



The Evaluation Exchange



People-centred evaluation: Putting it into practice

The [Evaluation Exchange](#) is currently supporting eight projects to co-produce evaluations of their work, as part of their involvement in the '[Measuring Success in Co-production](#)' programme. There is a lot for us and our teams to learn from evaluation approaches around the World. So, we invited Dr Alok Rath at the international development organisation [VSO](#), to share his experience of putting people-centric and action-oriented evaluation approaches in to practice in Africa and Asia.

By Dr Alok Rath, Global Head of Knowledge, Evidence & Learning, VSO

History and context of people led development

Most recently, with the 'Grand Bargain' as a localisation mechanism emerging after the 2016 Humanitarian Summit, an overarching tone and a buzzword in donors and development actors' policy has been localisation or locally led development that intends to give more resources and voice to stakeholders in places where the money is to be spent.

We can, however, trace back local people's participation and the spirit of localisation, at least to the 1960s. In his seminal publication, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Educator and philosopher, had said that "the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (1970, P 54). His work on conscientisation with rural Brazilians influenced wider interest in the use of participatory approaches from 1960s to include people's voice in development planning. Freire theorised that when a marginalised individual or group moves from a state of being in a 'dominated consciousness' to the state of 'critical consciousness', they take control of their development journey and start to make their own informed choices. His work became one of the main references for an emphasis on poor people's 'empowerment' in the 1970s (Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès 2009). People-led development planning gained a momentum in the 1990s through the works of participatory practitioners, development organisations, UN ([UNICEF 1992](#)) and the World Bank ([2000](#)). Over

the next three decades, people's voice and choice in decision making evolved in development practice, policies, and academic research.

[VSO](#) has been at the forefront of localisation, both in its strategy ("[People First](#)") and practice. One exciting and innovative practice in VSO's programmes is 'Measuring Impact for Learning & Empowerment' ([MILE](#))¹, which is part of its core 'Volunteering for Development' methodology. It is a people empowering method that brings together technical rigour of monitoring & evaluation (M&E) tools and primary actors (beneficiaries or programme participants) voice in jointly creating, reflecting, and influencing the practice of monitoring, evaluation, and learning in development programmes, thereby transforming the way local people are engaged in development plans decision making. VSO aims to be a leader in demonstrating accountability to its primary actors and local partners it works with. The MILE method recognises that primary actors, particularly the most marginalised, excluded, and vulnerable, have a central stake in the M&E process of a project cycle that aims to change their lives. A user [manual](#) provides broad guidance on how project teams can design project results, monitor progress, and evaluate impact, with active and equal participation of the very people's lives (primary actors) the project aims to change. Aided by VSO's defined M&E Standards, Quality Evidence Principles, tools and methods, the MILE process allows primary actors to step forward and volunteer to equally lead in the design, delivery, and learning, of their own development goals and results, in a project.

MILE has been developed through a bottom-up, co-creation, and adaptive learning approach in the last five years, wherein primary actors and local partners have shaped its genesis and evolution. Even today, the spirit in the practice is to learn and adapt. Over the past five years, the practice has been applied in over 50 VSO projects across 19 countries in Africa and Asia, strengthening meaningful and effective project engagement amongst primary actor groups such as women's collectives, youth networks, learners' clubs, disability associations and others. In half of those projects, engagements of primary actor and other stakeholder groups, have evolved in to structured 'Learning Circles' that act as platform for collective reflection and adaptation. These Learning Circles are contextual and flexible enabling the primary actors to feel valued and empowered in taking equal ownership of a project from design through to its completion.

The learning journey of how MILE has evolved has been fascinating and inspiring as a practitioner. When the concept of 'primary actor led development solution' was first pilot tested with learners in a primary school in the Karamoja region of Uganda in 2018, it was unclear what participation and decision making would exactly look like with a group of school children in a pre-determined project goal of improving learning outcomes. The 'journey of unknown', however, led to paving a path when the participant school children identified the need to include classroom engagement as a key determinant to the process towards learning outcomes. As the project was able to incorporate this input, thanks to the project donor's approach to listen to the learners, a new practice emerged. A feedback session brought up participants' expressions such as 'feel my views are respected', 'for the first time, we spoke, and others listened' and so on. As the pilot moved to other projects in Uganda, a common thread of what primary actors felt emerged around 'empowerment' and 'learning'. The concept of Measuring Impact for 'Learning' (by all involved) and 'Empowerment' (of primary actors and other stakeholders) evolved in VSO's M&E system aligning to its 'People First' strategy. The pilot subsequently moved to countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar in Asia and Kenya and Malawi in Africa. Learnings from all the pilots added to the emergence of a practitioner manual in MILE.

