has clearly helped to streamline and standardise information flows and removed an additional task for country teams.

However, the EIH impacts on processes and staff beyond MEL’s immediate sphere of influence and here some duplication of work continues. One is internal processes and procedures within WFD, where bigger organisational shifts are required to fully avoid work duplication. For example, continued reliance on email or verbal updates to extract information from country offices. The other is third-party donors, who continue to require narrative reports. MEL have been helping to mitigate this by making EIH data exportable in a variety of formats, including some short narrative. We have also been promoting the EIH with donors wherever possible and have received some excellent feedback.

“…”

Multiple representatives from UK embassies, CSSF, and other donors have said that the system is impressive and that they would be interested in replicating something similar.

In the Western Balkans, we successfully lobbied for permission to present our
reports in a format that was more compatible with the existing EIH data.

3.4 Organisation, Communication and Reporting

Within the MEL team, we also had assumptions about why we thought the system would work and the impact it would have, and it is important to evaluate these as well.

Our primary aim was
- to organise information in a uniform and structured way,
- to make it easily accessible and communicable, and thus
- make reporting, insight, and analysis easier.

There is consensus that this has been achieved.

“Country teams have told us that the Hub makes it easier to demonstrate the wealth of work they are doing and even when donors require narrative reporting, getting the information required is easier when it is on the EIH in an organised and accessible format.”

London-based teams find the EIH a useful tool for getting clearer oversight of their programmes. In the survey, we asked them what they mainly used the EIH for. The largest single group of answers were 45% of responses related to accessing information on activities, programmes, results frameworks etc.

Other answers were fairly evenly split over helping with reporting; supporting the MEL team; helping with programme decision making; facilitating learning; facilitating better information flows between London; helping with forward planning; and providing evidence.

3.5 Changing Work Processes

MEL also made assumptions about the wider impact that the Hub would have on WFD work processes.

Firstly, we assumed that with access to the EIH and all its data, staff would alter their work processes where the Hub could facilitate it. For example, dropping updates via email. However, where those changes in processes have occurred, it has usually been because MEL has advocated for it.

Whereas country teams have largely embedded their role of inputting data, London teams have not yet fully absorbed the EIH’s ability to extract data.

When we asked London teams how often they signed into the Hub, the answers suggest it is irregularly.

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“a few times/once a week” 22%
“a few times/once a month” 56%
“only in reporting periods” 11%
“never” 11%
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Survey Oct 2019

There is a limit to how far MEL can or should be involved in overhauling broader work processes, but we continue to advocate for the role of the EIH in programme management more broadly.

A wider point is we had hoped that with more information available, the way we think about our programmes and programme management would change. In the survey responses from London teams, there is clearly an awareness that this is possible:
Programme management is often driven by pressure from donors, whose focus is more on spending than on reflection and learning. Against this reality, really embedding the use of the EIH to facilitate ‘big-picture’ analysis of what does and does not work is going to be a longer-term process. There have been some discussions at a senior level about the WFD business model, prompted by the Hub data, and we hope that these conversations continue both at a senior level and within programme teams.

4. Where Next for the EIH?
With the EIH being linked to so many other WFD processes, there is plenty of scope for adaptations, additions, and expansion in the future. Indeed, the EIH has already changed dramatically from its first version. Edits we have made include tracking activities by organisational thematic areas; adding stakeholder interactions so country teams can record the behind-the-scenes work that makes their programmes possible; and adding aims and results fields to the activity forms so staff can communicate the rationale behind their activities better.

One area that could be incorporated into the EIH is the Programme Performance Review (PPR). The word template that is currently used could be replaced by a form on the EIH, with RAG scores and risk all captured there as well. This would make it easier to use and report on that data more widely within WFD and completion and annual reports could also do the same.
As we develop our new **Value for Money (VFM) framework**, we hope that we will be able to capture the framework and reporting on the Hub, much like the Outcome Matrices. In the long-term, and with a more sophisticated system, syncing finance and EIH data would support VFM analysis and bring together the two biggest reporting tasks in one place.

Developing additional features to enable the Hub to provide more programme management functions would help to remove the last areas of duplication. We have already discussed having a **context updates feature**, which would standardise that information and make it available for everyone to access. This would reduce the communication burden on country teams who might be asked for the same information by multiple people.

Finally, as information on activities and outcomes accumulates on the EIH, we are increasingly able to **design and adapt programmes based on better insight**. The MEL team will facilitate this process of learning and analysis, for example by producing thematic learning briefs that review which designs have achieved the most outcomes and results. This insight will enable WFD to streamline our interventions and become a more effective organisation. It will also be of interest to our donors such as DFID and will build WFD’s profile as a thought leader in both democracy assistance and MEL issues.

### Example summary of available data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme name</th>
<th>Total number of Activities</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria Supporting Open and Inclusive Democratic Institutions 2019-22 CSSF</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria Supporting Open and Inclusive Democratic Institutions 2019-22 CSSF</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>587</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Activities by Country**

Status: ● Cancelled ● Completed ● Ongoing ● Planned ● Postponed

[Map showing activities by country]
Annex: Screenshots from the EIH