ASSESSING LEARNING OUTCOMES OF MFDR INITIATIVES

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Tool N° 3

SYNOPSIS

The very structure of MfDR is built to gather performance information continually, and then it relies heavily upon that information for decision making, budget allocations, accountability, and continued learning. MfDR is meant to be a cycle of increasingly effective performance, continuous learning, and steady progress towards achieving development goals.

This note provides guidance on how to assess learning outcomes by listing important questions to ask at every stage of the MfDR process: strategic planning; program implementation; monitoring and evaluation; documentation and dissemination of learning. Specifically, it addresses the issues of what was learned during the MfDR initiative, whether what was learned had a positive effect, what else could have been learned, and what to do to improve learning outcomes.

Introduction

Continuous learning from results and evidence is the essence of Managing for Development Results (MfDR). The very structure of MfDR is to gather performance information continually, support decision making, budget allocations, accountability, and continued learning. MfDR is meant to be a cycle of increasingly effective performance, continuous learning, and steady progress towards achieving development goals. Unless the knowledge accumulated throughout the implementation process is effectively integrated into planning and decision making, it short circuits the learning cycle meaning that little benefit flows from the continuous monitoring and evaluation of MfDR. (See figure 3 in appendix 2).

Learning outcomes need to be monitored and evaluated just as all other MfDR components. This note provides guidance on how to do that by listing important questions to ask at every stage of the MfDR process: strategic planning; program implementation; monitoring and evaluation; documentation and dissemination of learning.

Assessment of learning outcomes has two important features. First it is about determining *what was learned* during the MfDR initiative. And second it is about the *impact and use* of what was learned on the ongoing efforts (i.e., midcourse corrections) and new efforts (for improved design from the start).

Types of learning

Generally speaking two types of learning take place in an MfDR initiative. The first is collecting relevant information or learning about the facts. Examples include whether stakeholders participated? Whether targets were met or missed? What are the results? Whether there were some unintended results?

The second type of learning involves understanding why certain results and outcomes were obtained. It is about developing a deeper understanding about various factors and their causal relationships. For example, did teacher training bring a better use of textbooks by teachers? Did it impact student outcomes? If it did, how can we rule out other possible explanations? This type of learning has to do with developing the right indicators, monitoring them throughout the project, evaluating the evidence, and explaining the results. It relies on how well the causal chains have been defined and explored. See example 1 & Figure 1 that shows the importance of considering relevant contextual factors, their dependencies, and their impact on the outcomes. Box 2 also describes a case study that shows how an evaluation of evidence provides alternative explanations for a result; and how it informs policymakers to better allocate resources.

Example 1: The effectiveness of teacher training programs

A teacher training program is an intervention that can improve teacher's knowledge of teaching methods, which instill higher-order thinking and reasoning skills in students. If a teacher training program in a country does not turn out to have much impact on student learning outcomes, it can be due to several reasons. For example, as shown in the causal graph shown below, both teacher knowledge and the content of the tests affect the teaching method that teachers use. When standardized tests encourage rote learning, teachers often revert to similar techniques rather than emphasizing analytical skills (World Development Report 2004). As a result, a teacher training program, despite increasing teachers' knowledge, becomes less effective. Figure 1:
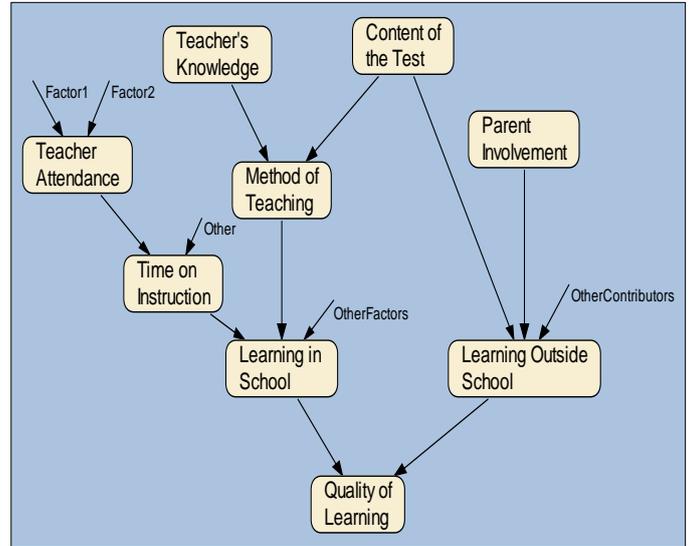
The effects of input and process variables on the quality of learning
(Source: Moussavi and McGinn 2010).

