

Using monitoring and evaluation to build transformative equity and resilience in South Africa

LESSONS FROM PRACTICE



SEPTEMBER 2023

The field of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is intimately connected with issues of power. Power is exercised in choices around what is monitored and evaluated, by, for and with whom, how data are collected, which criteria are used to indicate success, and who learns what in the process. M&E findings are used to determine whether funding and support for initiatives or organisations are continued or stopped. It therefore stands to reason that the way in which M&E is practised can profoundly influence whether it promotes equity and resilience, or dominance, exclusion and dependence, including an inability to adapt to changing circumstances.

This reflection explores four insights about how M&E practice can contribute to building transformative equity and resilience. It is based on the activities of a working group under the Southern African Resilience Academy (SARA), which brought six practitioners together to reflect on their experience. We reflect on both what has worked and what has not worked - in the often messy, contested and resource-limited contexts of organisations and projects - to identify possible leverage points for changing 'the system' in a way that builds transformative equity and resilience.

What is transformative equity?

Equity refers to "fairness and justice within social and economic systems, ensuring that persons or regions receive appropriate levels of support according to their level of need." (DPME Guideline', 2022 p.5). The word "transformative" underscores the assumption that

achieving equity requires a transformation of systems, structures and mindsets.

What is resilience?

"Resilience is having the capacity to live and develop with change and uncertainty, which is well beyond just the ability to 'bounce back' to the status quo. It involves the capacity to absorb shocks, avoid tipping points, navigate surprise and keep options alive, and the ability to innovate and transform in the face of crises and traps." (Rockström et al., 2023). Equity is considered one of the key attributes underlying resilience, along with diversity, redundancy, connectivity and adaptive learning.

Intended audience

Anyone thinking about what it means to evaluate equity and resilience, or how to do M&E in a way that promotes equity and resilience. For example:

- M&E practitioners and consultants
- Government departments seeking to implement the new DPME guideline on transformative equity
- M&E staff and project/programme managers involved in designing and implementing M&E systems
- M&E funders and commissioners
- Multilateral aid agencies looking to "localise" their activities
- Researchers and thought leaders



Background

There is a growing awareness of equity and power within M&E across different scales and contexts. This is reflected in the academic literature as well as in the Sustainable Development Goals, the African Evaluation Principles, and the South African government's Guideline on Transformative Equity.

South Africa is the most unequal country in the world.¹ Colonialism and apartheid have left deep-rooted injustices and inequalities, while the economy has continued to reproduce high levels of inequality in income and wealth. Social, economic and environmental inequalities negatively affect the social fabric of society and undermine social cohesion, threatening development and stability in the country. The recent focus on South Africa's "just transition" (particularly the transition away from coal and towards renewable energy) has generated a lot of interest within the M&E community about how to monitor and evaluate transformative equity.

Equity in the African Evaluation Principles

The African Evaluation Principles contain many references to equity, including that evaluation should be empowering and powerful for Africans (principle P1), should encourage mutual accountability (P2), safeguard diversity and inclusion (E3), address inequalities and power asymmetries (E4), be free from vested interests (E5), and strive to contribute to the urgent need for sustainable and transformative change (C3).



Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) Guideline on Transformative Equity

This guideline was developed through a collaborative process involving the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA), representatives from various government departments, independent evaluators, researchers, and civil society representatives.

The current OECD/DAC² evaluation criteria that guide most evaluations undertaken globally, and which are promoted in South Africa's National Evaluation Policy Framework, do not explicitly cover equity.

The guideline proposes and describes a transformative equity criterion and shows how this can be mainstreamed into the planning, commissioning, design, implementation and use of evaluations in the government sector, across all departments and interventions.

