GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT
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Uncertainty and COVID-19: A turning point for Monitoring Evaluation, Research and Learning?

A discussion note for aid actors, policymakers and practitioners

Lavinia Tyrrel, Linda Kelly, Chris Roche and Elisabeth Jackson

Foreword

This paper asks an important and potentially wide-reaching question: in terms of Monitoring Evaluation Research and Learning (MERL), will the 'aid-world' let the crisis that is COVID-19 go to waste? While this phrasing is indeed a cliché used today in reference to all crises, it seems particularly relevant to the practice of MERL. The authors make it clear that we have known for a while what constitutes 'good practice' in MERL systems: localisation, national ownership, contextualisation and the ability to adapt as circumstances change.

The authors reflect on the extent to which the 'critical juncture' created by COVID-19 (the juncture being helpfully defined as "where the structural influences that drive behaviour are 'significantly relaxed for a relatively short period") will be seized upon by key actors in aid-world and usher in more enlightened and developmentally justifiable ways of working. Or will path dependency prove too strong, and once the crises subsides, we return to the bad old ways of expatriate-driven, fly-in fly-out, linear and rigid monitoring processes, delivering comforting and rather anaemic data to senior officials and ministers, who crave brevity, surety and simplicity? The outcome is unknowable. But as the paper concludes, all of us in aid-world have a role to play.

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly shifted the context in which aid and development is being delivered. The global scale of the pandemic and the speed at which it is spreading mean that the 'normal' economic, ideological and organisational influences which shape (if not determine) aid delivery are in flux. This means that – for a relatively short-period – there is scope for aid actors to work collectively to embed more locally-led, politically-informed and adaptive forms of MERL in aid and development practice. These forms of Monitoring Evaluation Research and Learning (MERL) are not only well-suited to the current global pandemic. They also offer ways for aid program decision makers and practitioners to make sense of the complex and uncertain contexts in which much development work takes place.

Applying locally-led, politically-informed and adaptive forms of MERL in the COVID-19 context and beyond requires a shift in mindset and approaches. Situations of complexity, in which it is difficult to predict the relationships between cause and effect, do not lend themselves to linear approaches and fixed indicators. Instead, they require 'navigation by judgement', ongoing learning and adaptation and greater privileging of local knowledge, and of the perspectives of those who are often excluded. Rather than being focused on upwards accountability, simple numbers and good news stories, the core function of MERL in this context is to support a better understanding – in real-time – of the changing operating context, to generate learning about the immediate impact of policy and program responses and their longer-term effects, and to inform decision making by front line staff.

Whether the opportunities afforded by this 'critical juncture' are realised will depend on the degree to which those in the aid and development sector use this opportunity to promote a shift in the deep incentive structures within which development agencies are embedded. On the one hand, the pandemic underscores the limits of the linear understandings of change which underpin many orthodox approaches to planning, design and associated MERL. On the other hand, there is a vested interest in the status quo amongst many organisations, consultants, researchers and MERL practitioners. This is because approaches which promote locally-led development inevitably require those in power to relinquish control. While a range of factors make this shift difficult, there is more scope to change internal ways of working in development agencies than is commonly acknowledged. There is no time like the present to advocate for a 'new normal' for MERL.

Table of Contents

Uncertainty and COVID-19: A turning point for Monitoring Evaluation, Research and Learning?

A discussion paper for aid actors, policymakers and practitioners

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1. Introduction

1.1 Our starting point is that COVID-19 represents a critical juncture for aid and development practice, and therefore for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MERL). The scale and speed of the pandemic has significantly relaxed the ideological, economic and organisational influences which usually shape (if not determine) aid delivery. This means that – for a relatively short-period – there is scope for aid actors to work collectively to embed more *locally-led, politically-informed and adaptive forms* of MERL in aid and development practice.[1] These forms of MERL, many of which pre-date COVID-19, are also well suited to the global pandemic context in which aid and development programs are currently being delivered. They offer ways for aid program decision makers and practitioners to understand their rapidly changing operating context, navigate uncertainty and effectively monitor and evaluate COVID-19 responses.

1.2 However, whether the opportunities afforded by this critical juncture are realised will depend on both the *technical quality* of the MERL processes utilised as well as the degree to which *actors use* this opportunity to promote a shift in the deep incentive structures within which development agencies are embedded (Roche and Denney, 2019). As a number of commentators have suggested, this will require, among other things, giving up the illusion of control and predictability, investing appropriately in strategic learning and adaptation (Ramalingam 2013), and allowing for 'navigation by judgement' by front line staff and partner agencies in appropriate circumstances (Honig 2018). These are changes that many both within and outside the sector have been suggesting for some time.