Steps in assessing learning outcomes

The main phases of Managing for Development Results are: planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and learning. Below we look at each of these phases in regard to assessing learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes related to strategic planning

Strategic planning is the process by which leaders of an organization determine what it intends to be in the future and how it will get there. Strategic planning is ongoing; it is "the process of self-examination, the confrontation of difficult choices, and the establishment of priorities" (World Bank, 1994).

Results framework, which is the backbone of MfDR, provides the management framework and tools for strategic planning. In the initial round of planning, it requires the gathering of a knowledge base and establishment of baseline

data, as well as targets in relation to the plan's expected outcomes and objectives. During implementation, progress is assessed by comparison to the baseline data and program targets. Just as a ship's navigator draws a course at the beginning of a voyage, but takes periodic readings and adjusts the ship's direction accordingly, the stakeholders should revisit and adjust the strategic plan from time to time based on actual progress toward development goals. The review of the old strategy in light of performance information represents a new round of planning.

When reviewing the strategy of an MfDR initiative, we must determine and document what we have learned and use what we have learned to modify our activities, including making certain that we will continue to learn and deploy the new knowledge for results-based management.

The steps to do this would include asking such questions as the following:

Key questions on learning and planning

- What did we know at the beginning? Did we have a clear understanding of issues and problems? Were the proposed solutions relevant?
- Did we reach an agreement on the outcomes? Were appropriate budgets and timelines allocated?
- Did our initial benchmarks and indicators prove adequate? If not, what other indicators would have been useful?
- What do we know now? In other words, what have we learned from our own experience that adds to our knowledge, or, is there more that we can learn from the experience of other countries?
- Was there any unintended result, either positive or negative?

- How persuasive are our findings? Can we use them to adjust our course, or do we need to examine our position more closely?
- What else do we need to know? How can we find it out

To reiterate, it is important at the planning stage to draw a learning blueprint that specifies what information will be gathered, how it will be formatted for effective communication, and how it will be communicated (open forums, staff-level meetings and workshops, senior staff briefings of senior staff, e-mail, newsletters, open online databases, etc.). In fact, best practices require preparation of a detailed communications plan for performance information. The plan should include the creation of performance-data dashboards, which give a high-level view of performance. The dashboards should be designed for individuals at least two different levels: top management and staff-level personnel.

The CAP-Scan measurement framework

In 2010, a working group of international experts assembled by the OECD published a tool that may be useful for assessing how far a particular country (or ministry) has progressed in incorporating Management for Development Results. The CAP-Scan Framework recognizes four phases of introducing and rooting the MfDR approach: Awareness, Experience, Transition, and Sustainable (i.e. full) Implementation.

The framework provides criteria for evaluating how deeply MfDR has been implanted along five critical dimensions: Leadership, Monitoring and Evaluation, Accountability and Partnerships, Planning and Budgeting, Statistics. A description of the framework is available at the following address: http://www.mfdr.org/CAP-ScanTools.html

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Learning outcomes related to the implementation phase

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When we are assessing learning outcomes, we need to determine what effect, if any, they have had on the implementation of the initiative so far or on the stakeholders' behavior. Below are some of the key questions to ask:

Key questions on learning and implementation

- Is performance data easily available to managers? Is it being used to improve management for results and decision making?
- Is there evidence that programming and financing have responded to the results?
- Is there a clear procedure or system for linking budget allocations or programming decisions to performance information?
- Was there opportunity for adaptation of the program strategy or underlying results framework? Were any adaptations made?
- Have changes in managerial practice taken place or been planned as a result of findings from MfDR?
- What happened when targets were missed or delayed? Was that an occasion for punishment and assignment of blame or, rather, for analysis and problem-solving?
- Did stakeholders seek information or give input during the project?

