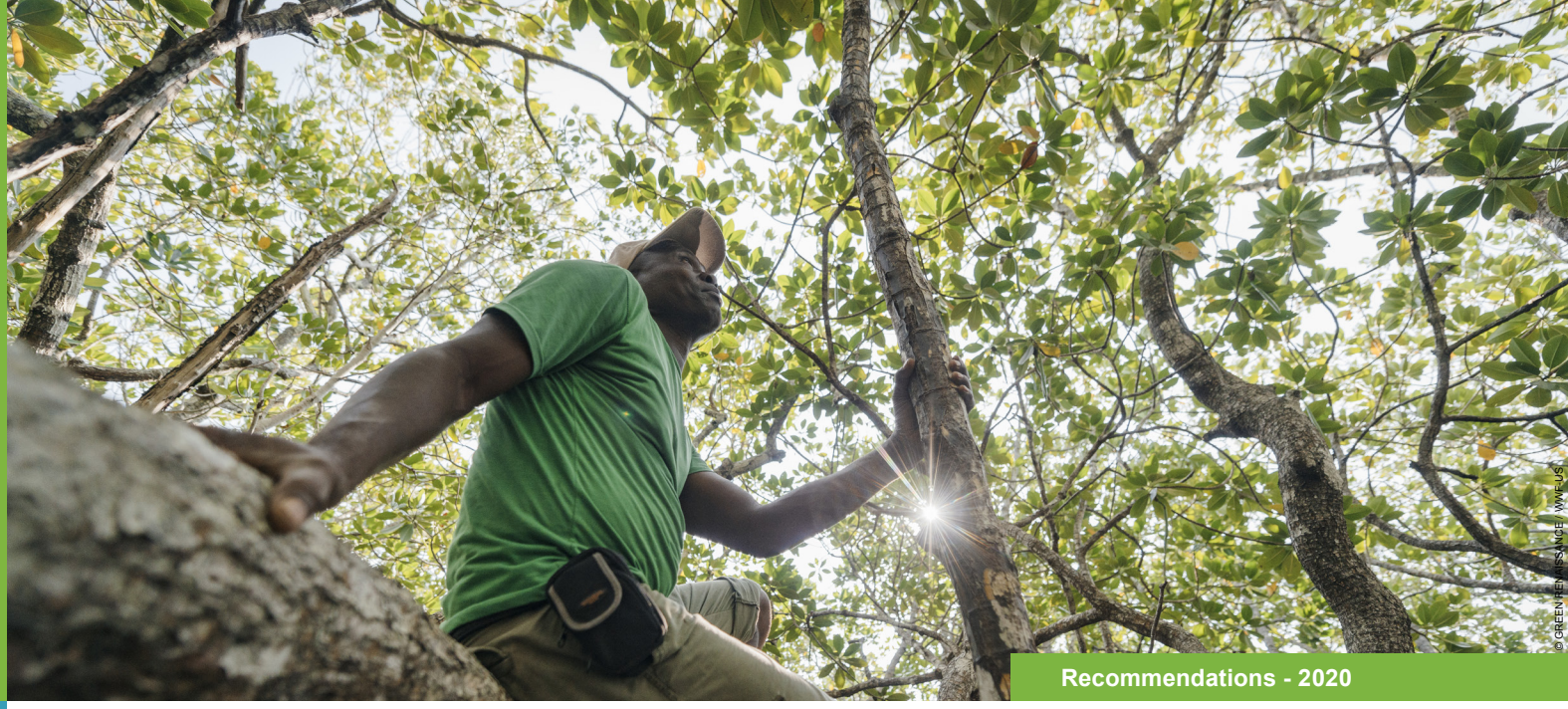

Recommendations - 2020

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning to Advance Conservation and Development Programming

Recommendations for Practitioners

CARE-WWF Alliance Impact Evaluation in Mozambique

Since 2008, the CARE-WWF Alliance has sought to test in practice the idea that empowering some of the poorest and most vulnerable women and communities on the planet to engage in sustainable livelihoods and natural resource governance could improve their wellbeing and conserve globally important biodiversity. A decade after its inception, the Alliance used existing project data to support an evaluation that assessed the social impacts of an integrated conservation and development program in Primeiras e Segundas (P&S), Mozambique. In 2018 and 2019, the Alliance collaborated with expert consultants, academics, and the Alliance for Conservation Evidence and Sustainability to implement a mixed-methods evaluation answering two questions:

1. What are the social impacts of natural resource management in P&S?

2. How do impacts vary between those who participated in: conservation interventions; development interventions; both conservation and development interventions; or neither conservation nor development interventions?

The methods employed were quantitative household surveys and qualitative focus group discussions in eight study sites where community-based conservation and development interventions were applied together, or separately.

Lessons from Experience

The strengths and weaknesses of this evaluation inform several recommendations around how to improve the effectiveness of applied research collaborations. Building on lessons, this brief offers practical recommendations for conservation and development practitioners seeking to implement robust Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) that serves both their project needs and the wider field of sustainable development. Evaluation findings are presented separately in the impact brief, *Social Outcomes of the CARE-WWF Alliance in Mozambique: Results and Recommendations from a Decade of Conservation and Development Programming*.