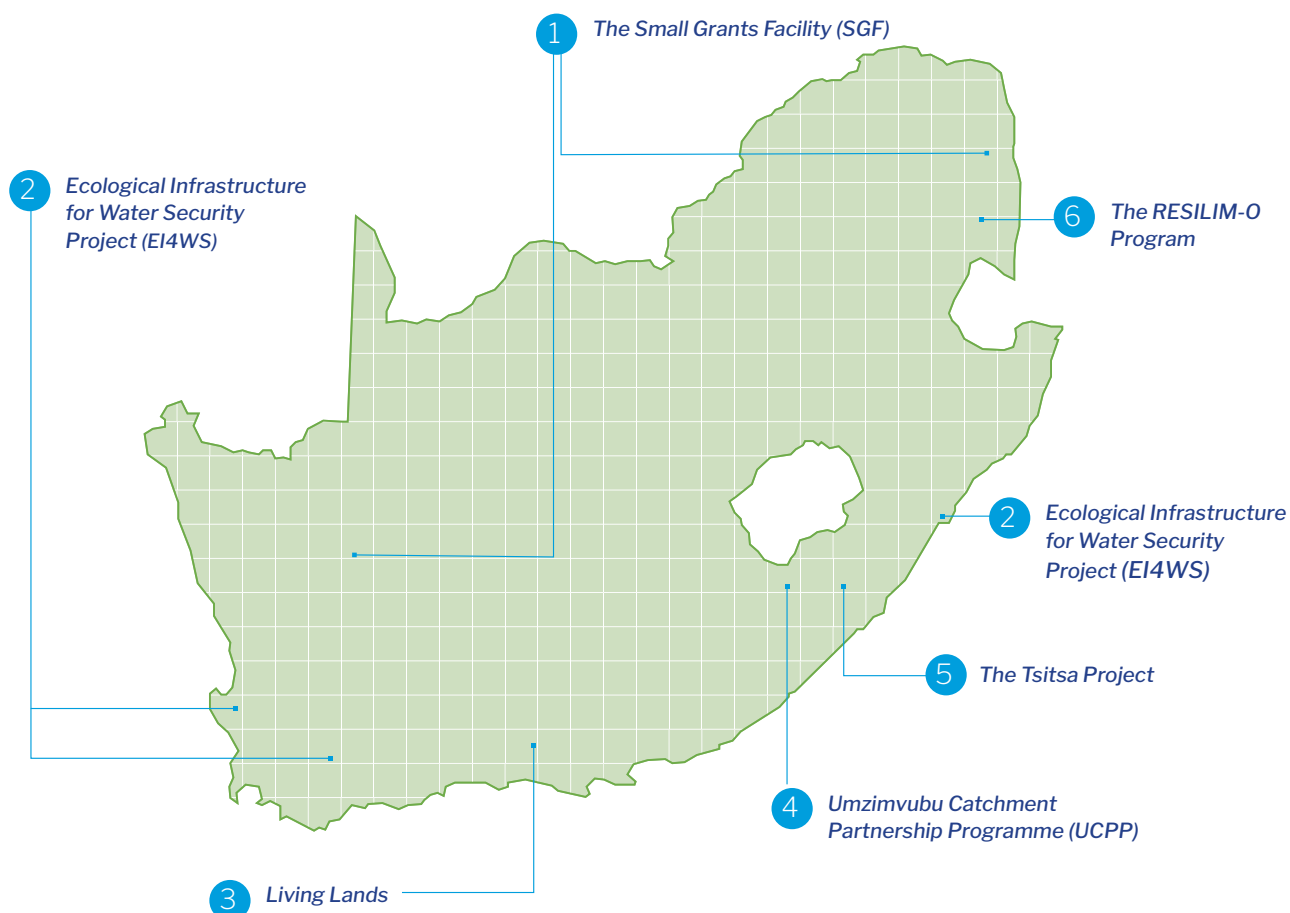
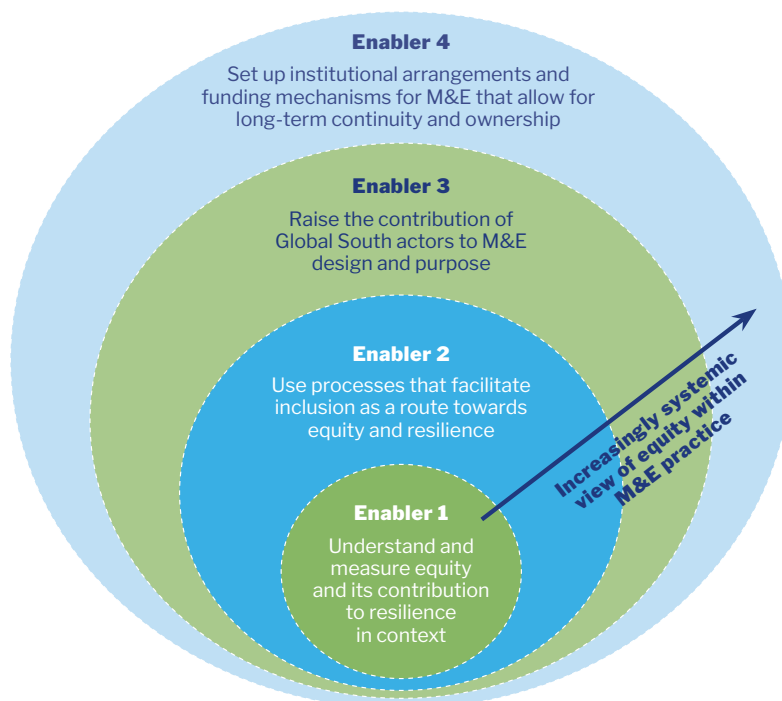
1. Based on World Bank assessments of the Gini coefficient, which measures income distribution across segments of society to demonstrate levels of inequality. South Africa has the highest level of inequality, at 0.69 out of a scale of 0-1, among countries assessed.

2. Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation/Development Assistance Committee

Key insights from case studies

Six case studies were assessed as an exploration of implementing M&E for equitable resilience through initiatives addressing social-ecological challenges and change in South Africa (see map below).

Four factors that enable equity and resilience emerged from the working group's reflections on their experiences in the different case studies. Together, these enablers cover a range of scales and role-players — together helping to create a systemic picture of equity and resilience within M&E practice. Addressing transformative equity is not just about measuring and evaluating how well marginalised groups have been included in interventions; it requires shifting power wherever needed in the system so that M&E can be more empowering, to enable equity, transformation and resilience.



(For further details of the case studies, see pg. 10-11)

ENABLER 1 (LEARNING)

Understand and measure equity and its contribution to resilience in context

Discussions about equity within M&E are often focused on the question of how to measure equity or monitor and evaluate the achievement of equitable outcomes. Inequity and vulnerability show up in many different ways in different contexts, which means that learning is needed each time to support equity and resilience in appropriate and effective ways. If it is to promote equity, this learning should not only be learning by 'external' M&E practitioners about potential indicators, tools and "best practices". People and organisations embedded in the context should also be learning to

understand the factors that contribute to inequity and vulnerability in their contexts, and how these factors can be monitored, evaluated, and changed. This requires actively cultivating a reflexive learning culture within organisations or collaborative initiatives, with the aim of actively empowering those involved. This learning should be ongoing over a long period of time, to account for changes in the context and to allow stakeholders' understanding of equity and resilience to grow and evolve.



CASE STUDIES

Small Grant Facility

In the Small Grant Facility case study, the concept of 'capacity for climate adaptation' was expanded over the course of the project to include both climate adaptation abilities and the organisational abilities required to access adaptation resources – access to and management of which are tightly administered. Greater organisational resilience came to be seen as supporting greater equity (the ability to engage as citizens and partners, to exercise agency over one's social and organisational life, to have voice, and to engage competently and confidently with conditionality and governance requirements), alongside climate resilience and its contribution to more secure livelihoods.