In addition, in terms of assessing learning outcomes, it is necessary to review the extent to which knowledge products were delivered according to plan and on time.

Learning outcomes related to monitoring and evaluation

When assessing learning outcomes from monitoring and evaluation, we should bear in mind at least three distinct purposes of performance information: inputs to decision making (including budget allocations), accountability, and knowledge that will loop back into the planning process. One important type of performance information is cost. This type needs special scrutiny as it is often missing or not easily linked to performance indicators. Cost information is extremely important because it allows us to understand cost-effectiveness, efficiency, spending trade-offs, and many other performance categories.

Key questions on dissemination of learning

- How is learning taking place now? How can it be made more effective?
- Has the communication plan been formulated and implemented?
- Has learning been documented, "advertised," and made easily available?
- Can we identify other audiences for our knowledge products? Have they been shared through Communities of Practice or other venues?
- Are program knowledge products presented in a format for good learning? Is information presented in a way that facilitates comprehension (e.g., information dashboards, summaries, data visualization, newsletters, and social media)?
- Is there a clean loop back to the planning process?

Documentation and dissemination of learning

Learning that is not documented has a short life. Even if it is documented, to the extent it is not disseminated to the audiences that can benefit from it, it is weakened. Lastly, care should be taken to present in formats that user friendly and motivates learning: dashboards and other varieties of summary as well as graphs, charts, and other data visualization techniques should be used whenever possible. Relevant techniques, including of course internet technology, should be used to make information as widely available as possible.

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Conclusions

The learning outcomes of MfDR are critically important. This is not just a question of what information or data has been assembled, but more importantly how the information has been used. Another way to phrase this is to ask simply: what has actually been *learned*? Good learning outcomes are not a question of access to information about development results, but actual use and internalization of lessons based on actual performance information.

References

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Appendix 1: fundamentals of MfDR

Managing for Development Results (MfDR) is a technique for stakeholders to co-design and agree upon a path (usually extending over several years) towards particular desirable changes and align efforts towards overarching development goals. By building a consensus among stakeholders and clearly articulating intermediate as well as long-term targets and objectives, MfDR is meant to integrate planning, monitoring, implementation, and evaluation—as well as provide a feedback loop so that actual results evidence will be incorporated into future planning. MfDR itself has been elaborated in a series of international conferences aimed at making development assistance more effective: Washington Roundtable on Managing for Development Results (2002), the Marrakesh Roundtable (2004), Paris High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the Hanoi Roundtable (2007), and others.

At the Second Roundtable in Marrakesh, five core principles were agreed upon. As Figure 2 illustrates, MfDR begins with a commitment to "focus the dialogue on results." This means at all stages, not during the planning stage alone but throughout implementation until the project is completed—and even beyond when the results achieved are assessed against what was specified in the results framework and, after enough time has passed, in terms of sustainability. The unwavering focus on the agreed-upon objectives is meant to align all activities of all actors with achievement of the goal.