1.3 The paper addresses these two issues in turn. First, what 'technically sound' MERL approaches can be applied right now to cope with the context presented by COVID-19 (Sections 3 and 4). Second, what is 'politically possible' in the current context? And how might aid actors at different levels try to embed these forms of MERL in aid and development practice over the longer-term (Section 5).

1.4 This paper is aimed at those responsible for implementing, monitoring and evaluating the impact of COVID-19 responses, as well as those who want to learn about what's working for whom, what isn't and why to inform better COVID-19 policy and program decision making. It is also relevant for those undertaking or supporting MERL processes in other complex and uncertain environments.

2. COVID-19 and its implications for MERL

2.1 **COVID-19 as a critical juncture.** Critical junctures are situations where the structural influences that drive behaviour are 'significantly relaxed for a relatively short period', meaning there are more choices available to development actors, and the impact of their decisions are likely to be 'much more momentous' and long-lasting (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007:343). This paper proposes that COVID-19 represents a critical juncture for aid and development. Travel restrictions are triggering both the re-centralisation and localisation of aid delivery, traditional recipient/donor and north/south paradigms are being challenged, billions of dollars in aid funding are being re-allocated

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[1] For the purposes of this paper, MEL is defined as as the processes by which knowledge is acquired and used in aid and development programming with the aim of understanding how change, and contribution to change, happens.

and 'pivoted' almost overnight, and widespread uncertainty is calling into question the planned project delivery approach. Such factors mean there is currently greater scope for actors within and around the aid industry – including donor agencies, international NGOs, private sector providers and partner Governments, as well as citizens – to promote change in how aid and development is delivered, both now and in the future. These changes will necessarily reflect actors' power and interests, and so could play out in a variety of ways. Some of these would support the arguments we propose in this paper, such as greater emphasis on supporting locally-led development processes. Others, however, may not, such as the re-centralisation of aid decision making to donor countries in a bid to retain control.

2.2 **COVID-19 as complex change**. COVID-19, its impacts and the responses to it epitomise a complex system. A complex system is one where the relationship between cause and effect (or inputs and outputs in log frame speak) is difficult to predict, and may not become clear until after an intervention has ended. A key question facing policymakers in the current context, for example, is the extent to which lockdown measures (the cause) will reduce transmission rates (the effect), and what secondary effects this may have. The relationship between these will be impacted by a range of variables, including the extent to which citizens are able to change their behaviour. Many of these variables will be unforeseen. The secondary impacts on various groups – including vulnerable and marginalised people – may also be largely unforeseeable, as will the impacts on local and global economies.

2.3 While it may be possible to guess at likely scenarios, in a complex system no amount of modelling can predict with absolute certainty what the outcome will be, and how different actors will react to one another and to the changes occurring around them.

> **Box 1: Simple, Complicated and Complex Change**
>
> 'There is a growing body of theory regarding the application of MEL for adaptive and politically informed programs (Roche and Kelly 2012; Ladner 2016; USAID 2018). Much of this draws from complexity and systems thinking: recognising that most aid programs are operating in 'complex' contexts. In these instances, change is very hard to predict at the start of the program. Indeed, it may not even be clear come program end. "*While experience and principles from other situations may guide the design and implementation of such work, it is often the case that it is only by probing and acting that understanding is developed. In these situations, regular monitoring and feedback provide the information to enable the program to assess its progress, or not, towards its objectives, and adapt as experience and learning develops*" (Roche and Kelly 2012: 8-9). This is in contrast to changes which may be 'simple' or 'complicated': whereby the relationship between cause and effect are much easier to predict or uncover with sufficient analysis, consultation or reflection on past experience or lessons learnt from other contexts'.
>
> *Source*: (Davda and Tyrrel 2019)

2.4 **Global pandemic, local response.** Evidence from Ebola in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the eradication of smallpox in Western Nigeria and the HIV/AIDS response suggests that pandemics manifest in different ways in different countries, regions and even communities (Hopkins 1988). This variance depends on pre-existing factors, including socio-economic inequalities, ideology (Buse et al 2008), the capacity and authority of the state to enforce and regulate lockdown measures, demographics (youth, urbanisation rates and so on) and community behaviours and modes of transition (Richards 2020). Evidence from past crises has consistently shown that crisis responses are usually *most* effective when communities and local actors are consulted on their design and implementation (see also Walter et al. 2015). Specifically, participatory forms of governance (see, e.g. Sen [2020]) that involve health experts, local actors and officials and allow local communities to identify problems and potential solutions - including drawing on existing methods of community regulation and behaviour change - are particularly important (Richards 2020). Participatory approaches increase both the appropriateness of pandemic responses to a specific locale and the legitimacy of the

> "
> *Lockdown can only work if it has the consent of the people who are being locked down. This is not simply a matter of experts telling the public what is best for them but consulting with communities about the specific risks they face, and the specific measures that would work in those communities.* "
>
> (de Waal 2020)

intervention, and therefore the likelihood of compliance. This is particularly important when responses require community mobilisation and measures need to be in place for some time.