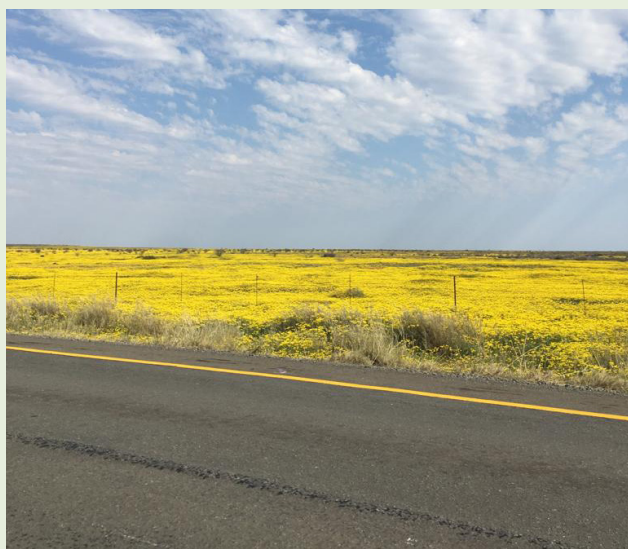


Photo: Sue Soal



Living Lands

Living Lands is a non-profit organisation that has supported collaborative sustainability initiatives in multifunctional landscapes in the Eastern Cape for about 15 years. Living Lands uses a relational approach which focuses on teams being embedded in the landscape, meaning that they live in the landscape and slowly build relationships in a congenial and informal process. The teams also continuously reflect on and question their position in the landscape, including who they engage, who they do not engage, and why. This approach has been effective in enabling the organisation to establish and maintain good relationships with landscape communities despite generally high levels of mistrust of conservation authorities and outsiders. While informal, ongoing sense-making takes place, it has been challenging to implement structured M&E processes to monitor equity and resilience without constraining the creativity, flexibility and informality that are so important in these long-term, complex landscape-based initiatives.

ENABLER 2 (INCLUSION)

Use processes that facilitate inclusion as a route towards equity and resilience

More inclusive M&E means involving other staff, participants or partners who are not typically part of M&E processes. Their participation can be technical or non-technical in terms of M&E, but it will most likely require additional planning, capacity building, cost and time.

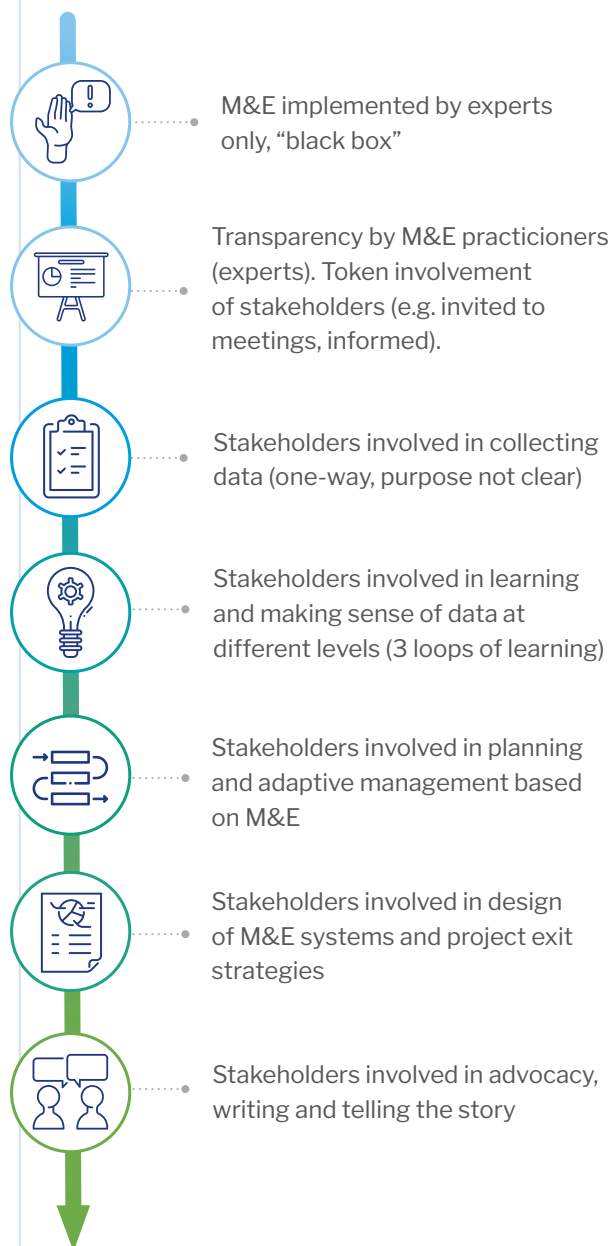
However, inclusion can lead to many co-benefits beyond the purposes of M&E, enriching peoples' involvement and deepening the sustainability and impact of the initiative. Examples of co-benefits include greater sensitivity to on-the-ground and implementation realities, personal and organisational capacity development, employment, personal agency, and improved collaboration within and between groups, which can all be transformative and help to push the system towards greater equity.



A citizen technician and researcher measure channel turbidity as part of the Tsitsa Project's suspended sediment monitoring programme. Photo: Laura Conde-Aller

Levels of inclusion of stakeholders in M&E processes and practices as a route towards equity and resilience

Least inclusive M&E



Most inclusive M&E



CASE STUDY: TSITA PROJECT

The Tsitsa Project deliberately facilitated inclusion of residents and stakeholder organisations in its data collection, reflection and sense-making processes through its PMERL (Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation, Reflection and Learning) system.