Figure 2: The five core principles of managing for development results
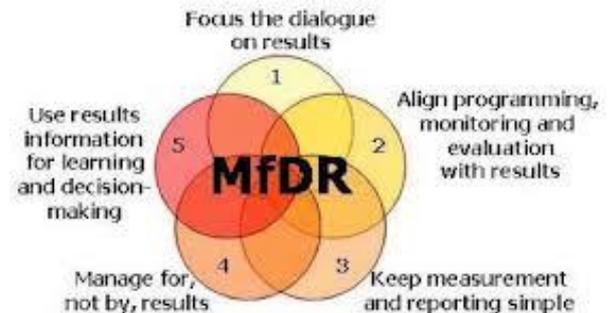
Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

The backbone of the system is a results framework (Box 1). The framework can be applied to a national development strategy, a sectorial strategy within a country, a development program, or even an individual project. It is essentially a hierarchy of inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes—all leading logically through a causal chain to the overall goal of the project. For each step in the hierarchy, a small set of indicators is articulated in order to facilitate monitoring and assessment. Crucially, the framework is the product of "backwards design," in which the long-term goal that is desired is first established and then, building backwards chronologically, intermediate goals leading to the final goal are articulated and assigned realistic timeframes. The illustration below shows the basic structure of the results framework.

The process of building the results framework for a program or project brings together stakeholders—government agencies, development organizations, civil society, intended beneficiaries, and the public—who through an iterative process or "dialogue" agree upon goals and a path to achieving those goals. . Once the goal and the intermediate objectives have been established, the stakeholders build out a detailed action plan, which spells out who

"owns" the initiative, the team members responsible for moving the initiative forward, the required resources, and the timeline.
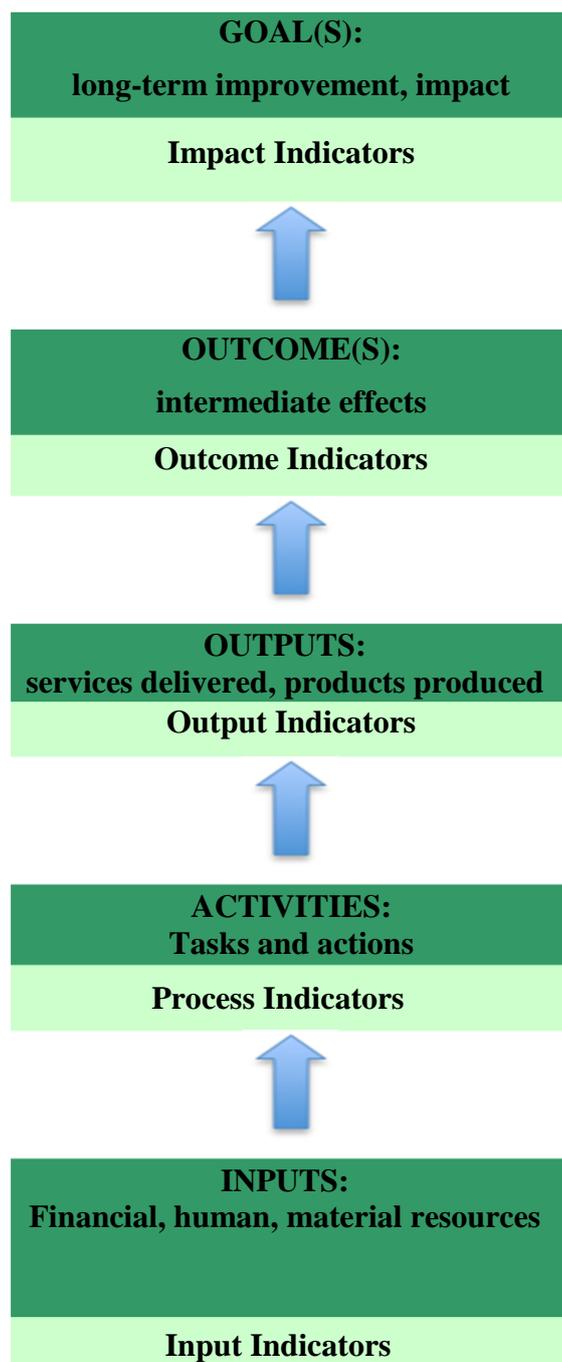
If the plan and the budget are sufficiently explicit and specific, managers should have greater flexibility as to implementation. In other words, if a manager's work plan and budget are spelled out in line with the government's intentions, the manager is bound to those intentions and should have greater flexibility in how he or she chooses to fulfill that intention, since service providers generally know more than central agencies about what they are doing and how to do it. To return to a previous example, if the budget allocates resources to building rural clinics, those resources cannot be spent on staff salaries.