2.5 **Power and control**. The humanitarian and development sectors have been debating how to support locally-led development for many years. Yet until now, institutional inertia, self-interest and disincentivising business practices have hampered progress in transferring power and decision-making into the hands of local people. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, means that many agencies are now more reliant on local staff and partners to run their operations on the ground as international development staff and advisers are sent back to their home countries and international aid organisations face significant downturns in funding, leading to redundancies and restructuring. In the Pacific, some national governments and Pacific regional organisations are taking the lead in responding to COVID-19. Localisation, in the sense of relying on the capacity of local actors, has started to become the norm, despite the fact that the headquarters of international agencies still hold the purse strings.

3. Applying effective MERL in COVID-19

If the critical juncture presented by COVID-19 is to help sway the pendulum towards more locally-led, politically-informed and adaptive forms of MERL that are suited to the COVID-19 context and beyond, then we need to understand what *kinds* of MERL methods and practices are available and what resources might be needed. This we explore in the following section.

3.1 **Navigation by judgement**. The uncertainty surrounding the impacts of COVID-19, and the fact that it is likely to play out differently in different contexts, underscores the importance of aid approaches that can navigate complexity and facilitate locally-driven approaches to problem solving.[2] Complexity favours learning by doing and adaptation. This means doing away with linear, phased approaches to 'design, implement, review' and instead focusing on the rapid testing of assumptions, and adjusting activities, outputs and even outcomes in as close to real-time as possible. This is known as the search-frame approach (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: the search frame approach (Andrews, Pritchett, Woolcock 2017)

3.2 This does not mean abandoning the development of MERL frameworks or notions of accountability, but it does mean giving up on the illusion that all the intricacies of shifting relationships and local social and political dynamics can be predicted in advance and described in SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) indicators and simple results frames. Furthermore, it means being very clear about the purpose of MERL systems and

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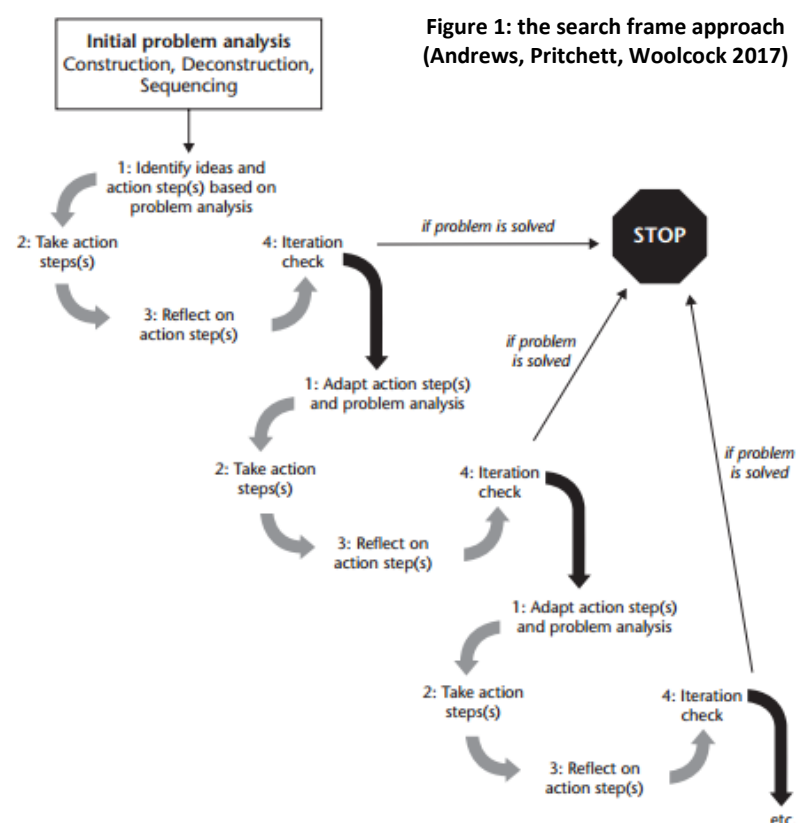
[2] Honig (2018a; 2020) provides important evidence about why central control and pre-specified targets are usually less effective than primarily relying on the judgements of front line staff, in uncertain contexts.

processes and the questions they seek to address, before defining the methods of data collection and analysis that will be used.