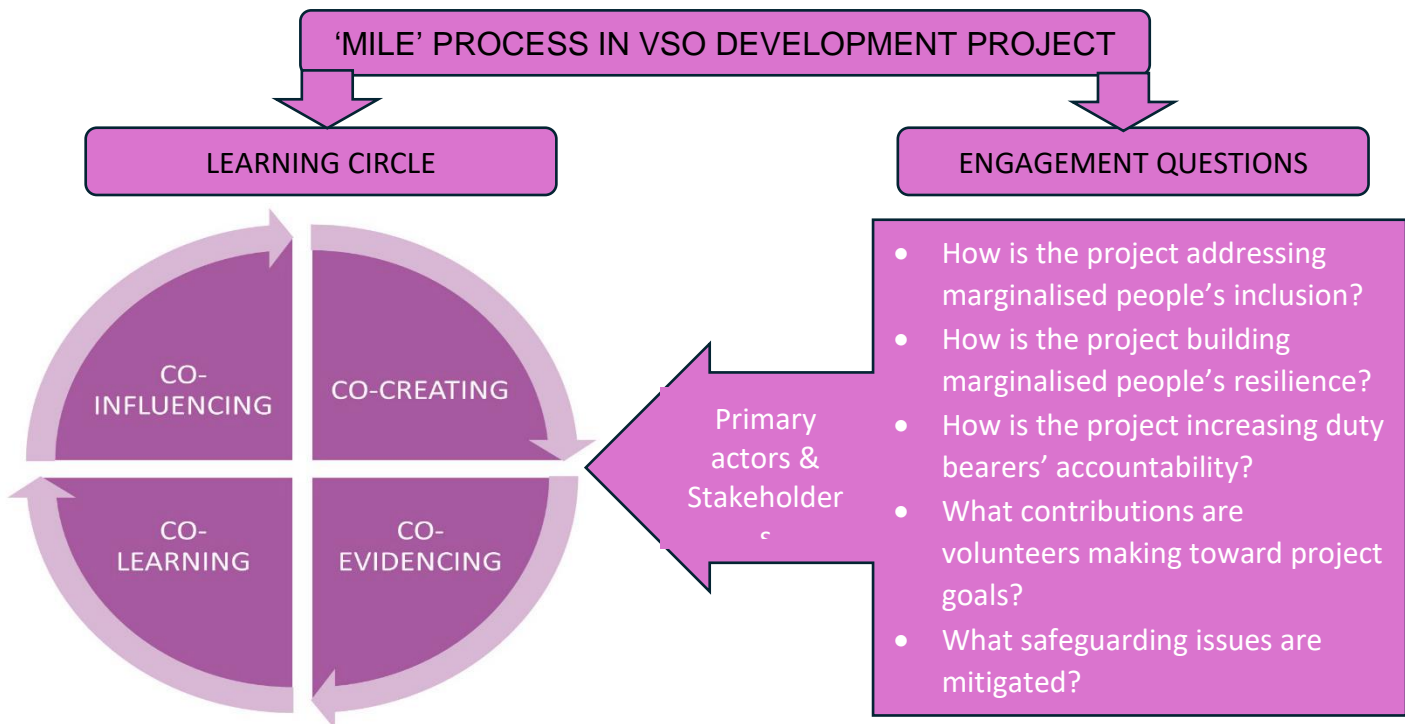
The early stage learnings were disseminated externally in an international platform such as [Feedback Labs](#) that not only reached other practitioners in people involving M&E, but also

¹ MILE was developed by VSO under a UKAID funded programme, 'Volunteering for Development' (2017-2022), and is currently implemented across VSO's programmes with support from ACTIVE grant, funded by UKAID.

picked up insightful feedback on how the MILE practice can improve further. A multi-country sample survey carried out in 2022 suggested that 90% of participants felt MILE promoted people’s participation. It also called for further simplification of the MILE manual which was actioned along with other improvements. The feedback loop remains a cornerstone of MILE as a locally led practice in the project cycle.