Enabling inclusive and genuine participation was not easy. Specific capabilities and skills were needed for the social process work to create inclusive spaces for reflection and learning across the diverse participants. It required paying attention to the practical aspects of facilitating work and events in the remote, rural and mountainous area, including providing transport, translation, mobile network data and technology support when needed.

Language was an important factor which influenced power dynamics. Researchers ensured that, wherever possible, participants used their home language (isiXhosa) to participate in project conversations and sharing of insights. Researchers used to operating in English had to learn to become comfortable in situations where their language was not the dominant one. The team paid attention to translating and mediating knowledge products across language groups and types of stakeholders.



Women from the Tsitsa River catchment developing their list of indicators for ‘a good life in the catchment’. Photo: Laura Conde-Aller

Project staff worked with residents using a capability pathway approach, to develop a shared vocabulary and concepts (co-knowing), a shared understanding of who they should be speaking and listening to (co-listening and co-speaking), and to plan events and workshops together (co-planning). The capability pathway reflects deepening levels of inclusion, which equate to deepening levels of equity. It took considerable time to build the relationships and capabilities that underpinned the pathway: after 5 years the project had made good progress but was not yet fully “co-deciding”, “co-acting” or “co-adapting”.



Training Community Liaison Officers in social survey methodology, 2022. Photo: Paul Mvulane

The Tsitsa Project employed four different types of community-based monitors who collected environmental and social data on an ongoing basis. The PMERL system specifically tried to connect monitoring (routine collection of data) with evaluation (sense-making based on the data) and to include as many people as possible in this process.

ENABLER 3 (PURPOSE)

Raise the contribution of Global South actors to M&E design and purpose

It is possible for implementing organisations to negotiate with funders about M&E requirements if they know what they want or need and why. This may require challenging the common narrative that global south organisations always need “capacity development”, where the funder’s needs determine the kind of capacity that counts (usually project management and financial management capacity). It is important for organisations to be able to advocate for, and then put in

place an alternative, if the funder’s M&E requirements are considered inequitable. Contributions are being made from the Global South but are often stifled by the strict constraints and compliance mechanisms imposed by governments and multilateral funders. The knock-on effects of compliance requirements on all actors in the system need to be considered, and advocacy is needed at all levels.



CASE STUDY: RESILIM-O PROGRAM

The RESILIM-O program was implemented by AWARD, a small, well-established NGO with a strong participatory social learning orientation. The funding came with M&E requirements unlike anything the organisation had ever had to do before. There was initially a lot of resistance to this new type of M&E, which seemed too heavy on quantitative indicators and too light on reflection and learning. With reporting, tensions arose between the competing needs of producing glossy reports to impress the funder, and documenting the processes as they unfolded, including learnings and challenges.

The M&E system seemed too focused on meeting the needs of the funder and not focused enough on the needs of the organisation and the program. So, AWARD negotiated with the funder, and was supported to embark on a journey to develop an M&E system that met everyone’s needs. This opened up a productive space for experimentation and learning over several years, and the principles and practices developed in this program were subsequently shared with other projects across the country.



CASE STUDY: SMALL GRANT FACILITY

In the Small Grant Facility case study, the South African context offered a great opportunity to gain insight into how M&E is experienced by small community-based organisations in southern contexts, and even how that experience might contribute to global learning about this topic.

Small grant recipient organisations struggled to fulfil cascading compliance and reporting requirements from higher up in the system. Despite an avowed desire to learn and change from officials up and down the system, the international donor organisation was subject to exacting requirements upholding environmental and social safeguards, and these were cascaded downwards. This had the unintended consequence of leaving grant recipients with the impression of a lack of trust and care and sometimes,

denied reputations with their local constituencies due to delays in payments and progress. A learning was that the hierarchical system (in this case spanning six levels from international agency tonational authority to executing entity to facilitating NGOs to grant recipients to beneficiaries) needs to be far more dynamic and that the realities on the ground should have concrete impact on the thinking and (ideally) systems higher up.



