Interrogating Leadership Paradigms Using a Public Sector lens:

Creating Horizontal Leadership Spaces for Inclusive and Transformative Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Practice

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1. The Equity and Inclusion Challenge for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

This discussion paper starts from the premise that monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) as a performance measurement practice also has the potential to be a dynamic tool that can facilitate and support socio-economic transformation. This can only happen, however, if there are two major shifts in the field of MEL – the practice itself, and the systems within which it is practiced. When the practice of MEL is embedded within a hierarchical management structure and positioned in a routinised and default compliance framework then it loses its potential to be a progressive element of government planning and programming. It turns the wheels of government systems but fails to see new possibilities while struggling to deal with complex challenges where conflicting interests and incomplete information make establishing shared facts and understanding difficult.

The leadership and management structures within public services are generally vertical and based on regulated authority and line management principles. The systems and practices associated with MEL that work within government also operate within these organisational power structures. While mid-level MEL officials may understand the technical aspects of their practice, they are constrained by the vertical decision-making authority of senior officials who may have little or no understanding of the capabilities of MEL beyond its performance management component. This often has the effect of marginalising the MEL function within public services to the status of an administrative function rather than positioning it as a central and transformative function. The reality is that traditional forms of public service leadership within vertical and hierarchical authority structures are no longer fit for the purpose of addressing the key equity and inclusion challenges that are affecting societies in the 21st century.

To move beyond this kind of instrumentalist approach is undoubtedly a massive challenge. Changing entire systems in the public sector is difficult, in part because they cannot be turned off, re-engineered, or restarted and public services need to be continuously available. The OECD (2017, pg. 8) suggests that a more systems-oriented approach can help navigate such a transition by allowing new practices to be rolled out while core processes are still running. In the public sector MEL environment such changes require both an individual and collective leadership capacity that understands and practices a transformational type of MEL that has the capacity to leverage points within the information and data flow structures to drive an equity and inclusion agenda. To be successful and sustainable, it also requires a shift in workplace culture from one that is procedural in nature to one that that is rooted in a

productive paradigm that merges compliance with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Those who lead this process need to be willing to step back and assess the systems, processes, and values that drive the existing MEL and take collegial ownership of the roles that they will play in creating and aligning new systems that will embed EDI into the workplace culture and capacity strengthening change process. While this may seem utopian in the context of public sectors it should in fact be standard practice when state-led development planning is driven by visions of fairer and more equal societies. This discussion paper uses the concept of equity, as opposed to equality, as a superordinate term that encompasses related concepts such as social justice and inclusion. Inclusion is understood as process and practice that involves working with diversity as a resource.

Many countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region have long-term visionary development strategies that aim to create equitable, inclusive, and sustainable societies that ensure
no one gets left behind. Typical examples would be South Africa's National Development Plan: Vision 2030, Tanzania's Development Vision 2025, Uganda's Vision 2040 and Nigeria's National Development Plan 2021-2025. All these planning visions incorporate the principles of sustainable, holistic and inclusive development based on national value systems. These strategies align with the 'Leave no one behind' agenda of the United Nations (UN) agenda, which is the central, transformative commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole[1]. In addition to the 17 SDGs the UN has developed the six SDG Transformations scorecards based on the assumption that all 17 SDGs can be achieved through six major

societal transformations as illustrated in Figure 1 below[2]:

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[1] United Nations available at https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind
[2] Sustainable Development Report 2021 available at
https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2021/2021-sustainable-development-report.pdf

Figure 1: The SDG Transformations Scorecard

Source: United Nations

The central principle driving the monitoring and evaluation work of the SDGs is the commitment to equity and a core expectation that member states would domesticate these into their own national development planning processes. As a globally agreed development agenda, the SDGs are dependent on several critical country level enablers:

- The quality, granularity and reliability of national data and statistics feeding into the global index and dashboards.
- The legislative and policy terrains within countries and the extent to which these can support or hinder inclusion, and subsequently a transformative MEL practice.
- The degree to which the capacity and commitment of MEL practitioners within public sectors are aligned with a genuinely internalised equity driven paradigm of MEL.
- The existence of a progressive and informed leadership collaborative working horizontally that drives a transformative MEL agenda.

2. The State's Responsibility for Equity-Driven MEL

The state ultimately bears the burden of responsibility for driving a country's development vision, for ensuring that progress on its goals and objectives are accurately and comprehensively measured and communicated, and for using evidence to inform socio-economic transformation. This assumes that there is commitment across government agencies to an evidence-driven policy and programming regime that can ensure that the socio-economic needs of all its citizens are adequately met. This commitment in turn assumes that what is commonly termed 'leadership' within government agencies is committed to embedding equity principles across their mandates, including the MEL function. Much of the genuine equity work in MEL gets done by civil society development organisations (both national and international) and by the big multilateral development agencies – but this often comes with its own problematic set of contestations around perceived 'foreign agendas' that are seen as driving unwelcome human rights and equity issues – sexual and reproductive health rights, political rights and protection of minorities. This more global MEL work often fills the gaps where national public sector MEL systems fail to incorporate or address such equity considerations into their monitoring systems.

Lack of broad-based equity and inclusion within government policies are driven by a range of issues – including social norms and values that enable stigma and discrimination, policy choices, legislative frameworks, and non-inclusive programming. These tensions are exemplified across the world by contestations over human rights and equity underpinned by the clash of different social, cultural and religious value systems. While the universal human rights architecture is driven through the UN system it is not necessarily accepted universally, which poses a challenge for MEL practitioners and the work that they are required to do. Moreover, many of the structural equity problems that governments deal with – poverty, unemployment, food security, safety, and security – are often deeply complex social problems that sit across and between different government departments and institutions. The siloed nature of governments – and by extension the siloed nature of MEL responsibilities – is not conducive to a unified (or government-wide) effort to deal with many of the unaddressed equity problems that exist.