3.3 The core function of MERL in this context is therefore generating real-time information about changes in the operating context, as well as surfacing learning about what is working for whom, what isn't and why. In the COVID-19 context this has four implications for MERL practitioners (adapted from Ramalingam et al. 2020):

- Helping decision-makers define key metrics to identify 'triggers' for when aid interventions should be changed. This requires gathering - for example through monitoring frameworks) - knowledge and data about these triggers and making this available to the right people in as real-time as possible.

- Collecting a range of data and evidence from different sources and in different forms (quantitative and qualitative) to triangulate with clinical and global/national-level datasets. Here the insights of front line responders, as well as men and women or groups living through the pandemic, are especially critical. These should be valued alongside more 'scientific' forms of data (we discuss methods for this below).

- Providing forums for the contestation of evidence by decision makers, including in collective and participatory ways. Existing methods – such as Strategy Testing (Ladner 2015) – can be adapted to enable this to occur remotely.

- Adjusting expectations for data collection. 'Good enough', timely evidence is better than none at all: and there are a number of existing methods that can be used to get information (especially local voices, and the views of the most vulnerable) surfaced cheaply and quickly. For example online surveys, remote interviews or crowd-sourced data.

3.4 **Co-produced knowledge.** Surfacing locally generated (often tacit) knowledge and making this available to decision makers alongside relevant epidemiological and other scientific data, will be key to ensuring that all effects of 'pivoting aid' to the COVID-19 response are assessed. This may mean integrating scientific knowledge with local cultural references and practices and engaging with those affected by the disease (Scoones 2020). For example; in the Ebola emergency, communities activated existing cultural practices and community networks to implement hygiene, protection and sanitation measures to effectively combat spread of the disease (Richards 2020). Such opportunities required health experts, front line responders and officials to consult, listen to and learn from communities. However, as international donors – and many of the international evaluators they commission – increasingly rely on remote processes to undertake MERL, there is a risk that those processes miss or even undermine locally-determined and locally-relevant action, learning and adaptation, namely the very processes that produce resilient development (King 2020).

3.5 Particular care must therefore be taken to ensure that local perspectives are not excluded from data collection and analysis. Locally-developed research and data collection methods sourced from those with lived experience of the pandemic can also play a critical role in surfacing information during COVID-19. MERL methods that use indigenous approaches conducted in local language – such as *talanoa* or *tok stori* (Sanga and Reynolds 2018) – can elevate the voices of local communities, civil society organisations, officials, front line responders and other local actors, alongside global expertise and epidemiological and scientific modelling. These practices have been used as research methods for decades (Vaioleti 2013) but have typically been underutilised in MERL. While these methods can be powerful tools for detailed, context rich understanding and provide essential information that can shape effective program outcomes, they are often unfamiliar to those with power and at senior levels. There are very real risks that these valuable processes will be dismissed or ignored in the rush for simple communications and aggregated results.

3.6 **Factoring in multiple interests.** We know that the commissioning of studies and interpretation of information in development is almost always shaped by those with power, most often donors and senior staff in partner governments or international organisations (Oliver et al. 2018). We also know that they tend to prefer unambiguous, succinct evidence which is able to be aggregated and reported in concise and simple forms, focused on their programs and their contributions to outcomes. Yet the COVID-19 response is being implemented in varied contexts largely by men and women, communities and local organisations on the front line. These local actors require information which is tailored to their context, reflects their local political and social reality and provides ideas for improving current practice. These people rarely have significant institutional power and voice in shaping MERL methods and approaches in their interests.

This requires carefully thinking through not just the resourcing but also the governance of MERL processes (Parkhurst 2017). If MERL is to influence policy and practice – and ultimately support better outcomes for people - it has to be seen as legitimate and useful to powerful stakeholders but also provide timely and relevant information to front line actors.

3.7 **Gender and inequality.** COVID-19 will impact men, women and vulnerable people in different ways (Wenham et al. 2020). In particular, the pre-existing under-recognition of women's unpaid work in much evaluation, if repeated, has the potential to underestimate gender impacts. Failure to listen to and work with women's organisations, Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), and other groups representing less powerful actors, may lead to mistakes in policies or programs. Disaggregated data is important, but of more importance is *who* is engaged in the design, implementation and use of MERL processes, and *how* data collection, analysis and reporting processes include different experiences (Kangas et al. 2014). In the current context, it is particularly important that the design of remote data collection systems is 'mindful of exclusionary factors surrounding the use of technology' (Chelsky and Kelly 2020).