ENABLER 4 (CONTINUITY)

Set up institutional arrangements and funding mechanisms for M&E that allow for long-term continuity and ownership

M&E processes and data should be owned and retained by the people and organisations who remain in the landscape after projects have ended. “Project-model” funding often works against this, because each project has its own M&E requirements, indicators and reporting formats and there may also be restrictions on data sharing. These factors all affect continuity and make it difficult for local organisations to build up the

data needed to demonstrate cumulative, long-term changes and impacts in their areas. This reduces their ability to attract funding, to work strategically, and be accountable to their local partners. Innovative solutions are needed for funding and coordinating M&E, data storage and institutional memory, especially in multi-stakeholder contexts. This is an important part of enabling “locally-led” development.

Locally-led development requires continuity in M&E³



Locally implemented

Primarily an outside approach, including external priorities that local people or organisations are supposed to implement.

Locally managed

The approach comes from outside, but is ‘transplanted’ to local management.

Locally led and owned

Local people and groups design the approach and set priorities. Outsiders assist with resources.

LESS LOCAL OWNERSHIP



MORE LOCAL OWNERSHIP



CASE STUDY: UMZIMVUBU CATCHMENT PARTNERSHIP

The uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership (UCP) is a network of partner organisations that collaborate on a wide range of land and water management projects. However, the partners are mainly reliant on short-term project funding (1–3 years). This increases their reporting burden, makes it difficult to employ citizen monitors and M&E staff on an ongoing basis, and makes long-term strategic planning difficult. Their dependence on short-term project funding reduces their resilience and sustainability. Members of the UCP feel that having a system for collating and sharing their M&E data would be very helpful, and have been trying to establish such a system for several years. However, despite the social

capital in the network and the synergies in the work implemented by the different partners, making a partnership-wide M&E collaboration work effectively has not been easy. Getting to equitable resilience in this context requires changes in the way contracts are negotiated and funded. If the organisations in the UCP had stable core funding and longer-term security, it would free them to be more strategic in the data they collect and how they use it, empower them to say “no” to funding that doesn’t meet their needs, and allow them to appoint M&E staff whose job it is to coordinate M&E at a catchment level and ensure that it is used in a way that promotes learning.

3. Adapted from Peace Direct and inspired by the spectrum of locally- or community-led development described by The Global Fund for Community Foundations (2021; https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WhatDoesItMeanToBeCommunityLed_Jan2021.pdf) and Bond (2022; <https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/becoming-locally-led-as-an-anti-racist-practice-a-guide/>).

Recommendations

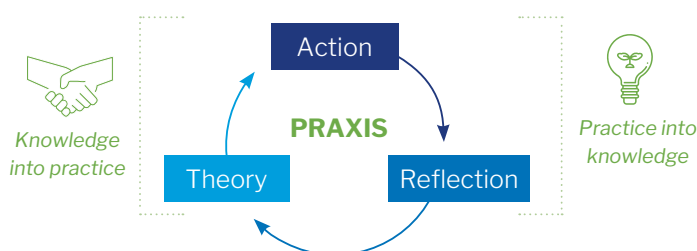
While the South African government's (DPME) Guideline on Transformative Equity is primarily intended to promote consideration of equity within evaluation of government programmes, it encourages all evaluation stakeholders – commissioners, evaluators and project managers – to reflect on transformative equity in their own (M&E) practice, and provides guidelines for the different dimensions of equity that should be considered.

The insights that emerged from the SARA working group process aligned well with the DPME Guideline, which was co-created by a diverse group of stakeholders, including M&E practitioners (see pg. 2). The working group also engaged with members of the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association's community of practice on M&E for a Just Transition to co-create this document. Such co-creation processes are an essential part of praxis.

As M&E practitioners, we found the opportunity to reflect on our experiences together interesting and valuable. **By comparing and contrasting our experiences and relating them to theory and developments in the field, we were able to develop a deeper understanding of what transformative equity and resilience mean within our own M&E practice, and in broader M&E systems.** The process provided an opportunity to move “practice into knowledge” – rather than the more usual “knowledge into practice”. This is an essential part of praxis, the mutual dependency of theory, action and reflection.

The “practice into knowledge” side of praxis is often neglected because practitioners do not always find the

time or the space to engage in deep reflection on their practice. Understanding what you have done and what it means in relation to theory is more difficult than it might seem! Practitioners also do not have the same incentive structures as academics, and writing and reflection are usually unfunded activities. Opportunities like the SARA working groups can provide the space needed to bring “practice into knowledge”.