Recommendation 1: Engage Research Partners Early to Define MEL Methods Fit for Purpose

Engaging research institutions or academic partners at baseline to define fit-for-purpose data collection methodologies can significantly improve the quality of an evaluation. Proactively defining the specific learning questions at the beginning of a project helps to clarify what data is needed upfront. In the case of P&S, the data used in the evaluation was designed and collected to support project implementation, not evaluation. The impact evaluation was, therefore, challenging because the team had to build the evaluation around the data collected for implementation, which was not the ideal fit for the evaluation questions. Ultimately, that undermined the team's ability to test the core hypothesis that integrated conservation and development approaches are more effective than siloed approaches. Engaging research partners

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early on to define learning questions can: (1) provide expertise that can support the design of survey instruments and data storage protocols and (2) build a foundation for a possible partnerships, where practitioners and researchers can share benefits from robust research in service of practice. Research institutions can then help design a MEL approach that will deliver the right data at the necessary quality in ways that are meaningful for advancing conservation and development practice. *Box 1 (below)* indicates key considerations for defining an appropriate MEL approach, particularly when with research partners.

Recommendation 2: Engage Research Partners throughout the Project Life Cycle

Ideally, collaborations built early in projects should provide the foundation for continuous academic collaboration over the course of the project cycle. Continuity in partnership ensures that a research agenda developed in the early stages of a project is seen to completion and/or adapted appropriately over time to suit the evolving needs of the project. In the case of the Alliance MEL efforts, different researchers came in and out of the project over time – including external consultants, university graduate students and CARE, WWF and Alliance staff. This is common, given the substantial resources and capacity needed to complete a robust evaluation of this magnitude. Depending on funding, stronger collaborative engagements with academics could be structured in several ways: For example, academic partners could have a contract focused on design and analysis at the beginning and end of the project cycle, assuming enough practitioner capacity to collect data throughout. They could be on retainer

Box 1. Key considerations in defining MEL strategies and methods

Does the project seek to attribute future change to project interventions? This is a key question with major implications for methodological design, partner selection and MEL budget.

- Collecting data that can infer causality – a cause-effect relationship between intervention and outcome – requires appropriately selected controls as well as a representative baseline sample. A time series increases the ability to go beyond correlation to causality, and can be achieved either through tracking the same respondents or maintaining a sufficiently large sample size over time.
- Best practice entails a survey cover sheet that captures the respondent's name, address, cell phone and GPS coordinates. This identifying information is then matched with a unique numerical code that remains with the survey data, while the cover sheet is stored separately and confidentially. If confidentiality cannot be assured, then this information should not be collected. (For more information on research ethics, see Vanclay, et al. 2013.)

Random, representative sampling frames should be defined using power analysis.

- Sampling rules of thumb, like surveying 30 people per community, can lead to underpowered statistics.
- The sample should also be randomized and representative of the population, unless specific reasons for a purposive sample are articulated and recorded. (For more information on random and purposive sampling, see Yale 2020 and Trochim 2020.)

Instrument development should correspond to decision-making needs and rely on existing, reliable instruments and protocols, whenever possible.

- Standard questions and metrics should be utilized, especially if they have been validated in the target country or region. Development of new instruments should be the last resort.
- In order to select among data collection wish-lists, prioritize data that will inform project and/or stakeholder decision-making. Questions should only be included in instruments if the data they produce contributes to the ability to make better decisions, including adaptative project management.

Data repatriation – sharing what was learned with the community members who contribute their valuable time to the study –is an important part of the research cycle that is often overlooked.

Partner selection should be strongly informed by the above considerations. Independent researchers are helpful if the intent of the research is to evaluate interventions affecting human wellbeing. Academics are particularly strong partners for:

- Effectively addressing strategic response bias, the human tendency to game the system.
- Ensuring the design and implementation of ethical research due to protocol vetting through Institutional Review Boards, which can advise on the most ethical way to reduce bias (e.g., slightly obscuring project evaluation intent by truthfully characterizing the study as focused on changes in natural-resource-based livelihoods over time).
- Sharing findings with communities invites useful feedback and protects the validity of future research.

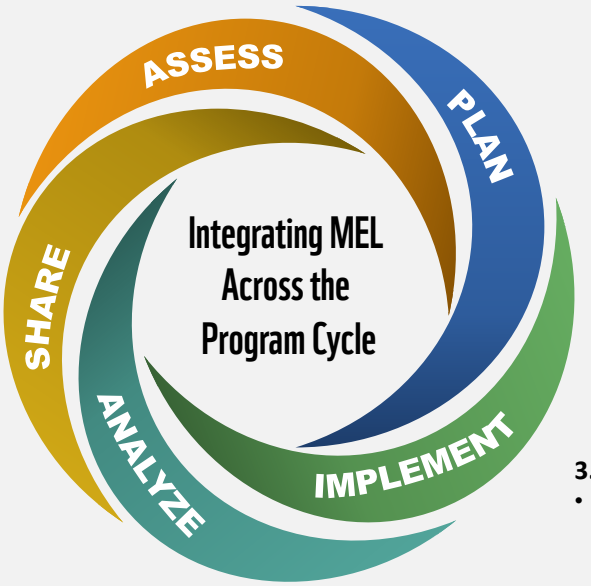
to weigh in, as necessary, throughout the project cycle. If not feasible, a well-documented hand-off is a must.

