Towards a MEL Framework for Multi-Stakeholder Platforms for Climate Change Adaptation

By Karen Kotschy, 28 November 2023

1. Introduction

Partnerships to enable effective climate change adaptation (climate-resilient agriculture or CRA) for smallholder farmers are conceptualized on three nested levels: micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Figure 1). At the micro-level, participants are locals interacting with each other - and possibly others in their community - in peer learning groups, interest groups and committees. As one moves to the meso- and macro-levels, the range and diversity of people and organisations involved broadens out to include a range of other players such as local and national government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the private sector and academic institutions, along with local farmers and communities. The term multi-stakeholder platform (MSP) is used to describe partnerships or structures which enable different stakeholders to work together towards particular climate adaptation and resilience goals. These can be national and/or regional networks or forums (Figure 1). The connections across the three scales are important for ensuring that farmers' issues, concerns and preferences are understood and taken up regionally and nationally (e.g. into policy, planning and communications), and that farmers are able to benefit from the support of these diverse stakeholders (e.g. through relationships, learning exchanges and training). As guided by the Locally-Led Adaptation Principles (Soanes et al., 2021),[1] the emphasis is on empowering local communities to lead sustainable and effective adaptation to climate change.

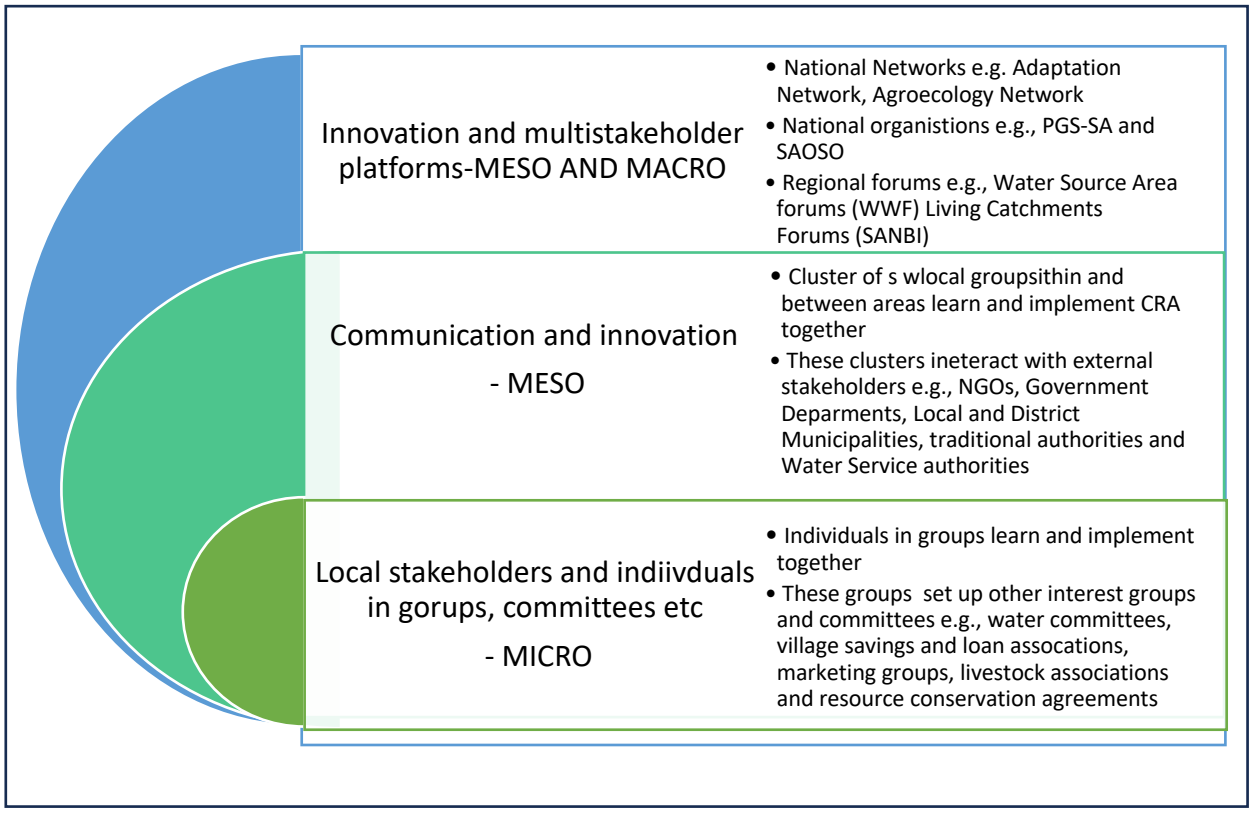

Figure 1: Micro-, meso- and macro-level multi-stakeholder platforms for climate-resilient smallholder agriculture in the project (from Mahlathini Development Foundation)

A monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system or framework should be designed with the following three considerations in mind:

- The context in which the framework is to be applied
- The intended purpose of the framework
- Practical factors related to how the framework will be implemented

Best practice for MEL in complex social-ecological systems, such as smallholder farming systems, is for the MEL framework to be flexible, enable ongoing learning and adaptive management, use both quantitative and qualitative data, monitor and evaluate processes of participation, relationship-building, planning, innovation, information-sharing, capacity development and collaboration, detect emergent outcomes, and take into account stakeholders' different interests and criteria for success.[2] The important role of robust and flexible monitoring and learning systems is also recognised explicitly in the Locally-Led Adaptation Principles (Principle 6).

This document presents a draft MEL framework for multi-stakeholder climate adaptation and climate-resilient agriculture platforms. The framework aims for coherence across micro-, meso- and macro-levels.

2. Resilience: Theoretical underpinnings

The theoretical framework underlying the MEL framework presented here was derived by combining Cabell and Oelofse's thirteen aspects of agro-ecosystem resilience (Cabell and Oelofse, 2012) with the concept of absorptive, adaptive and transformative resilience capacities as used by Oxfam and others (Jeans et al., 2017).

Cabell and Oelofse's (2012) aspects of agro-ecosystem resilience have a solid foundation in that they are based on the resilience principles outlined by Biggs et al. (2012) and numerous other resilience scholars. Cabell and Oelofse's framework forms the basis for the SHARP+[3] tool (Hernandez et al., 2022; https://www.fao.org/in-action/sharp), which is being widely used by the FAO and others to assess household climate resilience based on the knowledge and priorities of farmers, using an integrated approach. For example, the IFAD and GEF-financed Resilient Food Systems Impact Programme is currently using SHARP+ in seven countries in sub-Saharan Africa as part of its monitoring and evaluation framework, and SHARP+ has also been included in operational guidelines on monitoring and evaluation of nature-based interventions, climate adaptation in agriculture, and implementation of resilience thinking (Hernandez et al., 2022).

The thirteen aspects of resilience described by Cabell and Oelofse (2012) were reduced to ten as follows: two were removed because they were felt not to be relevant to South African smallholder farmers ("carefully exposed to disturbance", and "coupled with local natural capital"). Diversity and redundancy were combined into a single category, because in practice having more diverse options often also provides redundancy, or the ability to substitute one input, output, crop etc. with another).

The Oxfam Framework for Resilient Development, *The Future is a Choice*, describes three types of resilience capacity: absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity (Jeans et al., 2016). Resilience is seen as a result of enhancing the capacity (ability, agency, power) of people to proactively and

[2] See Tables 1 and 2 in Deliverable 4.
[3] Self-evaluation and Holistic Assessment of climate Resilience of farmers and Pastoralists

positively manage change in ways that contribute to a just world without poverty. The three capacities are seen as interconnected, existing at multiple levels, and mutually reinforcing (Jeans et al., 2017).

Absorptive capacity ensures stability because it aims to prevent or limit the negative impact of shocks. It is the capacity to 'bounce back' after a shock, through anticipating, planning, coping with and recovering from specific shocks and short-term stresses. Adaptive capacity is the capacity to make intentional incremental adjustments in anticipation of or in response to change, in ways that create more flexibility in the future. Transformative capacity is the capacity to intentionally change the deep structures that cause or increase vulnerability and risk as well as how risk is shared within societies and the global community (Jeans et al., 2017).

For the purpose of creating a coherent theoretical framework for resilience in this context that could work across the micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Figure 1), the different aspects of agro-ecosystem resilience described by Cabell and Oelofse (2012) were mapped onto the three types of resilience capacity as shown in Figure 2, to produce a guiding framework for monitoring and evaluating resilience. This framework summarises the different aspects of resilience as well as the interplay between stability and change. It was used to help organise and strengthen Mahlathini Development Foundation's resilience indicators ("resilience snapshots") being used at the micro-level, and relevant aspects were then extended to the meso- and macro-levels.