3.8 **Short-term outputs vs contribution to long-term outcomes.** In a crisis or emergency it is understandable that agencies prioritise the immediate and the short term. Most aid actors are necessarily focused on tracking and understanding the *primary* impacts of COVID-19 on target populations, and the *immediate* efficacy of policy and program responses in controlling and eliminating the pandemic. This includes tracking case numbers, mortality rates, understanding co-morbidity, distribution of equipment and supplies, indicators of health system capacity, reach and outputs of livelihoods interventions and so on. Here MERL has a critical role to play in the real-time monitoring of not only broader program and policy outputs, but also shifts in the political, economic or social environment triggered by the pandemic, and in making this information accessible in timely ways to decision makers. This can then allow projects to be adjusted to improve delivery, amplify positive or reduce negative effects, and remain relevant.

3.9 However, it is also important that aid actors explore the possible secondary effects of interventions (for example, the economic impact of lockdowns, gender-based violence), and longer-term effects and opportunities (for example, what will resilience to future pandemics or other crises like climate change need to look like). As Heather Marquette and Peter Evans (2020) recently commented: 'The social and political impacts of COVID-19 aren't second order problems that can be dealt with once the urgent work of flattening the curve and saving lives is done: these impacts are being felt now'. There is therefore an immediate need for aid programs to invest in research, applied analysis and rapid-cycle evaluation to help understand the current and potential future secondary (intended or unintended) consequences of COVID-19, as well as long-term effects of the pandemic on recovery and ongoing development possibilities for different populations.

Figure 2: Where MEL is focused now vs where it needs to be
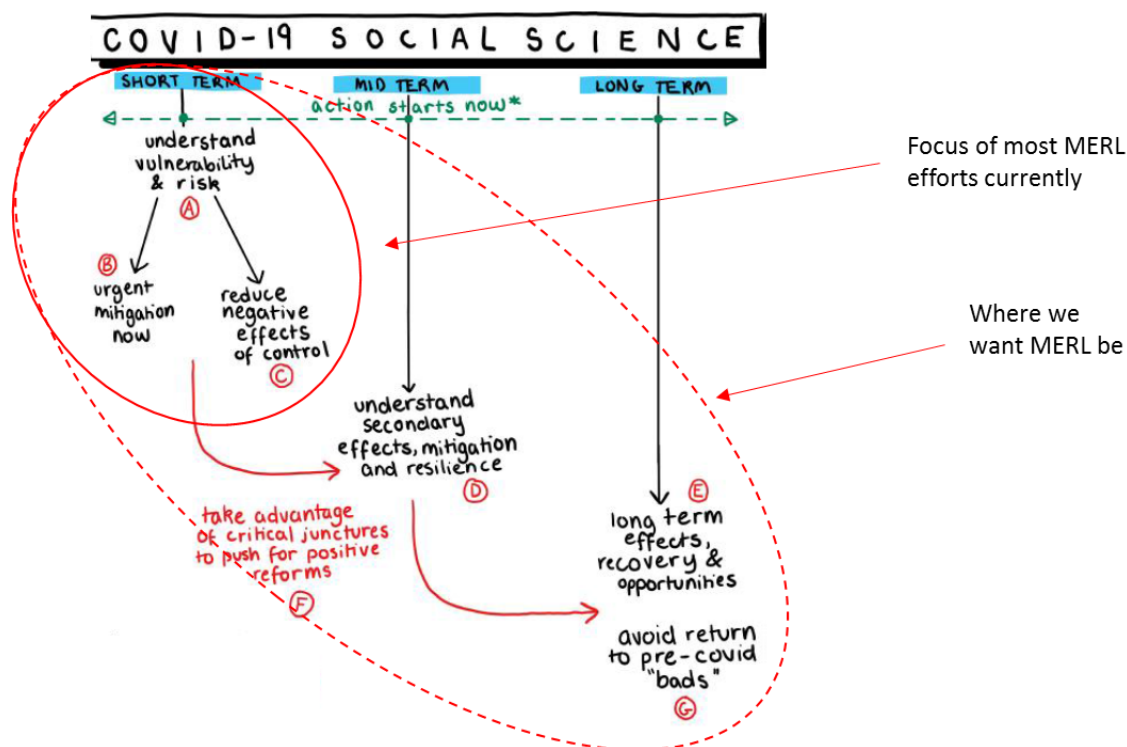
Source: Marquette and Evans (2020) p6; image by Hamsi Evans [*Additions regarding MERL are authors' own*].