How does the MILE process work?

Fig.1: MILE in action



As in Fig.1, the MILE process entails four stages of progression: 1. Co-creating: In this phase, primary actors and other stakeholders in a proposed project come together with the project team to either prospectively design or retrospectively validate design of project goals and results; 2. Co-Evidencing: within this phase, primary actors combine with project teams to collect data on progress in the project; 3. Co-Learning: during this phase, primary actors, other stakeholders and project teams, reflect on the project data, validate and recommend any amendments; 4. Co-influencing: in this last phase in a project cycle, the primary actors actively engage in evaluating the project results and make recommendations for future programme designs and any specific policy area(s) they want to pursue. A clarification is that phases 2 and 3 are non-linear in nature with overlaps between them. The entire process works as ‘learning circles’ in different stages in which, the primary actors acting as volunteers and active citizens in their own development process, come together with other stakeholders, and project teams to engage, learn, and adapt. A range of questions are used as options by primary actors and other stakeholders in their engagement in the learning circles to make sure that the project cycle i.e. design, implementation, and evidence building, tackle the root causes of people’s marginalisation. It is only then that MILE and by extension, Volunteering for Development methodology, becomes effective.

Effectiveness of MILE as participatory monitoring & evaluation practice

The below are some examples of how the MILE process has facilitated people's feedback, improved design, outcomes, and learning in development projects.

Case 1: Reduced Gender-Based Violence in Kenya

As part of the Youth Employment project co-creation stage in 2020, Siaya County in Kenya, young people as primary actors (main 'beneficiaries'), had suggested that one of the success indicators, apart from the ones planned, for access to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities and increased household income, should be 'reduced incidences of gender-based violence at home'. Young women, in the group, explained that there are young couples, who on many occasions, they can't agree with their young spouses on how to spend the little income they earned, leading to conflict and resulting in gender-based violence between the spouses. In an internal study in early 2023 amongst young people including members of women's Savings & Loans groups in the project locations, pointed to reduced gender-based violence at home as women started to use their own income to cover small household expenses and some school levies without bothering their spouses. The active participation of the young women in the project implementation and their influence on the gender-based violence indicator, was found to be a key local context.

Case 2: Converting waste into dignified income

Under the Waste2Work project in Kenya, in which waste pickers are the primary actors, the following feedback at the end of the co-creation phase in early 2023, summed up their empowerment:

" I now understand this project, the expected successes from the project and my role as a primary actor in monitoring the Waste to Work Project successes"

Primary actor, Nairobi County.

" Am happy that VSO has empowered me to hold them accountable on what they promised to do to make this project succeed, am looking forward to receiving my PPEs promised by VSO"

Primary actor, Mtaa safi initiative, Nairobi.

Case 3: Influencing scale of people's participation

In Tanzania, one of the VSO projects visited and reviewed by the donor, included feedback in their report that MILE is an effective approach enabling participation of the targeted people and smooth implementation of the project. Learning from VSO's MILE method, the Government of Tanzania is reported to have used MILE as an example of how other donor funded projects in Tanzania can build people's participation. Inspired, VSO's consortium partners in a project in Ethiopia have scaled up MILE process in their other projects.

Looking forward

By December 2023, about 75% of VSO's projects had modelled their M&E practice along the MILE process, laying a path for agency and empowerment of primary actors and downward accountability by projects, and by extension VSO, to them.

Over the decades, technical solutions to addressing poverty, inequality, and marginalisation have evolved through innovations. What has continued fundamentally unchanged is the need of people's participation in their own development process, for those technical solutions to be effective and sustainable. For that to happen, people's participation needs reimagining and designed from the perspective of power imbalance. Done right, it would be transformational especially when the donor policy is shifting towards localisation and locally led development.

Local ownership may not materialise until development programmes share power in the design, delivery, and measurement of development results together with those very people and demonstrate their downward accountability to them. Localisation is, hence, not a mere resource shift but a complete shift of 'mindset' on power by donors, INGOs and other non-local stakeholders. MILE, as a people-centred method and practice as indicated by the evidence presented above, aims to exactly alter that dynamic to bestow more power to the primary actors.

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