For public sector MEL purposes, the sources of inequity should serve as a lens for understanding how data informs policy and programming around various forms of gender, disability, language, culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, social class, colour, and poverty differentials within a society and within the sector mandate of specific ministries / departments. Yet, despite increasing agreement that greater equity is needed, social diversity

dynamics within societies often result in stresses, controversies, and dilemmas about how to achieve it, and these dynamics also proliferate within the MEL community. A key consideration for leadership functions more broadly, and MEL leadership functions in particular, is how to ensure that alongside its management and compliance function equity principles are embedded in a transformational MEL practice.

Achieving this requires two major shifts for the work of MEL – the practice itself, and the structures and systems within which it is practiced. It is possible to do this by, for example, using the socio-ecological model, which is a framing heuristic that considers the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. It allows us through the overlapping rings to understand how factors at one level may influence factors at another level and increases our understanding of intersecting realities.

Figure 2: The social-ecological model
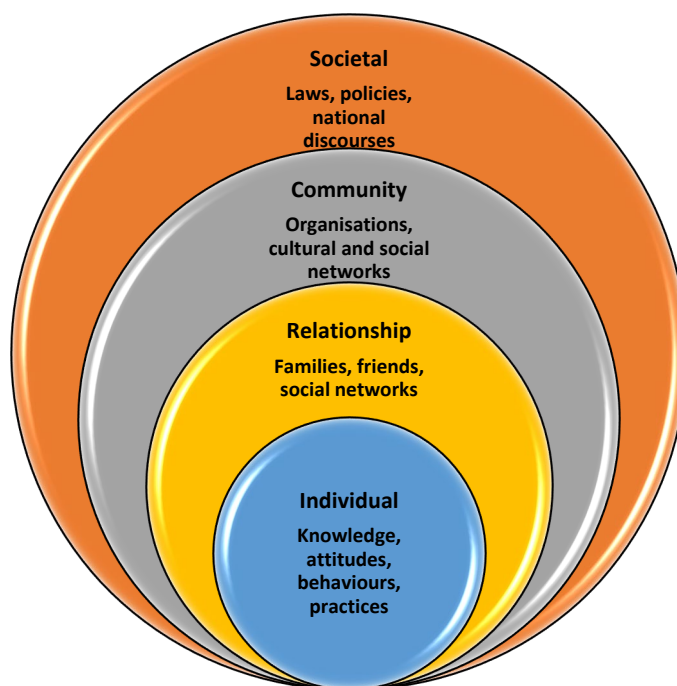
The MEL practitioner is both situated within these intersecting levels and investigates others who are all situated within them. It should be noted that the business of conducting transformative MEL work labours under several critical individual, organisational and societal constraints:

Individual	• Individual MEL practitioners may be in their position by default rather than competence and may have little interest in the work that they are doing. • Individual MEL practitioners are products of their societies and may therefore operate with value systems and cognitive biases that conflict with social transformation agendas. • Individual MEL practitioners may lack the capacity for reflexivity that could help them engage transformatively in organizational / sector mandates.
Community / Organisational	• The kind of results-based management practiced within governments generally focuses on accounting and compliance and less so on working through the challenges of measuring progress on core development priorities. • The routine nature of the work done in public sector MEL units is often not considered a priority and as a result these units are often staffed by mid-level officials with limited capacity and decision-making authority. • M&E processes are geared to the internal logic of bureaucracies rather than the development needs of the citizenry. • Monitoring within ministries / departments is generally linked to targets and outputs within a recursive compliance architecture, and there is limited time or space for dialogue, reflection, and learning. • What passes for MEL leadership is often managerialist and functional in nature.
Societal	• There is a lack of a shared MEL vision of equity as the end goal of government programming, and therefore limited emphasis is placed on the diagnostic use of data to identify implementation gaps. • Issues of equity may be circumscribed by country-level legislation, policies and strategies that actively create and sustain inequities and as a result create risks for MEL systems seeking to generate certain kinds of data.

3. Implications for the Public Sector Practice of MEL

What do these kinds of challenges mean for effective MEL leadership – and specifically the kind of leadership capacities that can navigate through these challenging constraints? Public sectors typically have formalised chains of command and are characterised by top-down decision-making process within a hierarchy of clearly defined titles, roles, and responsibilities. This structure is rooted in the managerialist and functional understanding of organisations and privileges elements such as control, accountability, and measurement, and reflects an ideologically determined belief in the importance of tightly managed organizations. Layers of bureaucracy and multiple lines of authority slow down decision making and create departmental and practice silos that make it difficult for MEL units to collaborate and adapt to change. These doctrines described above are referred to as New Public Management (NPM) or "new managerialism." While the effect of the integration of NPM into public sectors have in some ways made for a cleaner, more efficient, professional government, they have also created much larger, more bureaucratic and expensive governments (Frederkson et al, 2012). One of the effects of NPM practices within government has been to turn them into sterile "regimes of practice" that confine people to preordained ways of behaving, such as practicing leadership, and constrain room for agency (Cleaver, 2007). Such environments are not conducive to a focus on equity-driven practice.