3.10 We do not pretend that making a case for investing in these strategic, long-term forms of MERL will be easy. Political, public and emergency pressures are understandably focusing MERL on meeting immediate needs and information demands. Political imperatives are shaping MERL towards high profile inputs and good stories. Yet this binds aid actors to closed-system decision making, where they are only able to decide between immediate options (for example, whether to fund protective equipment or WASH behaviour change activities?) without understanding potential scenarios or long-term trends that could result from COVID-19, or which might emerge as a consequence of their actions. Here MERL practitioners need to help decision-makers see the value of an expanded investment in understanding and responding to change on multiple timescales and at multiple levels.

3.11 This might mean establishing collaboration with local research bodies, United Nations or Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) agencies, or universities who are well-placed to be contributing on some of the longer term questions. Exploring these questions at a time of 'radical uncertainty' (Kay and King 2020) means that there are necessarily limits to how definitive answers can be, or indeed the degree to which risks can be quantified. However, there is much to be learnt from research in other fields.[3] Previous experience also shows the value of bringing scientific, policy and community stakeholders together in open and transparent ways (Georgalakis 2020). For some aid programs these activities can be done through the pivoting of research partnerships or evaluative methods/evaluators. For others this will require new activities and funding.

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[3] The fields of ecology and engineering, for example, provide insights into how to develop robust and resilient systems which are better able to cope with unexpected shocks by building in ideas of modularity (i.e. building buffers to stop system-wide collapse) and redundancy (i.e. ensuring adequate capacity – such as ICU beds, ventilators or PPE kits - in a system to cope with shocks) (ScienceDirect n.d.a; n.d.b).

3.12 **Collective analysis and sense making.** Reflecting on, and contesting, evidence from a range of sources and perspectives is critical to adaptive management (Ramalingam et al 2020). MERL has a critical role in providing forums for decision makers, communities and other local and international actors to understand, contest and triangulate evidence and data. This serves two purposes: (i) providing more and different perspectives to help decision makers make sense of the firehose of information available to them during COVID-19, and what this may mean when translated into practice; and (ii) democratising the sense-making process by allowing greater participation and transparency in how data is used by those with power. There are a range of existing methods designed for politically-informed and adaptive programming – such as Strategy Testing – that can enable collective analysis and be adapted for remote use. There are also on-line meeting resources (such as the toolkit developed by the Facilitators for Pandemic Response Group (f4c n.d)) and guidance on remote facilitation (Smart 2020) for collective processes which can be applied by MERL practitioners.

3.13 **Document and communicate change, and delegate decision making**. Knowledge generated from MERL methods during COVID-19 will do little to improve aid effectiveness unless it is linked to changes in budgets, activities, outputs, outcomes and strategies. MERL systems must be designed to feed policy and program relevant information into regularised decision-making processes. This can be achieved through Strategy Testing sessions, annual planning, emergency response task-force meetings, cabinet decision making and so on. Here two additional factors are critical. First, authority to make adjustments to programs must be delegated to those who are as close to the front line as possible. This will provide those with the greatest insight into how change is occurring with the space and permission to change activates and budgets in response. Second, that those 'higher-up' in donor agencies and partner governments protect and maintain the space for those 'at the bottom' (front line workers, program managers, local civil society organisations and so on) to continue making decisions, testing assumptions, and making calculated adjustments to programs and strategies.

Cross-cutting considerations

3.14 **Safeguards.** Undertaking MERL during an emergency comes with risks, including the risk that inquiry and analysis processes might fail to safeguard vulnerable people or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. MERL is essential to highlight the potential for this, to guard against further harm, and to safeguard the rights of those involved in collecting and contributing to monitoring and evaluation processes. In particular, it is important that gender inequalities are taken into account (UNFPA 2020), children are protected (End Violence n.d), and the vulnerability and capacities of persons with disabilities are recognised (Pacific Disability Forum n.d). For example, although using ICT technologies remotely can make data collection faster, more efficient, and more cost-effective, not everyone has a mobile phone or access to the internet. This is most likely to impact rural populations (where coverage is poor: GSMA 2019a; GSMA 2019b), the poor (who cannot afford to purchase a phone or pay for credit) or the disabled and vulnerable (who may not be able to use the technologies proposed).