A detailed description of the use of this framework at the micro-level, with smallholder farmers, is covered elsewhere. The focus here is on its use for macro-level multi-stakeholder platforms.

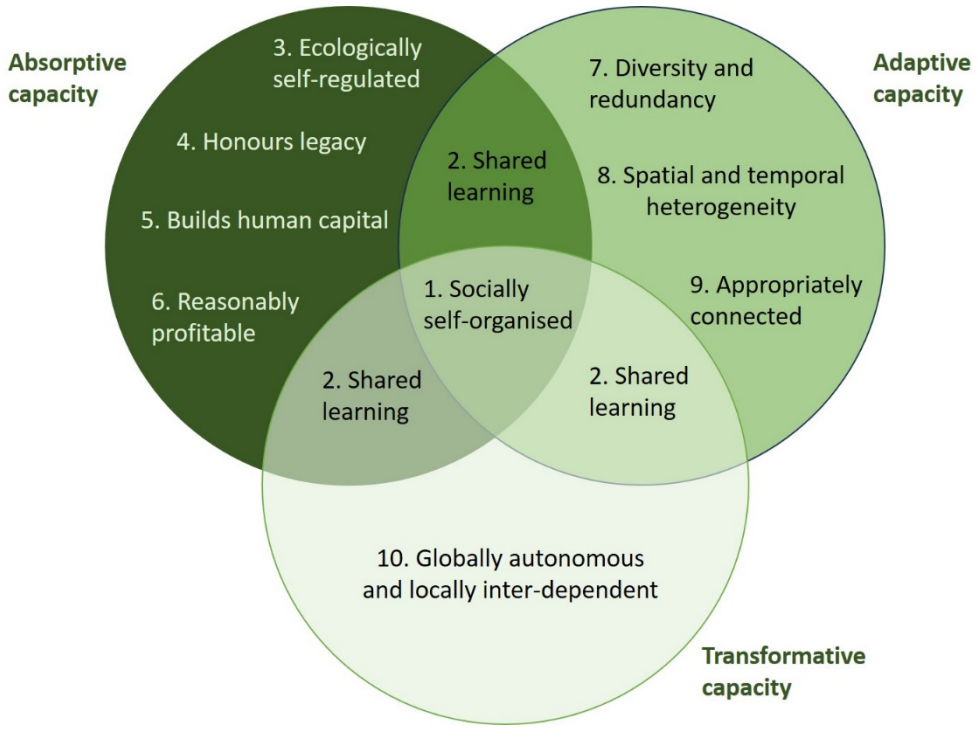

Figure 2: Theoretical framework underlying the MERL framework for multi-stakeholder platforms. Based on Cabell & Oelofse (2012) and Jeans et al. (2017).

3. Draft MEL Framework for MSP's

The main activities covered by this MEL framework are:

- **Monitoring**: A monitoring framework is designed to collect quantitative and/or qualitative indicator data based which reflect progress towards or achievement of the planned objectives, activities, outputs and outcomes. These data often need to be reported to project funders or higher-level institutions.
- **Evaluation**: Evaluation processes use monitoring data and other sources to determine the effectiveness, efficiency, value-for-money, sustainability and impact of interventions.
- **Learning**: Most M&E frameworks will say that they intend to promote learning. However, the details of what type of learning is expected, by whom and when, are often not specified. Learning is most commonly stated to be important for developing "best practice" guidelines, allowing upscaling of successes, and sharing knowledge with other projects, practitioners or institutions. This implies a kind of learning that is focused on documenting and communicating successes – which is most easily done at the end of a project. However, in this case, learning is considered important for facilitating ongoing adaptive management and responsivity to changing conditions, as part of capacity development processes, as well as communicating and sharing lessons as described above.

Details of the proposed monitoring, evaluation and learning activities will now be presented.

3.1 Monitoring

The aspects of resilience and resilience capacity shown in Figure 2 were translated into specific indicators which can be used for monitoring progress towards resilience at the three different levels (Figure 1). While specific indicators may differ at the different levels, the underlying theoretical framework (Figure 2) is the same and brings coherence across levels.