The insights and examples presented in this document can be used to:

- Stimulate reflection by M&E practitioners and stakeholders on their practice and how to better enable transformative equity and resilience.
- Provide examples of how the African Evaluation Principles can be applied.
- Develop a more systemic understanding of transformative equity as it relates to M&E.
- Provide a basis for advocacy by all M&E stakeholders for more equitable practices and systems.
- Inform M&E practice in other countries struggling with supporting resilience in deeply inequitable and complex spaces.

Additional reflections that emerged from our co-creation process:

- 1 The more M&E is embedded in a system, the more it can **support aspirational values** like equitable resilience and a Just Transition.
- 2 Achieving M&E for equitable resilience is **a process**.
- 3 **Capacity building is important to promote equitable M&E** – this is needed for researchers, practitioners, evaluation commissioners, funding agencies, project managers and project participants alike.

- 4 **It is important to be able to provide convincing evidence of the “co-benefits” of inclusive, equitable M&E**, such as agency, motivation, relationships, networks, social cohesion, coherence, and changes in power relations. Such evidence would help to advocate for more inclusive approaches, given that these take longer and require more and different resources (as highlighted in our Tsitsa case study). This has particular relevance to impact evaluation as one specialisation within broader M&E practice.



Further information

Case study description	Context and scale	M&E purpose	Further reading
THE SMALL GRANTS FACILITY (SGF)			
<p>A relatively small pilot project (12 sites over 4-5 years) to allow testing of approaches and practices for cascading large-scale multilateral climate funding into localised climate change adaptation efforts, within the existing tight conditionality of such multilateral funding and a complex and tightly prescribed model of governance. The pilot facilitated a meeting of epistemologies, preoccupations, traditions, assumptions, styles and personnel from the science/ environment and social/ development spheres.</p>	<p>Bridging international, national and local scales. The 12 small grant projects were implemented in two districts in Limpopo and Northern Cape Provinces.</p>	<p>Mid-term evaluation, intended as a real-time learning opportunity to enable adaptive management within the project. The intention was to enable learning from practice, to develop a grounded approach that can be upscaled.</p>	<p>https://www.sanbi.org/biodiversity/science-into-policy-action/nie-adaptation-fund/small-grants-facility/</p>
ECOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR WATER SECURITY PROJECT (EI4WS)			
<p>A 5-year project executed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), in partnership with the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) and with funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), implemented by a range of partners. The project focused on ecosystem restoration work and improving water security by integrating biodiversity and ecosystem services into planning, finance and development in the water sector.</p>	<p>Greater uMngeni River catchment in KwaZulu-Natal and the Berg and Breede catchments in the Western Cape.</p>	<p>The Water Research Commission was responsible for facilitating knowledge management and social learning so as to change the way targeted public and private sector stakeholders and decision-makers engage with, think about and integrate ecological infrastructure into water sector development planning and finance. M&E was an important part of the project's social learning strategy.</p>	<p>For further information please contact the Water Research Commission and Dr Roderick Juba roderickj@wrc.org.za</p>
LIVING LANDS: RELATIONAL APPROACHES FOR LAND STEWARDSHIP IN MULTIFUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPES			
<p>A small locally-based environmental NPC facilitating landscape-based collaborations and initiatives for ecological rehabilitation at the interface of agriculture and ecology.</p>	<p>Baviaans-Kromme-Kouga River Catchment, Eastern Cape.</p>	<p>To support and implement a M&E framework which integrates a more dynamic and holistic perspective of impact, and supports internal decision-making, and the organisational culture for innovation and adaptation (i.e. organic learning and reflexive processes).</p>	<p>Cockburn et al. 2019; Cockburn et al. 2020a; Cockburn et al. 2020b; De Villiers et al. 2024</p>

