



BRIEF

Leadership Spaces for Inclusive and Transformative MEL Practice

THE EQUITY AND INCLUSION CHALLENGE FOR MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

This brief is based on a discussion paper titled *Interrogating Leadership Paradigms using a Public Sector lens: creating horizontal leadership spaces for inclusive and transformative Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning practice*. The brief 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 structures / systems within which it is practiced.

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 that 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 whole¹.

THE STATE'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR EQUITY-DRIVEN MEL

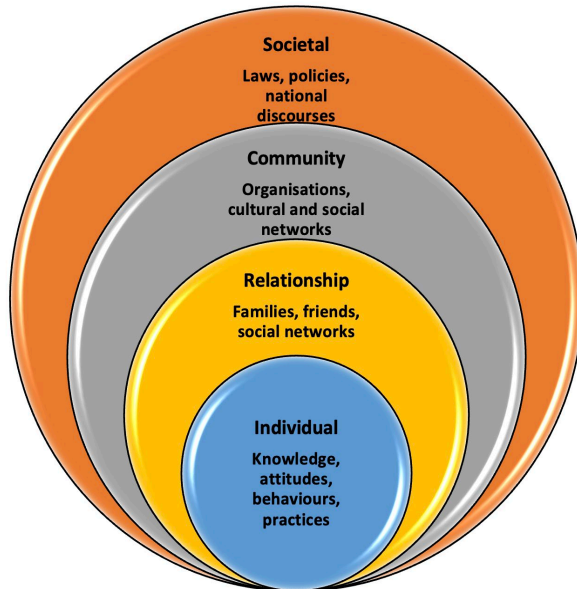
The state ultimately bears the burden of responsibility for driving a country's development vision, for ensuring that progress on its goals and objectives are accurately and comprehensively measured and communicated, and for using evidence to inform socio-economic transformation. Much of the genuine equity work in MEL gets done by civil society development organisations and by the big multilateral development agencies. The challenge is that 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 and state-led development agendas are driven by a range of issues – including epistemological understandings, social norms and values that enable stigma and discrimination, policy choices, legislative frameworks, and non-inclusive programming. 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 programming around various forms of gender, disability, language, culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race,

¹ United Nations available at <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>

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 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.

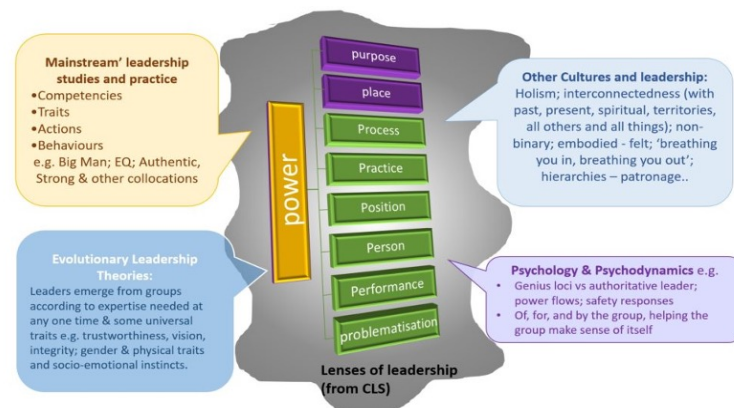
The MEL practitioner is both situated within these intersecting levels and investigates others who are all situated within them. It should be noted that the business of conducting transformative MEL work labours under several critical individual, organisational and societal constraints:

Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
-----------------	--

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR PRACTICE OF MEL

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 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). Such environments are not conducive to a focus on equity-driven practice. 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.



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. 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.

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, 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. According to Merton (1973) empirical knowledge (as in data) is organized 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.

CREATING A RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITY-ORIENTED MEL LEADERSHIP

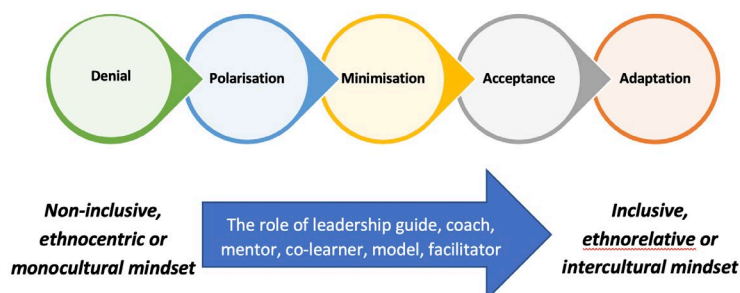
In many ways COVID-19 has foregrounded the liminal nature of current leadership debates where old hierarchical “command and control” leadership models are being challenged, subverted and in some cases replaced by horizontal, peer-to-peer leadership models in organizations of all kinds. In the private 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 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.