The transition to a new management model is not unproblematic at any level of Public Administration and the cultural systems of public organizations seem to have an important role in defining and informing understandings of what constitutes "effective "leadership. National specificities and different administrative cultures and traditions make public administrations a unique, path-dependent product of history and local traditions (Mauri and Muccio, 2012) and this determines the nature and quality of leadership. Public administration is embedded in a political, social, and economic environment and is part of society as a whole and not merely of the political system. Value systems that exist in a society are migrated into the administration and into its decisions and actions by civil servants and can create tensions at the structure-agency nexus when value systems are at odds with prevailing policy and practice norms. This can present several capability challenges for MEL leadership. Within government institutions leadership support for MEL systems is not optional as they serve as part of the leadership's mandate and function to ensure that the policy, planning, and programming cycle is iteratively measurable and reported on. This position may mean that the commitment of the organisation's leadership to an effective MEL practice may be questionable given that support is not necessarily linked to conviction and transformation but rather just serves as an act of compliance with a mandate[3]. Data generated through government MEL systems have historically been driven through vertical leadership

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[3] Eresia, Eke, C. and Boadu, E. Monitoring and Evaluation Preparedness of Public Sector Institutions in South Africa.

hierarchies and used for compliance and accountability purposes within the wider administrative structure – more often than not as an output-level tick-box reporting exercise. The agency of MEL practitioners is, as a result, consistently constrained and subordinated to the demands of compliance and accountability and any sense of broader outcomes, impact and sustainability is lost. When the goal of MEL is compliance then it fails to achieve its full potential as a transformative tool for achieving increasing levels of equity within societies.

The perceived rigidity of public sector structures may however be a misconception. Structure itself - in this case public services - is dynamic and multifaceted and thus ever-evolving through dialectical interactions and can adapt traditions and resources to guide practitioners through the institutional barriers that confront them (Raelin, 2014). This perspective would suggest that space exists for change or at least for different practice options. MEL practitioners who are committed to infusing diversity and inclusion into MEL systems or who are seeking to foster social equality through transformative MEL approaches will undoubtedly face barriers where supportive leadership systems are absent. At the same time they must be prepared to see opposing views not as resistance, but as varying and normal manifestations of diversity dynamics in organizations and societies and of the practice of inclusion itself (Ferdman: 2017). The concept of difference is central to interactions in relationships of inequality. Humans have used differences to value, divide, and structure society—as with race, gender, class, age, and sexuality (Bopaiah and Zucal, 20). One's relationship to difference impacts one's interactions, either reinforcing such structures of value or interrupting them. The bureaucratic vertical leadership approach to power offers two options for dealing with difference: ignore it or view it as cause for separation. A liberatory horizontal or bridging leadership approach views differences as strengths and entertains interdependence as an option.

4. Contested Understandings of Leadership

In formulating a case for equity-centred MEL there is a need to problematise the concept of "leadership" as conventionally understood. There is an argument to be made that for much of the 20th century and into the 21st century outdated models of Western leadership have prevailed, primarily centring white culture and male energy: someone who's certain of himself, who has all the answers, who takes up space, shows no weakness, and knows how to win[4]. The radically and fundamentally changing world of work – even further intensified in the era of COVID-19, is forcing organisations and their members to address deeper issues, such as who are we? why do we exist? what drives us, relative to the concepts of organisational and individual identities. Looking through an equity lens the potentiality for alternative forms of leadership in the public sector MEL terrain can be generated through the act of questioning and problematising accepted understandings of public sector leadership.

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[4] Bopaiah, M. and Zucal, J. (2021). What does equitable leadership look like in Leadership Now.

As Raelin (2014) notes the concept and practice of leadership have been overused and oversold to such an extent that the meaning of leadership is no longer conceptually intact, while its practice has become minimally suspect. This means holding the slippery undefinedness of leadership as something that we don't fully understand but would like to articulate. This invites us to keep questioning and exploring, this has usefulness in the generative process of becoming, of 'development'. Being comfortable staying with the uncomfortableness of the not-knowing and not abandoning the problem nor entering the goal-driven race to solution has energy and potentiality. As Chaffer suggests the useful questioning and the holding open of a critical, enquiring mind-set around leadership and leadership development provide a framework for the problematized space. It is a gateway into different ways of thinking around leadership – to open up thinking, to add flavour[5].

Figure 3: The complex formations of leadership models
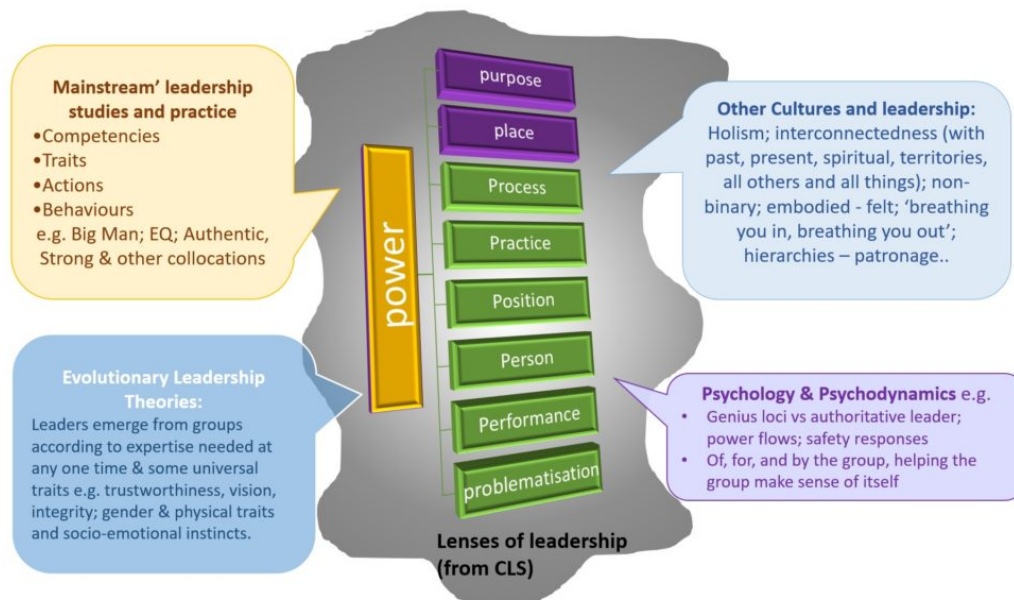
Source: Chaffer