The results framework, then, depicts the future that the consensus of stakeholders wants and, ideally, a well-defined path to that future. The framework presents an explicit definition of results—precisely what is to be achieved through the project or program or national strategy and by when. With measurable objectives in sight, the framework provides the basis for monitoring progress toward those objectives and managing and adjusting program implementation. Box 1 gives an example.
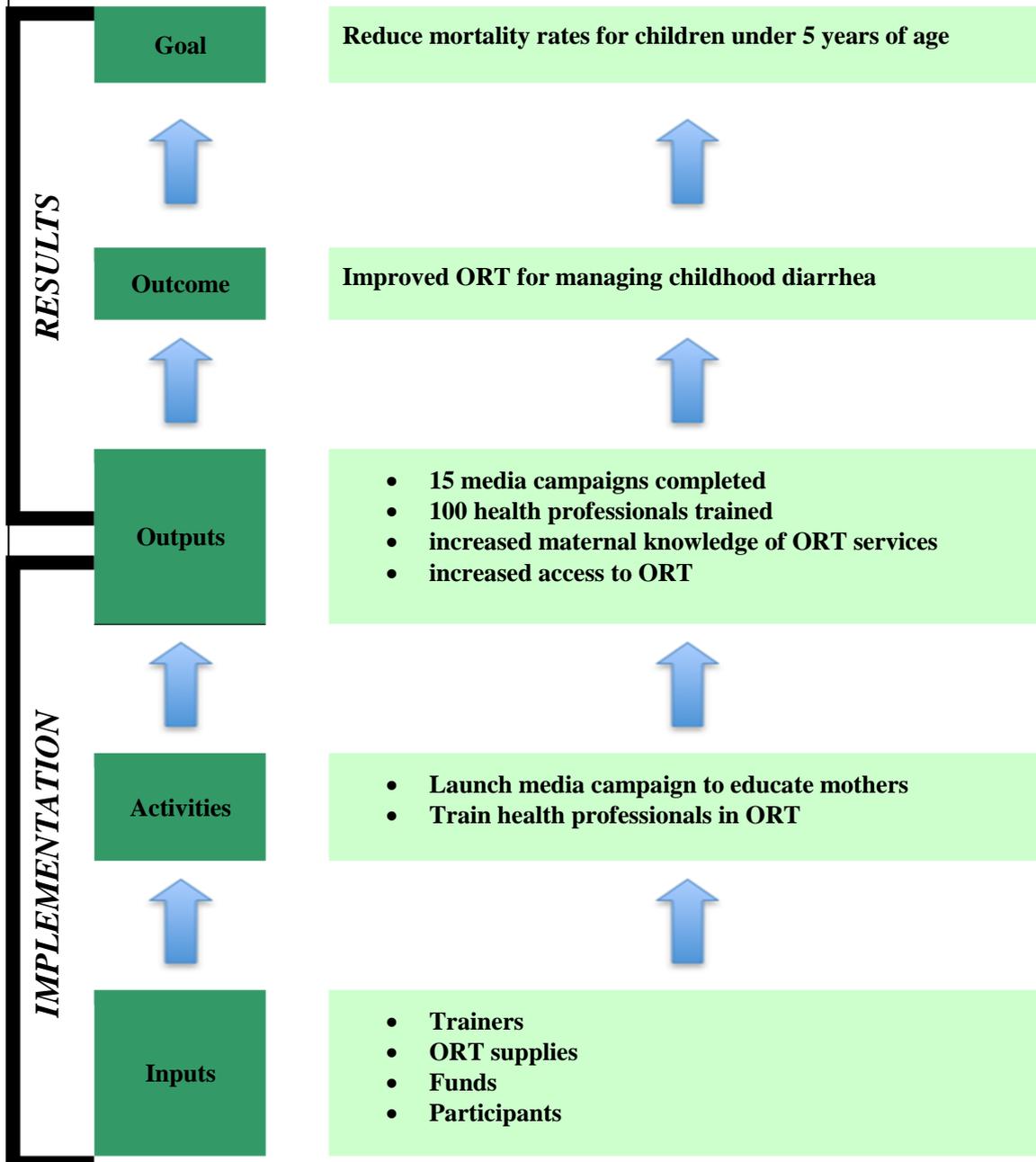
Box 1: results framework and types of indicators