3.15 **Ensure coordination of data collection and analysis efforts.** MERL during COVID-19 must also be cognisant of the long history of poor coordination of needs assessment, monitoring and evaluation processes in humanitarian settings (Tarpey and Walton 2017). This is often because individual agencies feel the need to collect their own data in order to promote their achievements or are simply unaware of what other agencies are doing. In practice, agencies are often working directly or indirectly with the same population, or in the same geographical space. They require the same information, or need a combination of evidence, some of which may be collected by others. An effective division of labour between agencies is not only cost-effective and saves time, but can avoid populations being over-surveyed and over-consulted. Frameworks for collective impact (Kania and Kramer 2011) have been developed—for example for peacebuilding (Woodrow 2019)—

which propose key principles for working in this manner. Establishing these kinds of agreements can avoid frustrations encountered in attempts at coordination which are more about individual agency information sharing rather than collective processes of analysis, learning and adaptation.

4 Embedding effective MERL in the COVID-19 'new normal'

Critical juncture = multiple possible outcomes

4.1 Is it possible for these locally-led, adaptive and politically informed approaches to MERL to become more widely used, both during this pandemic and beyond? In short, the answer is unknowable, as it depends on the choices different aid actors make, and how they respond to the critical juncture presented by COVID-19.

4.2 On the one hand the pandemic shines a bright light on the limits of current approaches to risk management, efficiency, and linear understandings of change which underpin many orthodox approaches to planning, design and associated MERL. One would hope that a greater emphasis in the future would be put on the long-term robustness and resilience of organisations and systems to cope with uncertainty and shocks, and to learn and adapt. That we would be seeing COVID-19 as providing us with important lessons for addressing climate change, and how we should be monitoring and evaluating our capacities to respond to it. Not least, we might already be thinking about the deliberative spaces that would bring different forms of knowledge, including the experience of citizens and marginalised groups, and different interests together to collectively learn about how well we are addressing common problems, and what we could do differently.

4.3 On the other hand, there is a vested interest in the status quo amongst many organisations, consultants, researchers and MERL practitioners. In large measure this is because approaches which promote locally-led development and localisation and which provide more voice to less powerful interests inevitably require giving up control and relinquishing power. It also means recognising that the essence of MERL processes – that is, the ability to assess progress, learn and adapt - is not something external to social change, but rather is central to it. Both of these require large political and conceptual shifts. While there is little doubt that there has been a loosening of some of the factors which hold the current system in place, whether this results in an enhanced status-quo or more radical shifts will be determined by actions and decisions made in the next few months and years.

From MERL practice to activism?

4.4 Dan Honig has eloquently argued that there is a lot that those who work for or with aid agencies can do to promote the organisational changes which would be consistent with locally-led development undertaken in uncertain environments (Honig 2018). Similarly, a number of evaluation specialists have advocated for approaches which better reflect uncertainty (Patton 2010), which move beyond projects to assess and support systems change (Cabaj 2019), and which factor in organisational politics and power relations (Raimondo 2018). Arguably there is a lot of overlap between these arguments. In the table below, which is adapted from Honig's follow-up paper to his book *Navigation by Judgement* (Honig 2020), we illustrate the kinds of strategies that that might be used by more and less powerful actors in and around the aid system to promote changes in the system.

Table 1. Strategies for Promoting effective MERL (adapted from Honig 2020 and Karkara et al. 2014)