The concept and the practice of "leadership" – redefined – not as management or managers and subordinates but rather as an interactive process engaged in by participant, collaborators, or partners (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The IT industry brought in new understandings about the effectiveness, creativity and innovation that can generated through matrixed or horizontal organisations with flatter and more collaborative leadership and decision-making approaches, and the shift to a virtual working environment because of COVID-19 has reinvigorated thinking about organisational systems and structures moving forward. Unquestionably, this has become a redefining moment, a seismic shift in a time of "Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity" (VUCA) (Bennis and Nanus, 1987). In the time of

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[5] Chaffer, J. (2017). Problematising leadership at https://www.korakoru.com/leadership/problematising-leadership/

COVID-19 this has increasingly become the new normal and because it appears that this will continue to reverberate for some time it calls for alternative forms of organisational functioning and leadership approaches. Modern organisations are becoming increasingly more inclined to give such autonomy, decision making 'power' and strategic direction to groups of people for distribution and completion, in an attempt to promote inclusion, collective responsibility and input.

5. Leadership in the Context of an Equity-Oriented MEL

What has this got to do with the theory and practice of MEL within African public sectors? Increasingly governments are viewing MEL systems as a critical element in the transformation of public sectors so that they are more efficient, effective, and accountable to their citizens and their parliaments. Goldman and Porter (2013) argue that in order for MEL systems to make this kind of contribution there needs to be increased capacity by governments to demand results-orientated monitoring (tracking what they have planned to do), and also to ask deeper questions of why and how, through evaluations of policies and programmes. There is a powerful discourse that calls for government policy and programming to be data driven and for leadership within the data ecosystem to ensure that the requirements of data collection, processing and analysis are met. Typically, within the public sector monitoring and evaluation data serves as a method of management compliance and accountability, and senior MEL personnel are responsible for the quality, integrity and timeliness of routine data collected.

Given the hierarchical nature of staffing with government departments levels of authority and decision-making are vested in vertical levels – or forms and degrees of positional leadership. This results in forms of data generation, analysis and use that are primarily functional in nature and utility focused – serving the specific data driven sector needs of departments and the performance imperatives of unit and departments heads. This tends to result in a public sector MEL practice that is instrumental rather than transformative – if we follow the logic that we use data to improve, change and transform rather than to discipline and contain. In the public service demand for data come from above – aligned with strategic and operational planning – and linked with performance – the consumption of data via MEL systems is supply driven to meet demand that can simultaneously be needs driven (accountability) and politically required (perceptions of government). Within the bureaucratic and vertical structures of public services these embedded forms of power through disciplined practice and convention are constituted as part of everyday functioning and thus become taken for granted as part of the natural order of things.

Monitoring, and specifically performance monitoring, forms an integral part of the accountability regimes of the public sector. Reliable and accurate information about the performance of government in its key areas of responsibility – education, health, basic

services, security, economic growth and job creation and the quality of life of its citizens – is essential for evidence-based resource allocation as well as the improvement of all its services. The interpretation of those who receive public service as clients is based on a "liberal definition of a citizen", that is to say a vision of citizenship as a set of individual rights, rather than reciprocal obligations between members of a community or nation. Evaluations generally address more analytical questions about the relevance of what is being done through interventions – including whether these interventions are effective and have the required impact and whether the results being achieved are sustainable and scalable. Evaluation in its ideal form also informs future policy, strategy, and implementation – and in the context of many developing countries this includes addressing critical transformation issues around poverty, unemployment, and inequality, but also harder to address challenges of marginalisation, stigmatisation, and exclusion.

While calling for a transformative MEL practice it is also important to be clear about the nature and purpose of data. Data are carriers of knowledge and information, in other words a means through which knowledge and information can be stored and transferred. Although moral and ethical claims and opinions are of interest, public service MEL practitioners typically look to use empirical evidence (that is, evidence corroborated by direct experience and/or observation) combined with the scientific method to deliver sound measurements. According to Merton (1973) empirical knowledge (as in data) is organised around four key principles:

1. Communalism: The results of measurement must be made available to the public; data is freely available, shared knowledge open to public discussion and debate.

2. Universalism: The results of data generation must be evaluated based on universal criteria; not parochial criteria specific to the researchers themselves.

3. Disinterestness: Data must not be pursued for private interests or personal reward.

4. Organised Skepticism: The data practitioner must abandon all prior intellectual commitments, critically evaluate claims, and postpone conclusions until sufficient evidence has been presented; knowledge based on data is provisional.

While these principles guide any MEL practitioner in the work that they do, the empirical lens must still search for gaps in the data that are created by a lack of tools that enable the generation of data relevant to equity and inclusion considerations.

6. Creating a Relational Substrate for Equity-Oriented MEL Leadership

It can be argued that the conventional kinds of management hierarchies that exist in most public sectors are not conducive to collaborative, equity-driven practice. Such structures tend to place constraints on government processes, including those related to MEL. In Foucault's understanding institutional power structures automatise and deindividualise agency - "I'm just doing my job"; "I'm just a cog in the machine" – but that power can in fact inhere in individuals (Felluga, 2002). Using this frame, it is possible to understand MEL not only as a systemic control instrument of programmes, policies and ultimately politics, but also as a necessary dialogic space where practitioners can engage on the terrain of development, its progress, and its gaps. This can shift the prevailing instrumentalist discourse from one that views the MEL practitioner as a kind of bureaucratised compliance officer to one where the MEL practitioner can also function as an agent / catalyst of change.