A results framework is a logical representation of how inputs, activities, and outputs affect outcomes and the long term goals through causal pathways (see figure below). The framework can be applied to a national development strategy, a development program, or an individual project.

GOAL(S):

long-term improvement, impact

Impact Indicators

OUTCOME(S):

intermediate effects

Outcome Indicators

OUTPUTS:
services delivered, products produced
Output Indicators

ACTIVITIES:
Tasks and actions

Process Indicators

INPUTS:
Financial, human, material resources

Input Indicators

Source: Adapted from DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation, Results based management in the development of co-operation agencies: a review of experience – background report (2000)

Box 2: sample results framework for reducing childhood morbidity through Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT)

RESULTS

Goal — Reduce mortality rates for children under 5 years of age

Outcome — Improved ORT for managing childhood diarrhea

Outputs
- 15 media campaigns completed
- 100 health professionals trained
- increased maternal knowledge of ORT services
- increased access to ORT

IMPLEMENTATION

Activities
- Launch media campaign to educate mothers
- Train health professionals in ORT

Inputs
- Trainers
- ORT supplies
- Funds
- Participants

Source: **The World Bank, Independent Evaluation Group, Designing A Results Framework for Achieving Results: A How-To Guide (2012)**

Box 3: evaluating to improve resource allocations

Family planning and fertility in Indonesia

In the 1970s, Indonesia's innovative family planning efforts gained international recognition for their success in decreasing the country's fertility rates. The acclaim arose from two parallel phenomena: (1) fertility rates declined significantly and (2) during the same period, the Indonesian government substantially increased resources allocated to family planning (particularly contraceptive subsidies). Given that the two things happened contemporaneously, many concluded that it was the increased investment in family planning that had led to lower fertility.

Unconvinced by the available evidence, a team of researchers tested whether family planning programs indeed lowered fertility rates. They found, contrary to what was generally believed, that family planning programs only had a moderate impact on fertility, and they argued that instead it was a change in women's status that was responsible for the decline in fertility rates. The researchers noted that before the start of the family planning program very few women of reproductive age had finished primary education. During the same period as the family planning program, however, the government undertook a large-scale education program for girls, so that by the end of the program, women entering reproductive age had benefited from that additional education. When the oil boom brought economic expansion and increased demand for labor in Indonesia, educated women's participation in the labor force increased significantly. As the value of women's time at work rose, so did the use of contraceptives. In the end, higher wages and empowerment explained 70 percent of the observed decline in fertility—more than the investment in family planning programs.