Case study description	Context and scale	M&E purpose	Further reading
UMZIMVUBU CATCHMENT PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME (UCPP)			
<p>The UCP is a well-established catchment partnership, started in 2013. Members include NGOs, local and district municipalities, conservation agencies, traditional authorities, social enterprises, SMMEs and provincial departments. The UCP facilitates collaboration on projects and helps to attract new collaborators, researchers and funding into the area.</p>	<p>uMzimvubu catchment in the Eastern Cape.</p>	<p>Mid-term formative evaluation of funder support for the UCP.</p>	<p>https://enviros.co.za/umzimvubu-catchment-partnership/</p> <p>https://umzimvubu.org</p>
THE TSITSA PROJECT			
<p>A multi-stakeholder land rehabilitation project funded by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and involving academic institutions, government entities, NGOs, local communities and traditional leadership. The overall vision was to enable and support sustainable landscape management and livelihoods. The project aimed to do things differently from other state-funded rehabilitation projects, by focusing on social and governance issues, learning and capacity development, along with technical solutions.</p>	<p>Tsitsa River catchment in the Eastern Cape.</p>	<p>PMERL - with an emphasis on participation (the 'P' of PMERL) aimed to create a more situated M&E system by being as inclusive as possible. Catchment-based monitors and stakeholders from different organisations were included in reflection and sense-making processes. The purpose was for mutual accountability and learning of project stakeholders.</p>	<p>https://www.ru.ac.za/tsitsaproject/</p> <p>https://www.ru.ac.za/tsitsaproject/resourcesresearch/keyinformation/</p>
AWARD: THE RESILIM-O PROGRAM			
<p>The RESILIM-O program was a large program implemented in the Olifants River Basin in north-eastern South Africa and southern Mozambique from 2013 to 2020, by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD). It included 23 overlapping and complementary projects with the overall aim to reduce vulnerability to climate change through building improved transboundary water and biodiversity governance and management of the Olifants Basin, enhancing the resilience of its people and ecosystems through systemic and social learning approaches.</p>	<p>Trans-boundary Olifants River catchment (north-eastern South Africa and Mozambique).</p>	<p>A process unfolded over the 7 years of the RESILIM-O program to figure out how to develop an M&E system that could meet both the needs of the funder and the needs of the organisation. The M&E system that emerged involved all AWARD staff in data collection, reflection, reporting, learning and evaluation activities. This led to acceptance of the M&E system as well as capacity building within the organisation.</p>	<p>www.award.org.za</p> <p>https://award.org.za/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AWARD-BROCHURE-MERL-Harnessing-Monitoring-Evaluation-for-Learning-2019-v2-PRINT.pdf</p>



SARA's work towards building equitable resilience in southern Africa

Since 2022, the Southern African Resilience Academy (SARA) has supported collaborative working groups to pursue inter- or transdisciplinary synthesis research under the guiding theme of “**Building equitable resilience in Southern Africa**”.

This is in line with SARA's role as a convening and support space for researchers and practitioners working across Southern Africa to engage around pressing resilience and development challenges in the region.

SARA is an initiative of the Global Resilience Partnership (GRP), with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The academy's goals are to strengthen existing expert networks, expand collaboration, and facilitate the co-production of policy and practice-relevant knowledge.

Through its links with other regional networks, SARA aims to contribute directly and meaningfully to regional and global policy discussions around resilience and development, and elevate the Southern African voice in international fora.

SARA is coordinated by the Centre for Sustainability Transitions (CST) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. It is co-funded by the South African Research Chair in Social-Ecological Systems and Resilience.

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WORKING GROUP:

Harnessing the Power of Monitoring and Evaluation for Equitable Resilience

Often, the project design and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of development work is driven primarily by funder requirements. Project ‘beneficiaries’ have little say in what is implemented in their areas, and little capacity to evaluate what has been done or how the different projects fit together and contribute to their needs and goals. M&E, as currently practiced, therefore often contributes little towards building long-term sustainability of outcomes and equitable resilience, despite its enormous potential to do so.

This working group brought together six practitioner-researchers from across South Africa, giving them a rare opportunity to reflect deeply on their practice and experience and to co-create a synthesis of “voices from practice” on how M&E practitioners can use monitoring and evaluation in a way that builds equity and resilience.

The working group's co-creation process was extended on 24 July 2023 to a broader group of M&E practitioners interested in the issue of equity. As part of its work mainstreaming M&E into governance and accountability, the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) convened a Community of Practice on M&E for a Just Transition, in order to support practitioners working to integrate considerations of a Just Transition into their practice, and to specifically support use of South Africa's new evaluation criteria - Climate and Ecosystem Health and Transformative Equity.

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