The two aspects shown in the intersections between the three circles in Figure 2, namely social self-organisation and shared learning, are important for all three types of resilience capacity and at all three levels, although they are expressed in slightly different ways in each. For example, at the micro-level, farmer self-organisation is measured by the number of local groups that provide support, the inclusivity of groups, and the extent of collaborative actions among farmers. At the macro-level, similar indicators for social self-organisation are used, but they are applied at the regional or national level (e.g. collaborative actions would not be between individual farmers but between organisations or groups). Additional indicators are also included such as the diversity (of genders, ages, knowledge) within the MSP and whether all stakeholder groups are adequately represented.

While all the aspects of resilience shown in Figure 2 are used at the micro-level, not all are applicable at the macro-level. A set of proposed indicators for the macro-level (both quantitative and qualitative) is presented in

Table 1. These are focused on the work of the MSP in general, in terms of its sustainability and effectiveness in improving the resilience of smallholder farming systems.

Table 1: Proposed indicators for monitoring resilience and adaptation through multi-stakeholder platforms (numbers refer to the numbers in Figure 2)

Indicator name	Rationale & Type of Capacity	Definition
1. Socially self-organised		
1.1 Extent of support to farmers	Absorptive: Support networks build absorptive capacity by helping farmers to absorb and survive shocks.	Number of organisations in the MSP providing support to farmers, and types of support offered (choice of categories).
1.2 Collaborative actions	Absorptive: Absorptive capacity is enhanced by support networks that enable individual and collective agency to make farming livelihoods more efficient and productive.	Extent of collaboration between members of the MSP e.g. in improving livelihood opportunities, market access, water supply etc. (no. of collaborative projects, nature of collaboration).
1.6 Interactions between disciplines and knowledge systems	Adaptive: Diversity of knowledge systems and backgrounds can promote learning, innovation and adaptation.	No. of structures (formal or informal) within the MSP that promote ongoing interaction between disciplines and knowledge systems, e.g. committees, working groups, communities of practice, mailing lists, and nature of these interactions.
1.7 Inclusivity	Transformative: Inclusive social and governance structures build transformative capacity by reducing marginalisation, exclusion and inequity.	Representation of stakeholders in the MSP and extent to which initiatives are community-led (community involvement in design, implementation, decision-making, MEL, planning etc.).
1.8 Extent to which networks cross scales or hierarchies	Transformative: Connections across scales or hierarchies provide opportunities for advocacy and structural change.	Strength and no. of connections between actors operating at different scales, as measured by social network analysis.
2. Shared learning		
2.1 Extent of knowledge sharing	Absorptive: Sharing of knowledge promotes exchange of ideas and also learning for both sharer and recipient. Knowledge sharing helps farmers to farm more effectively and to mitigate the impacts of shocks and disturbances.	How information is shared (where, when), with whom, and what kind of information is shared?
2.2 Sources of information used in decision-making	Adaptive: Successful adaptation is more likely when more sources of information are used to make decisions and when MEL data informs adaptive management.	Extent to which MEL data are being used to inform decisions/plans.
2.3 Change in practices	Adaptive: Changing practices indicates adaptation.	The most significant change in members' practice that is due to the work/influence of the MSP, as perceived by members.
2.3 Documentation of learning	Adaptive: Written reflections and learnings promote institutional memory and a rich source of	No. of written reflections or reflective reports.

	qualitative data for tracking trends and changes in approach.	
2.4 Changes in personal attitudes, motivations or beliefs	Transformative: Such changes reflect personal transformation, which is the foundation for and motivator of broader transformation.	Members' reflections on how they think they have grown and how their personal attitudes have changed.
5. Builds human capital		
5.3 Changes in knowledge and agency	Absorptive: Building skills, knowledge and agency increases human capital.	What MSP members feel they are able to do that they weren't able to do before.
7. Diversity and redundancy		
7.8 Diversity and redundancy of funding sources	Adaptive: A greater diversity and redundancy of funding sources (i.e. having several different sources for each type of activity) makes the MSP more resilient should a particular funding source dry up.	Proportions of funding derived from different sources (categories).
9. Appropriately connected		
9.1 Flexibility of networks	Adaptive: Flexibility of networks (many weak connections) allows configurations to change according to members' needs and desires.	No. and strength of connections between MSP members (social network analysis).
10. Globally autonomous and locally inter-dependent		
10.2 External vs local funding sources	Transformative: If the MSP is highly dependent on external funding, it may have less flexibility to determine its own priorities. Sharing or pooling locally-sourced funding suggests local interdependence.	Ratio of external (international) to local (South African) funding of MSP activities.