Who are you?	What you can do
You work for an aid agency	
You're pretty senior in an aid agency	• Promote the case that effective locally led and owned MERL is **central to good governance;** • **Start a pilot** to try out new approaches*,* or **find, investigate and celebrate** existing examples of effective MERL practice inside and outside the agency build on these; • **Commission analytic work** on existing MERL approaches which aren't giving an understanding of success, or are getting in the way of locally led development; • **Talk to authorizers** about when pursuing short-term results is undermining sustainability. Figure out **how to provide cover for judgment**, where appropriate; • Don't allow the problem to be framed as **'real' accountability vs no accountability.**
You're somewhere in the middle of an aid agency	• Challenge assumptions you think may not be accurate; • **Start some dialogue about effective locally-led MERL** with your bosses, staff and peers. **Get involved in an existing MERL forum or community of practice** to apply the insights to encourage positive change; • **Think hard about when—and how—to contract.** What can be left flexible, or out of the contract? When are there alternatives to traditional contracts and MERL approaches? • **Pay attention to what you pass on to implementers.** Think about how to provide more space, more ability to use their judgment and incorporate their learning into their work; • **Talk to the implementers you work with.** Learn from them what MERL is working, what isn't, and where the rules are getting in the way.
You're pretty junior in an aid agency	• **Propose new things you think are right.** Ask questions that your relative youth and inexperience make it *easier* for you to ask; • **Learn the** *actual* **rules.** The next time someone says, "You can't do it that way", maybe say "I'm sorry, I'm new here. Why not?" **Find a champion.** Have a lot of coffees. Talk to other staff. • **Take some risks.** All you've got to lose is this job. It's not a career yet!
You work for a partner government or local agency	
	• Ensure donor MERL processes are aligned to and supportive of **national priorities and capacities**, including building **and using** local capacity to undertake MERL and increasing demand for it; • Promote **coordination of and consistency from donors** and point out their deficiencies; • Insist **on being part of the governance arrangements** or committees overseeing evaluations; • Advocate for **equity-focused and gender responsive** evaluation and learning policies with strong engagement of **local civil society representatives**.
You have another role in or near the aid world	
Contractors/ NGOs/ implementers of MERL	• **Point out the constraints of MERL which does not promote learning and adaptation** – do it with others and with coordination bodies (i.e. Australia's ACFID, US' Interaction, UK's Bond, etc.); • **Commission analytic work** from third parties, and provide some buffer to any pushback; • Find a bid you're *unlikely* to win and **propose a new way of working**. You might just win the bid; • **Don't neglect your own power** in day to day MERL practice: find ways to tweak and leverage the current system, tools and processes until they become a trend.
Authorizers (e.g. Members of parliament, committees, or CEO of a foundation)	• **Make sure what you demand is not undermining long-term, locally-led MERL and governance;** • **Build the bridge in the 'other' direction.** Reach out to staff in the agencies; • **Ask questions** (of your principal, or of the agency) like "Are we creating enabling environments for evaluation and learning?" Or are our controls getting in the way?" • **Provide some more space** and see what flourishes. **Request a pilot** of different approaches to MERL which relieves the constraints on agencies.
Freelance consultants	• **Share your observations and information.** Build **networks and coalitions** of colleagues; • **Connect people** you meet at different organisations who might be allies to each other. • **Help the system** overcome the view that unhelpful MERL practice is a minority view.
Other observers	• Close observers can help by **speaking out**, **by convening spaces** to share experiences and challenges with current practice, and commission or undertaking research to explore alternatives
You're not in the aid system	• **Use your power as a voter** to help foreign aid meets its goals by avoiding controls invoked in 'your' name - the taxpayer - in service of a façade of accountability.

4.5   A number of authors have described the factors that make these shifts difficult (Carothers and De Gramont 2013; Natsios 2010; Yanguas 2018; Corbett 2017). These include suggestions that the political interests of donor governments increasingly trump issues of development effectiveness, a narrow focus on a particular form of accountability and up front rigid planning and 'business cases' constrains flexibility and adaptation, and a negative authorising environment acts to constrain the autonomy of aid agencies, not least because public attitudes to aid are less positive than they have been. However, as noted above, other authors have posited that despite these structural constraints there is more scope to change internal ways of working in development agencies than is commonly acknowledged (Honig and Gulrajani 2018, Fushimi 2019). In particular, there is a view that much more can be done to assess the readiness of organisations to be in a position to enable strategic learning and adaptation in complex environments (see for example, Spark Policy Institute 2014; Cabaj n.d; Williams 2014). These assessments place a specific emphasis on the importance of organisational leadership and culture, and adequate organisational resources devoted to MERL processes (Williams 2014)

5   Concluding thoughts

5.1 In this paper we have argued that the COVID-19 pandemic is a critical juncture which throws up a number of specific opportunities and challenges for both development and MERL practitioners, not least due to the uncertainty and complexity that it engenders. Furthermore, difficulties related to the inability to travel and meet face-to-face compound the situation. However, we also suggest that many of the *existing* practices associated with MERL which recognise uncertainty, promote learning and adaptation, and take into account power relations are particularly well-suited for this moment. Whilst some of these practices have been long recognised by some as supportive of locally-led, politically astute development processes, their utilisation is by no means widespread, and there is a tendency to shy away from their adoption and resourcing, particularly, but not exclusively, in emergency or crisis settings.

5.2 It remains to be seen if the 'opportunity structures' of COVID-19, that is, the contextual factors which constrain or empower collective action, result in a realignment of the fundamental ideas and power relations which underpin much international development and the MERL approaches which accompany them. Or if the structural explanations for the status-quo are more powerful than those which suggest collective action and advocacy for changed ways of working might prevail now that the 'Overton window', that is, the range of ideas or policies deemed politically acceptable, has moved. In either case, now is the time to debate what a new normal might look like and for those who want to 'build back better' to take action to marshal their forces and shape the MERL agenda in their interests.

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