Box 2 (next page) offers a checklist for conservation and development practitioners who may be constrained, by budget or other factors, from consistent engagement with a research partner. The checklist includes the details that should be recorded for continuity.

Recommendation 3: Invest in Collaborative Interpretation of Findings by Practitioners, Researchers and Project Participants

Collaborative interpretation of findings contributes to better conclusions and recommendations. The Alliance experience affirms that co-interpretation of data by practitioners and research institutions is valuable. In April 2019, a data analysis workshop brought together science staff and academic partners (in this case, graduate interns and their advisors) with program, communications and fundraising staff from CARE, WWF and the Alliance to jointly interpret the data and inform recommendations. This approach to co-creation of an evidence-based narrative created shared excitement and understanding that led to improved insights and recommendations. The in-person opportunity was critical for the researchers to share and validate their findings with project and science staff and accelerate development of an integrated narrative within the short internship window. The presence of program staff familiar with the project, geography and culture provided important context for analysis and understanding. This likely reduced the time researchers needed to arrive at recommendations useful to project decision-makers. Moreover, fostering stronger relationships between the researchers and project staff through collaborative interpretations can help reduce potential pushback or rejection of results, which may (or may not) depict the project as having negative (or positive) outcomes. This reinforces the importance of thought partnership between researchers and practitioners throughout the applied research and project cycle.

Last but not least, good practice in action



1. Assess scope

- Engage M&E staff and research partners to assist in framing the project problem and research or learning questions

2. Plan project

- Collaborate with research partners and M&E staff to design MEL methods fit for purpose
- Build on existing methods and data if they are reliable, valid and relevant to the questions and context
- Ensure adequate budget for MEL, and a shared approach to knowledge management, throughout the project cycle

3. Implement activities

- Engage in evaluative thinking by mainstreaming project monitoring and reflection on experience throughout activity implementation
- Document any changes in MEL methodology and their rationale

4. Analyze data and adapt

- Analyze monitoring data regularly
- Bring experience to bear in understanding the data by reflecting with key stakeholders when possible
- Document insights, lessons, and adaptive management decisions

5. Evaluate and share lessons

- Engage key stakeholders, including project participants, in evaluation
- Collaboratively interpret findings with practitioners and stakeholders to integrate diverse perspectives into lessons and recommendations
- Capture and share findings and lessons in communications appropriate to the target audience, including project participants and other stakeholders

research entails providing feedback on the findings to target communities, which constitute both project and research participants (see also *Box 1* vis-à-vis the role of academic partners). Ideally, the co-interpretation process should also incorporate community perspectives on the findings into analysis and recommendations. Differential perceptions, for instance between men and women on issues such as access to resources or services, should be recorded. Such differences should inform response – both in future research and programming.

Conclusion

The design of the CARE-WWF Alliance final evaluation in Mozambique was constrained by a baseline intended for project monitoring rather than impact assessment. Limited financial and human resources also constrained the ability to engage the same researchers over the life of the decade-long project and undermined the depth of the final analysis. Despite these limitations, the Alliance completed a relatively robust mixed-methods evaluation, in part due to the collaborative approach to data interpretation, which invited researchers and implementers to bring their unique expertise and insights to bear in the development of narratives, conclusions and recommendations.

Three key recommendations for practitioners emerged from this evaluation experience:

- Engage a research partner early in the project lifecycle to define clear learning questions and ensure fit-for-purpose MEL methods.
- Engage the same research partner over the life of a project. If not possible, it is critical to clearly document the research process and rationale for decisions.
- Facilitate co-interpretation of data with researchers, project staff and stakeholders. This involves strong facilitation skills as well as resources for convening.

Box 2. Practitioner Checklist for Robust MEL

When an academic or other research partner is not involved at all or over the life of the project cycle, it falls to project implementers to document the details of the MEL approach. This is critical to ensure that future research partners or consultants have enough information to repeat the data collection methodology, perform robust analyses and make other informed decisions.

The following information should be robustly documented and stored in an accessible and secure location:

1. A codebook or annotated research instrument that explains the meaning of all numeric codes, permitting future analysis and interpretation.
2. The rationale behind decisions, both original design and sampling choices as well as instrument or methods modifications over time. It is unadvisable to change instruments without good reason, such as changes to the research question or survey question invalidity.
3. Contact information and role of anyone involved in research, including fieldwork, data processing and storage.

During field research, the following information should be recorded about each household survey or focus group discussion:

- Date, start and end time
- Enumerator name or code
- Consent of the respondent(s) (even if a tick box indicating verbal consent to a standard consent statement, read aloud)
- Sex (age bracket and other demographic information critical for disaggregation, such as race or ethnicity) of each respondent
- Number of people who declined to participate and refused to answer particular questions
- Respondent contact information (see also *Box 1* vis-a-vis confidentiality)

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Helping People and the Planet Thrive

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