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. 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 “hold 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.

STRENGTHENING COMPETENCE FOR EQUITY-DRIVEN MEL

Integrating an 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 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.

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 3).



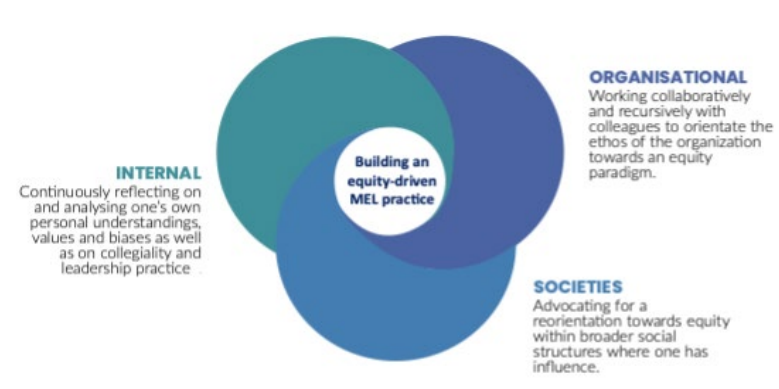
CHALLENGES TO INCORPORATING EQUITY WITHIN GOVERNMENT-WIDE MEL SYSTEMS

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. 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.

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 and dialogic 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.

REIMAGINING AN EQUITY-INSPIRED MEL LEADERSHIP PARADIGM

It can be argued that an equity-oriented leadership approach needs to be done at three critical entry points – the individual, the organisational and the societal – as these are overlapping ontological and experiential fields.



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 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 one undertakes "self-work" to accommodate a paradigm that privileges human rights, equity, and inclusion.

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. 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 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.

The public sectors operate under strict regulatory and recruitment frameworks and often with a constrained budget. 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 to lobby for and secure “buy-in” for the level of resources required to undertake equity-driven MEL.

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. 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. 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.

REFERENCES

- Bopaiah, M. and Zucal, J. (2021). What does equitable leadership look like in Leadership Now available at https://www.leadershipnow.com/leadingblog/2021/09/what_does_equitable_leadership.html.
- Frederickson, H.G., Smith, K.B., Larimer, C.W., & Licari, M.J. (2012). The public administration theory primer. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Merton, R. (1973). The normative structure of science. In *The sociology of science theoretical and empirical investigation* (pp. 267-278).
- Porter, S., Goldman, I. (2013). A Growing Demand for Monitoring and Evaluation in Africa, *African Evaluation Journal* 2013;1(1), Art. #25, 9 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/aej.v1i1.25>
- Raelin, J. (2014). *Imagine there are no leaders: Reframing leadership as collaborative agency*. Sage Publications. DOI: 10.1177/1742715014558076 available at https://wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/Imagine_there_are_no_leaders_Reframing_leadership_as_collaborative_agency.pdf
- UhlBien, M. (2006). *Relational LeadershipTheory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organising*. University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Leadership Institute Faculty Publications, 19 available at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/leadershipfacpub>
- Van Der Kolk, Berend & Kaufmann, Wesley. (2018). Performance measurement, cognitive dissonance and coping strategies: Exploring individual responses to NPM-inspired output control. *Journal of management control*. 29. 10.1007/s00187-018-0265-1.



TWENDE MBELE

www.twendembele.org

TWENDE MBELE is a multi-country peer-learning partnership centred on country government priorities for building national evaluation systems in an effort to improve government performance and accountability to citizens.

Telephone: +27 (0) 11 717 3453 | **Email:** info@twendembele.org

The University of the Witwatersrand
2 St David's Place, Parktown, Johannesburg
Telephone: +27 11 717 3157; Fax: +27 86 765 5860

 [@TwendeMnE](https://twitter.com/TwendeMnE)  <http://www.twendembele.org>