In conventional bureaucratic structures, hierarchies and vertical lines of decision making are default structures. While this may create the ideal conditions for the exercise of power, positional leadership structures, management decision-making, role definition, accountability and sanctioning, it tends to limit the possibilities for innovation, non-formal leadership, and creative dialogue. For staff working in departments as MEL practitioners these are the parameters within which they generally operate. The question is whether, from within the constraints of public sector MEL practice, there are opportunities for forms of horizontal leadership that are disruptive of conventional leadership practices – for example typologies such as matrixed, relational, or bridging leadership - that can function both within and across formal power structures and leadership hierarchies. This notion of power in a positive sense is not viewing or experiencing power as a commodity, concentrated within certain individuals, but as a force distributed throughout the social field (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In many ways COVID-19 has foregrounded the liminal nature of current leadership debates where old hierarchical 'command and control' leadership models are being challenged, subverted and in some cases replaced by horizontal, peer-to-peer leadership models in organisations of all kinds. In the private sector and within civil society many organisations have attempted to create flatter, more matrixed organisational structures that are typically less focused on the titles, personal status and hierarchy and more focused on a shared vision where people are collaboratively aligned with the mission of the organization.

While there is a strong emphasis within the practice around developing, building, or strengthening evaluation capacities in the African context it is also necessary interrogate what those capacities should include. If there aren't active efforts to promote innovative or transformative thinking about evaluation theory and practice, then the practice itself will be impoverished and remain moribund as a profession and practice in Africa. While changes are happening, the profile of thought leadership in evaluation in Africa needs to be more robustly addressed and prevailing paradigms challenged. The aim should be to shape and develop an African MEL agenda beyond the confines of the development partner models in ways that

build African evaluation innovations that feed into and shape national, regional and global evaluation thinking and practices around a transformative and equity-driven practice. To address this concern, it is possible to argue for a more progressive, possibly even subversive, framing of MEL within the "leadership" debate. Here we may start to think more critically not only about who evidence is for, but who leads the evidence agenda and whose interests does it serve. In turn we can ask more searching questions about who gets left out of the data process. Critically this begs the question – what kinds of MEL practice and thought and practice leadership become relevant for a data ecosystem that is committed to inclusion in the processes that track and measure socio-economic transformation.

In current thinking on the possibilities of horizontal organisational structures, leaders are typically seen as more trustworthy as they tend to be more participative and 'democratic' in their approach with employees. The bridging leadership model, for example, sees leadership as one in which values and principles compel leaders to make a personal response to address inequities and societal divides recognizes that the complexity of the problem can only be solved by convening the stakeholders to the divide and through a process of dialogue and engagement arrive at a common vision and collective response to the situation (Asian Institute, 2015). As summarised by Uhl-Bien (2006) relational perspectives do not seek to identify attributes or behaviours of individual leaders but instead focus on the communication processes (e.g., dialogue, multilogue) through which relational realities are 'made', sharing an emphasis on communication and on language, and on dialogue as a dialectical movement between people in which true interaction or real meaning emerges in the 'space between'.

There is a tendency to see leaders within this kind of framing as more vulnerable when they reach out to employees and stakeholders to ask for help, resulting in deeper connections and stronger relationships. These leaders are typically more collaborative and interconnected – approaching teams in a manner that builds alliances, trust, and morale. These leaders are also generally more empathetic and committed to their people demonstrating the desire to see them succeed. According to Bopaiah (2021) equitable leaders become engaged leaders when they also nurture the three preconditions for equity in themselves – valuing difference, seeing the system and using their power to redesign systems. Trust is built through personal relationships and these relationships function like a web, in which influence flows in every direction. There are no followers as there are in vertical scheme, whereas in horizontal leadership models, leadership truly influences, so instead of followers, we have 'influenced peers'. One clear advantage of this for the practice of MEL within the public sector is that it creates possibilities for a different kind of practice that moves out of the Weberian "iron cage" of highly rationalised bureaucracy to a more person-centric and dialogic view of the purpose and performance of MEL. A vertical leader knows first and tells the rest while a horizontal (bridging/relational) leader holds the space of creativity, innovation, and project management as an incubator for all to learn from each other, understanding that nobody has

all the answers and therefore listens to anybody who would enrich and widen perceptions and perspectives.

Two critical questions are, can equity-focused approaches work or be sustainable within a conventional public sector environment and is there sufficient 'enabling space' to allow individuals to drive this agenda collectively from within? In reality a significant part of public sector MEL work lies within the ambit of equity and inclusion – by virtue of the mandate to measure the performance of government planning and programming for its core function of providing equitable and constitutionally mandated services to citizens. A corollary to this is the work that MEL needs to do to identify gaps in data and information that are resulting in the exclusion or marginalisation of sub-sections of the population – whether by omission or commission through planning and programming blind spots or through the deliberate erasure of certain groups from official records. In many ways MEL occupies a critical space within government in that it functions as a signalling system between policy and implementation that provides evidence on performance. Central to this mandate is the imperative to measure progress against the human rights, equity, and inclusion commitments that governments make. Beyond compliance it can also function as an equity focused system that can signal where government is failing at a systemic level to address critical gaps in its policy and programming. This doesn't necessarily happen automatically and therefore requires a commitment across the MEL terrain to collect, process, analyse and package data that speaks to equity issues within programming. This can be further translated into communications and advocacy initiatives that promote the centrality of equity within government's MEL obligations.