The indicator list in

Table 1 should be refined together with stakeholders in the MSP. It is important to develop the final set of indicators together with the stakeholders, to ensure that there is agreement on what will be measured and how, and that the data are practically feasible to collect. Indicators may be added or deleted as required, but the choices should be guided by the theoretical framework in Figure 2. The indicators should cover both processes and impacts.

Once the final set has been chosen, the indicator definitions need to be tightened up and further details added to the table. These include: units of measure, data sources, frequency and timing of collection, methodology (for collection and analysis), people responsible, and data limitations. Baseline data should also be collected or compiled for all indicators, for future reference and comparison. The indicators in

Table 1 will be further developed and tested with the Northern Berg Collaborative MSP through a related WWF project.

Practical factors that need to be taken into account will depend on the particular MSP and the stakeholders involved. Typically, MSP's do not have MEL staff whose job it is to collect and analyse data for the MSP, although some individual organisations may have such people. One way to ensure that data collection does not become too onerous is to build it into regular MSP meetings and progress reports - for example, as a short survey or reflection, or by developing report templates that elicit the type of data required. However, based on the review of experience in Deliverable 4, the role of collecting and analysing the data and making it available to stakeholders is essential for the monitoring system to function, and this role will need to be played by one or more people within the MSP.

Future work will involve developing a visually engaging way of presenting and sharing the data. This could include:

- A "traffic light" system (red, orange, green) for each indicator to provide a simple overview of status and progress.
- Web-based dashboards which convert the data into engaging visual representations (e.g. graphs, charts, tables, word clouds) and make it accessible to stakeholders.
- An interactive network mapping tool such as Kumu (https://kumu.io/), which allows stakeholders to map and visualise their connections interactively and can also be used to gather and analyse data such as numbers and types of connections, strength of connections and social self-organisation.

3.2 Evaluation

Making sure that monitoring and evaluation activities are closely connected brings benefits in terms of learning. This means that monitoring data should be regularly evaluated by stakeholders and used to help "steer" the activities of the MSP.

Evaluation activities therefore include both those that occur more frequently, such as reflection activities at workshops, and those that occur less frequently, such as evaluation of the impacts of a particular intervention (Table 2).

Table 2: Examples of evaluation activities for use in multi-stakeholder partnerships

Frequency of evaluation activity	Examples
More frequent	Reflection activities at workshops Reflective reports on challenges and successes Interactive network mapping activities Collaborative reflections on indicator data (e.g. annually)
Less frequent	Short case study evaluations on particular topics, questions, pilot studies etc. Formative evaluations (e.g. on progress or what has been learned) More comprehensive summative evaluations (e.g. of the functioning of the MSP or the impacts of particular interventions).

Evaluation activities in MSP's are frequently under-funded, even more so than monitoring activities. Funding for evaluations should ideally be built into project budgets. Partnerships with universities and other research organisations can also be explored to cover certain evaluation activities.

Evaluation activities may be linked to any of the indicators in Table 1, and should extend, deepen or challenge the data collected through monitoring. This may require additional data to be collected, such as through interviews, focus groups, surveys or by accessing secondary data. While the more frequent types of evaluation activities (Table 2) typically have a more particular and limited focus, summative evaluations address several evaluation questions and multiple sources of data to provide a comprehensive assessment of a particular initiative, or of the MSP itself.

A few examples of potential evaluation questions are listed below:

- What different kinds of value are being created through the MSP? (as described in the Value Creation Framework for evaluating networks and communities of practice – Wenger et al., 2011).
- How do factors such as gender, age, nationality, or political affiliation enable (or hinder) social agency within the MSP?
- Does the picture painted by the monitoring data match up to communities' experiences on the ground? (comparison across macro- and micro-levels).
- How do particular shocks or disturbances affect the different stakeholders?
- Which of the different archetypes or roles described by Chambers et al. (2022) as contributing to "co-productive agility" in stakeholder networks, are present in the MSP? How do different perspectives, agendas and roles enable agency and change?

3.3 Learning

The monitoring and evaluation activities suggested above are designed to promote learning, because they are designed to help stakeholders to regularly collect data and reflect on the meaning of the results. This "joining up" of monitoring and evaluation is important for learning and should be promoted wherever possible.