These evaluation results informed policy makers' subsequent resource allocation decisions: funding was reprogrammed away from contraception subsidies and toward programs that increased women's school enrollment. Although the ultimate goals of the two types of programs were similar, evaluation studies had shown that in the Indonesian context, lower fertility rates could be obtained more efficiently by investing in education than by investing in family planning.
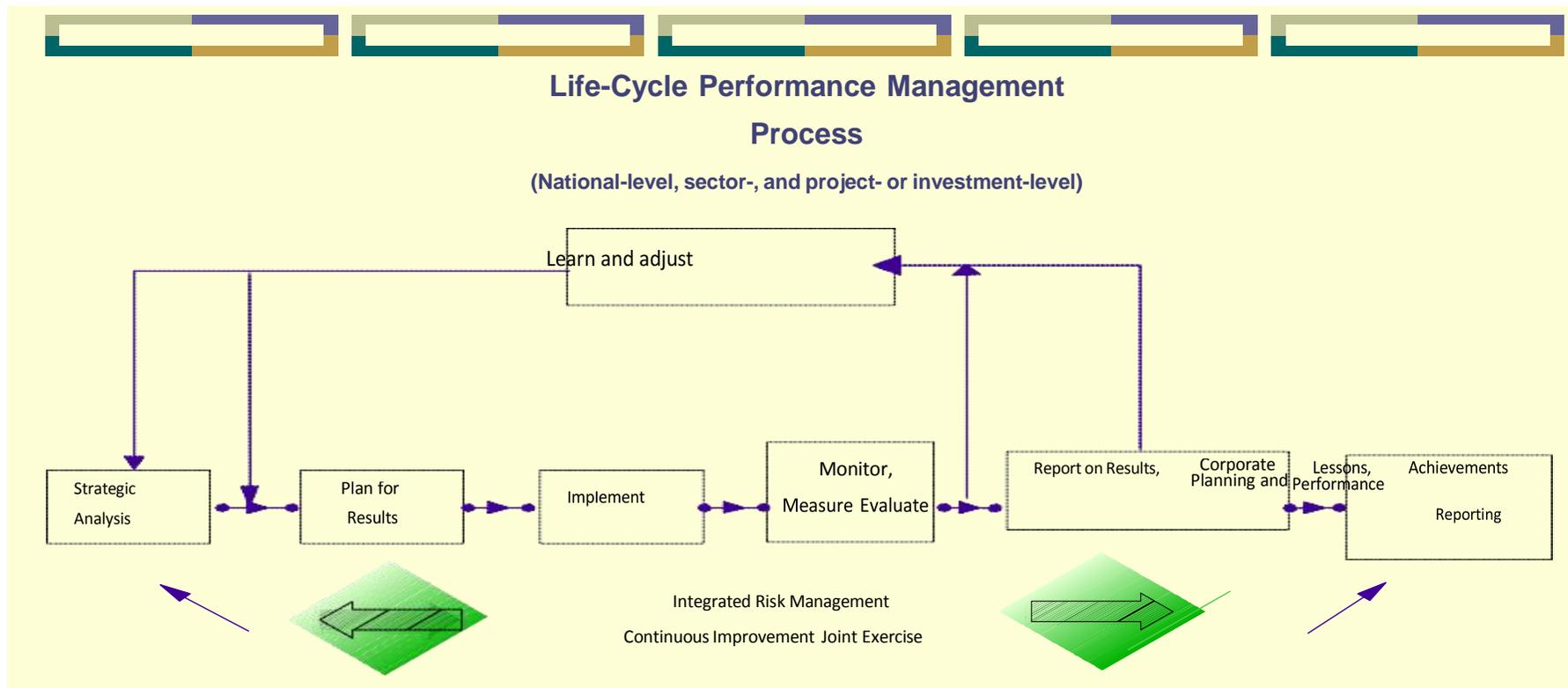
Adapted with some modification from: Gertler, et al., 2011

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Life-Cycle Performance Management Process

(National-level, sector-, and project- or investment-level)

Learn and adjust

Strategic Analysis — Plan for Results — Implement — Monitor, Measure Evaluate — Report on Results, Corporate Planning and Lessons, Performance — Achievements Reporting

Integrated Risk Management
Continuous Improvement Joint Exercise

Source: Performance and Knowledge Management Branch, CIDA (2005)

Figure 3 - Appendix 2: Learning cycle

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This knowledge series is intended to summarize good practices and key policy findings on managing for development results. The views expressed in the notes are those of the authors. Notes are widely disseminated and are available on the website of the Africa for Results initiative (AfriK4R), at: www.afrik4r.org/page/resources