7. Strengthening Competence for Equity-Driven MEL

Integrating equity-led MEL into public service monitoring and evaluation units can also serve to sharpen the analytical capacities of practitioners. An equity-oriented MEL practice incorporates an analytical paradigm that moves beyond single or typically favoured categories of analysis (e.g. sex, gender, race and class) to consider simultaneous interactions between different aspects of social identity, as well as the impact of systems and processes of oppression and domination. Intersectional analysis enables practitioners to generate and apply data to a multi-faceted exploration of how factors of privilege and marginalisation may alternate between contexts or occur simultaneously. Intersectionality speaks to how human and social characteristics such as age, gender, sex, ability, disability, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. interact to shape individual experience at a given point or time. Within a broader equity framework, it is nuanced understanding that people have multiple and diverse identity factors that intersect to shape their perspectives, ideologies and experiences. Within a MEL environment part of the horizontal leadership task is engage in reflection with others around the intersectional experience – and how data can effectively reflect such realities so that it enriches and deepens policy and programmatic formulation. As a dialogic approach this

requires a leader, or group of co-leaders, to act as guides, coaches, mentors, models and facilitator in the process of creating knowledge bases and capacities that enable practitioners to adapt to new ways of thinking about data and the application of data within a public sector setting (illustrated in Figure 4).

Figure 4: Pathways from a mono-sectional to an intersectional mindset
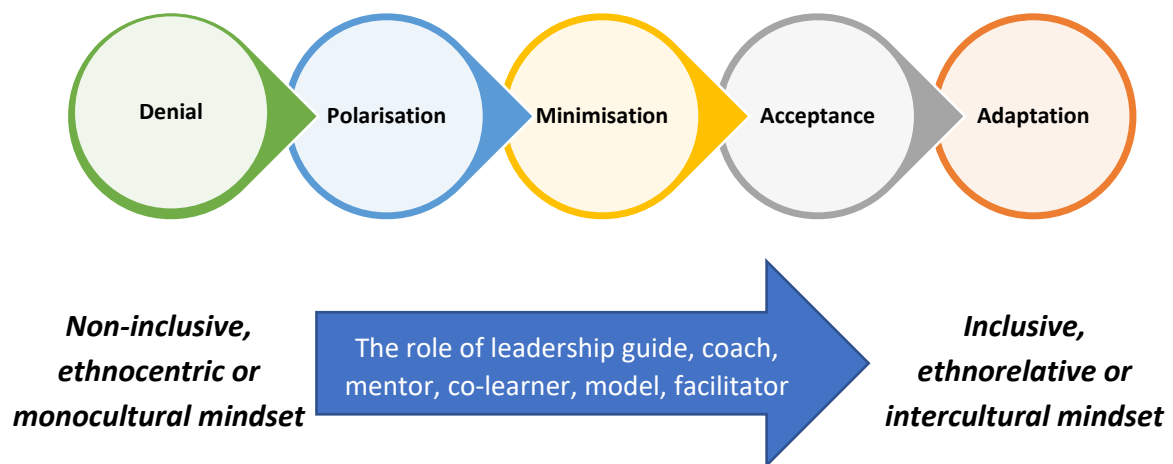
Source: Adapted from Bopaiah (2021), Bennet (2017) and Hammer (2019)

Within the practice of MEL, the horizontal leadership approach opens new potentialities for the profession. These potentialities exist beyond the boundaries of conventional data collection and processing, opening out into areas where MEL can best serve a transformative developmental approach. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of going beyond averages and disaggregating data to understand inequities and disparities within epidemiology, public health, social protection and safety and security. Governments and organisations have rapidly tested new, more inclusive approaches to data collection and analysis to understand and mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic. This shift in data management approaches should not, however, end when the worst effects of the pandemic are over.

For decades MEL systems have been partially blind to the most disadvantaged people within societies - marginalised people have been uncounted by censuses, unreached by household surveys, and untouched by civil registration systems. With less than ten years to go until the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 deadline - and indeed the destination point of the National Development Plan (NDP) in South Africa - there is an ever more pressing need for long-term plans and concerted action to put inclusivity at the heart of data systems. There is a global move towards a reconceptualised form of inclusive MEL, exemplified in the Inclusive Data Charter (IDC). This charter sets out actions that enable governments, civil society, and multilaterals to make significant progress on inclusion

by setting clear goals, sustaining commitments, and learning and sharing openly. This agenda can be driven from within government by leadership within MEL systems at all levels of the public sector that understands the imperative of a MEL practice that is inclusive, responsive to all forms of vulnerability and marginalisation, and committed to generating data that detects and surfaces the presence of inequalities. This in turn allows for data analysis that is based on more granular forms of data.

8. Challenges to Incorporating Equity within Government-Wide MEL Systems

Public sectors have for some time been aware of the need to build and maintain government-wide monitoring and evaluation systems that integrate equity and inclusion considerations. This reality has encouraged the South African government to develop what it refers to as a government-wide monitoring and evaluation system (GWM&ES) which according to Ile, Eresia-Eke and Allen-Ile (2019) is a signal of the South African government's preference for a participatory MEL approach. The GWM&ES comprises three complementary frameworks of Programme performance, Evaluation policy and Statistical quality. These frameworks are credited to the National Treasury, and the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation. This type of foundation for MEL systems is a meaningful first step, but if it remains weak it could compromise the ability of the system to generate meaningful information that could support both equity-informed and evidence-informed decision-making. In South Africa efforts were made to introduces a citizen-based M&E that was influenced by the National Development Plan's (NDP) call for active citizenry and social compacts. However, the latter has not yielded tangible result due to its poor implementation. Also, in South Africa in 2017 the Department of Women developed a Gender Responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing Framework (GRPBMEA) in an effort to mainstream gender across core government functions. While the National Treasury has been a champion for this Framework it is not yet clear whether its principles are being integrated into M&E processes at departmental level. There is, therefore, a need for a change in the thinking of public sector officials aimed at ensuring a higher appreciation of the role of MEL in the scheme of equity-oriented performance improvement intentions. Where policymakers and institutional leaders recognise the need to focus their efforts and resources on creating equity that substantively includes historically marginalized populations, and MEL practitioners need to respond accordingly.