Participation of stakeholders in learning-focused MEL activities can be a powerful tool for building collaboration, a common vision and a strong basis for ongoing strategic adaptive management (see Tsitsa Project, 2021). In learning-oriented MEL systems, it is important to consider who will participate in the MEL system and how they will do so, because participation enables learning. A useful exercise when planning who should be involved and how is to complete a table similar to the following, as suggested in a handbook produced by Cape Action for People and the Environment (2008):

Steps in the M&E process	**Who should participate?**	**When will this happen?**
1. Develop the M&E plan		
2. Gather the information		
3. Analyse the information		
4. Act on the analysis		

• Learning • Decision-making • Accountability		

Different possible levels of inclusion of stakeholders within MEL processes are shown in Figure 3 (Kotschy et al., in preparation).

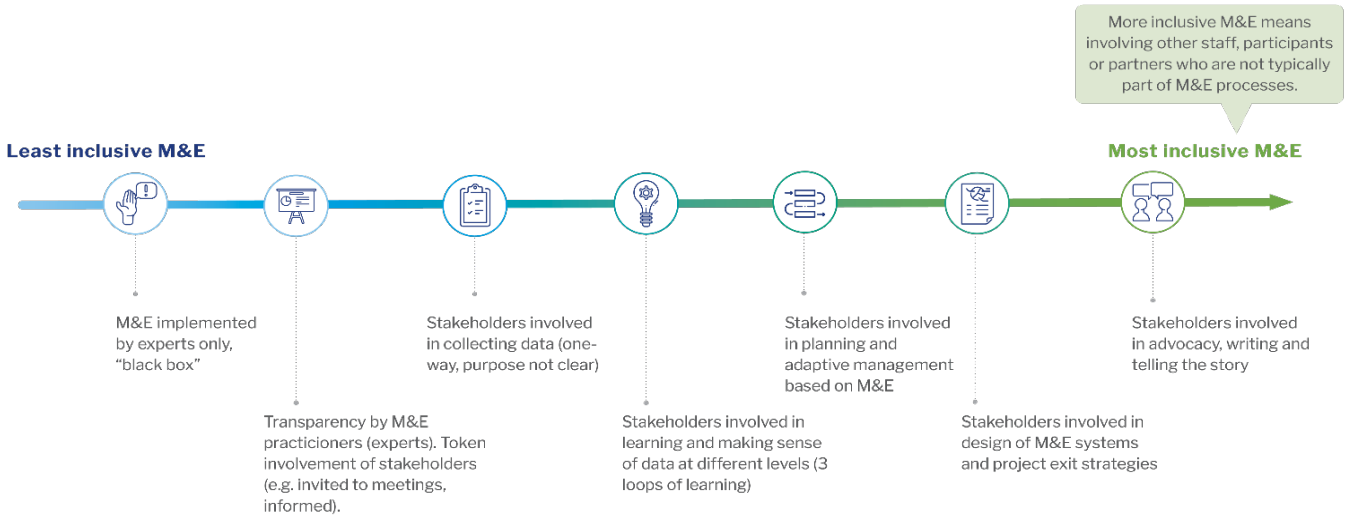

Figure 3: Levels of stakeholder inclusion within M&E. Source: Kotschy et al., 2023 (in preparation)

An approach that includes and capacitates local residents brings multiple benefits including motivation, agency, capacity to participate in collective action, and changes in power relations and accountability structures. Participation makes M&E more inclusive and can thereby contribute to equity and transformation. It can also increase the "downward" accountability of stakeholders towards residents. However, participation requires capacity building, proper planning, paying attention and creating the conditions to enable proper participation. This approach is therefore more time-consuming and costly than "expert-driven" M&E, and requires more and different resources. For example, monitoring practices and tools must be developed to support a participatory approach, materials may need to be developed in multiple languages, and capacity building and culturally appropriate facilitation skills are required.

Potential additional learning activities that could be planned include:

- Learning field visits which bring stakeholders from the different levels together
- Capacity development workshops
- Collaborative development of a communications product or products
- Photovoice or participatory video activities to allow sharing of peoples' different perspectives or experiences
- Theory of change or situation assessment workshops to learn about a new context or issue
- Writing about the learning and experiences of the MSP

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