Inequities in both opportunity and outcome have deep-seeded structural roots that continues to inhibit progress for those on the margins. These can be inequities that affect discrete segments of a population (women and adolescent girls, LGBTIQ, homeless, migrants, ethnic minorities), as well as significant portions of the population (the poor, the un-employed, internally displaced people, women). Identifying and solving the issues that result in 'unwanted' statistics is often deemed to be politically unpalatable and can result in a lack of urgency to collect this data, or to find solutions to collect it reliably. A case in point would be the availability, reliability, and accuracy of data on gender-based violence, or data on drug use in prisons. Using more progressive understandings of what MEL

leadership at all levels can achieve can be incredibly effective, influencing MEL culture to create the conditions for an equity-informed evidence base for change.

Arguably this is a collaborative process which should focus on relational processes by which leadership is produced and enabled and that serves as a mutual influencing process (Uhl-Bien, 2006). As noted earlier, theoretical understandings of leadership are diverse, contested and often ideologically driven, and in public sectors vertical and hierarchical leadership modalities are hardwired into individual and organisational consciousness. How then, under these circumstances, can enabling environments for genuine equity-led and transformational MEL practice be shaped and embedded? It must from the outset be recognised that public sectors as government workspaces are not monoliths but complex, heterogenous and ever-changing spaces of engagement and practice that are shaped by contingent factors that include the nature and quality of leadership.

9. Reimagining an Equity-Inspired MEL Leadership Paradigm

Recognising the complexity of the task this discussion paper proposes several approaches that have the potential to translate theoretical understandings of an equity-oriented leadership approach into more practical stances that could be utilised within the MEL practice environment. It can be argued that this work needs to be done at three critical entry points – the individual, the organisational and the societal.

Figure 5: Critical entry points for shaping an equity-oriented MEL leadership

ORGANISATIONAL
Working collaboratively and recursively with colleagues to orientate the ethos of the organization towards an equity paradigm.

INTERNAL
Continuously reflecting on and analysing one's own personal understandings, values and biases as well as on collegiality and leadership practice .

Building an equity-driven MEL practice

SOCIETIES
Advocating for a reorientation towards equity within broader social structures where one has influence.

Source: Author

At the individual (personal) level assuming a leadership role can signal to the self that you have 'made it', you are fully capacitated for the tasks ahead and that your new position entitles you authority over others. This model of leadership is still very prevalent in public sectors and in command-and-control type organisations such as the military, police services and first responder agencies. The literature on leadership, however, increasingly points to the fact that in many public, private and civil society work spaces such leadership styles are redundant, stifling and often counter-productive to successful collaborative outcomes. In the context of this discussion paper – focusing on equity-driven leadership within the MEL environment – such leadership styles will undoubtedly be counter-productive. So, without idealising a leadership style or type we can ask what some of the requirements of this kind of leadership would be.

Human beings are reflexive beings who continuously reflect on themselves as entities in the social world (Adams, 2010). The process of self-reflection involves reflection upon the act of knowledge, while being reflexive is a stance, it is the ability to evaluate the influence of oneself within the very act of knowing in relation to the social structures that one operates within[6]. In the context of MEL, the practice of monitoring and evaluating may create cognitive dissonance – a discomfort with both the subject matters and data under review combined with efforts to maintain consistency between the set of beliefs, values, opinions, or attitudes that an individual has. This can also result in a tendency to spend more time on activities that are easily measured, and thus pay less attention to other areas that do not fit nicely into a performance measurement context (Van der Kolk et al, 2018). This requires an ability (or soft skill) as a MEL leader to reflect on one's own relationship to equity and the extent to which it aligns with one's own value system and how to accommodate a paradigm that privileges human rights, equity, and inclusion. Typically, this could involve gender work, reflecting on how an understanding of your own gender roles interacts with the MEL work that you do. In this action, leaders proactively interrogate their values, biases, and privileges. This means practising ongoing inquiry into the place one hold in the world, as well as the place of each member of their community.

Enhanced levels of self-awareness enable individuals in leadership positions to catalyse changes in interpersonal and professional conversations about MEL work and associated issues. The inability to have meaningful conversations contributes significantly to the unproductive relationships that can sometimes develop across diversity divides. To work with those whose background and perspective is vastly different, or whose role or leadership style is at odds, people at every organisational level need to have effective conversations. This is where understandings from the literature on horizontal, relational and bridging models of leadership can inform a dialogic, non-hierarchical, informed kind of leadership that encourages mutual self-reflection and growth for equity for themselves as

[6] The term "reflexivity" has been used by Anthony Giddens as a process to elucidate what are perceived to be changes in the relationship between contemporary structures and people's intimate sense of self.

well as their colleagues. In the context of MEL practice this means working with colleagues to examine their relationships to difference - not surface-level differences such as disagreement in approach or process to employ, but rather the kind of differences that challenge or unsettle people's worldviews, beliefs, and values.

Part of this work requires a foregrounding of challenging issues within the ambit of socio-economic measurement and data analysis. The concept of social identity is the lever that can engage people in understanding similarities and differences and their impact, firstly within the workplace itself and secondly within the measurement terrain. Social identity comprises the parts of a person's identity that come from belonging to groups, including age, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, education, physical ability, and socioeconomic status. It fuels distinct perspectives and unique values, and often defines sources of power and privilege as inequity is often driven by long-established structures, unconscious assumptions, and experiences tied to social identity. Together with dialogue further work can be done in foregrounding the issue of intersectionality and creating a broader consciousness that measuring discrete characteristics – for example gender – masks complex identities that intersect and that require more nuanced and granular data collection and analysis. Part of the leadership work is to model an equity stance through practices, interactions and even more overtly in advocacy that positions voiceless and marginalised at the core of MEL activities.

This paper argues that the conventional understanding of leadership within vertical authority structures is no longer relevant for the development of a transformational MEL practice. Leadership for equity (in the sense of taking a lead) can be dispersed across organisations and units with nodes of expertise and best practice distributed across a collaborative team of practitioners. The leader takes on the role of a facilitator of joined-up excellence, and in this role can drive an equity-oriented practice. This requires certain personal qualities – for example someone who is not tolerant of difference but rather so comfortable with it that they are willing to embrace it and make it a characteristic of the workplace. This is also about engaging with colleagues through advocacy, sensitisation, and knowledge sharing – building MEL competencies in working with data in the context of equity. This could include building a culturally responsive and sustainable practice linked to critical thinking with regards to issues like race, class, age, and gender identity. Within this kind of relational paradigm dispersed leadership will create a network of feedback loops, and practices of mutual accountability for the production of high-quality data within a framework of equity-informed data analysis.

A horizontal leadership structure will be able to see systems and understand interdependence – essentially a systems-thinking paradigm. This will include the leveraging of MEL tools and techniques that enable practitioners to understand their subjects (ie. subjects of measurement and evaluation) in all their complexity and in relation to their subjectivity within

systems and relations of power. It also allows them to understand why it is important to measure and analyse experiences of marginalization within sub-populations and to create evidence bases that reflect this. Using an equity and inclusion MEL enables teams to co-construct and enact an equity vision within their practice and linking this to real world equity challenges. This could, for example, be a case where an understanding of gender disparities and capacity to access or generate data on these inequalities that can feed into programme design and the development of gender-responsive budgeting within government departments. These MEL capacities help to create a laser focus on the structural underpinnings of inequity in society, and the importance of developing a MEL practice that can foreground and demonstrate this.

The process of solidifying an equity-driven MEL practice is not something that needs to start from scratch. Governments routinely engage with data to understand the kinds of structural inequities that create, for example, conditions of poverty and unemployment and the interlinked challenges of health, education and social security. This kind of data often forms the basis of a diagnostic process that is a critical foundation for evidence-based policy-making and programming. Policies can, however, serve as blunt instruments if the data used has not adequately integrated data on different kinds of inequities or intersectional inequalities. Societies are complex systems that are typically fractured along lines of class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, sexual identity – and governments must attempt to address these tensions through legislation, policy and implementation based on available data. Policies and programmes are only as good as the data that informs them.

A characteristic of many public sector MEL units is that they are often working in isolation from other units both within their own ministry (department) or in other ministries. Collaborating with other MEL structures across the public service, breaking down siloed systems and engendering a cross-departmental and mutually supportive MEL practice is a key element in building a transformational MEL leadership and practice. This approach puts meaningful relationships at the centre of equity – speaking with and listening to other practitioners in the sector, especially those whose voices may not usually be found at the centre, and engaging in a learning dialogue. This includes understanding people's positionality within the system and promoting MEL as a critical element of government-led transformation efforts. It won't be one person – it may happen organically – or be based on one or two inspirational colleagues.

A caveat to any discussion on ideal leadership forms in the context of MEL is the fact that public sectors operate under strict regulatory and recruitment frameworks and often constrained budgets. As noted earlier in the discussion paper the recruitment of MEL unit heads and officers is often not prioritised and the people appointed may not necessarily be capacitated to undertake more specialised M&E work around gender, diversity, and equity. Effective leadership in the context of MEL will look to develop job descriptions that include

the knowledge and skills to work with equity-related data, to set up systems to capture this kind of data, and to analyse using equity and intersectionality lenses. So rather than hiring and placing personnel as default placements, staff members are appointed based on a broader range of MEL capacities, including the understanding and experience to empathise with and promote the perspectives of marginalised and vulnerable groups. Another element of this role would be the ability – and possibly perseverance – to lobby for and secure buy-in for the level of resources required to undertake equity-driven MEL.

10. Concluding Reflections

There is considerable overlap between some of these approaches, and the exact form they would take in a specific public sector MEL setting may vary considerably, depending on unique sector contexts. For example, the equity and inclusion issues within the health sector will differ from the environment sector, or the agriculture sector – but at the same time there will be intersectional equity and inclusion challenges that require a more cross-sectoral understanding and response. The principle however is clear – equity-driven MEL leaders are in a unique position of influence and can take practical steps to ensure not only a capacitated, committed, and collaborative team, but also one that has a consistent, productive and sustainable equity focus. As one swallow doesn't make a summer, one leader doesn't make an equitable MEL practice. It requires a dispersed network of leadership advocates who want to see equity and inclusion built into their practice as an integral and non-negotiable competence and performance indicator. Many working within public sectors will already be doing this – perhaps only as a committed individual, perhaps as a team. What should ideally happen is that public sector MEL evolves through the work of equity-inspired practitioners into function that is measurably transformative. By reiterating the importance of placing equity at the centre of a progressive MEL practice will generate and foreground evidence that surfaces the often-unnoticed ways in which citizens can get left behind by state measurement systems that are unresponsive to equity and inclusion.

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