
MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING SYSTEM REVIEW

A report for DRC by Nigel Simister

INTRAC

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Acronyms

CHS	Common Humanitarian Standard
DDG	Danish Demining Group
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DRC HQ	DRC Headquarters
ESMG	Extended Senior Management Group
KM	Knowledge Management
LLN	Lessons Learned Notes
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MELMOP	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Minimum Operational Procedures
MEP	Monitoring and Evaluation Plans
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PRF	Planning and Reporting Framework
QA	Quality Assurance
RC	Results Contract
RTR	Real-time Review
SPD	Strategic Planning Documents

1.0 Introduction and Methodology

- 1.1 The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) initiated a three-year project in 2013, supported by Sida, that aimed to strengthen monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes within the organisation. The goal was to have well-defined, global MEL structures in place by the end of 2015, covering all DRC programmes.
- 1.2 The initial process was designed to close at the end of 2015, and DRC desired to conduct a review of the system in order to establish progress and provide advice for future direction. Nigel Simister of INTRAC was commissioned to carry out the review.
- 1.3 The review was divided into three discrete phases, as follows:
 - Phase 1 consisted of a desk review of pertinent literature (see annex A)
 - Phase 2 consisted of meetings with Head Quarters staff based in Copenhagen
 - Phase 3 consisted of wider interviews with a cross section of DRC staff representing different levels of the organisation (see annex B)
- 1.4 There will be three main outputs from the review: this report; a DRC Evaluation and Learning Brief on DRC's MEL system; and a webinar with interested staff in January 2016.

2.0 Progress

- 2.1 This section provides an overview of the progress made over the past 2-3 years. It is a brief summary of highlights only, and it is not intended that this section replicates the Progress Reports that the Global DRC M&E Adviser(s) produced in 2014 and 2015 (see annex A).
- 2.2 Within DRC, the strategic priority on MEL is defined as follows:

"A global MEL system is in place providing global consistency in programme MEL and allowing for global systematic learning that feeds into 1) programme development and policy messaging 2) supports regular programme monitoring and 3) global aggregation of results within selected areas"

In the opinion of the reviewer, a global MEL system is now in place that has the potential to provide global consistency in programme MEL. However, there are still major gaps in DRC's ability to feed global, systematic learning into programme development. DRC does not currently have any systems to aggregate results at a global level, other than in the financial arena.

- 2.3 Before 2013, the majority of M&E processes were linked to DRC's Planning and Reporting Framework (PRF). These included:
 - Annual Reviews in each country, with associated Lessons Learned Notes;
 - a Meta Evaluation carried out each year; and
 - Monitoring and Evaluation Plans as a standard requirement for all projects.

In addition, country programmes were expected to follow various donor requirements on M&E.

- 2.4 Since 2013, the following processes have been introduced or strengthened (these are dealt with in more depth below):

- Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Minimum Operational Procedures (MELMOPs) have been introduced, linking M&E to PRF elements such as Annual Reviews and Lessons Learned Notes.
- A Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Compliance Self Check has been introduced, assessing country office compliance with the MELMOPs on a biannual basis.
- M&E Focal Point Roles have been defined in each country as part of the MELMOPs.
- An Evaluation Policy has been developed, setting organisational triggers for evaluations and focusing on the strategic use of evaluations.
- Real Time Reviews have been introduced, linked to DRC's corporate emergencies.
- DRC Evaluation and Learning Briefs have been developed, capturing and disseminating findings from DRC-led evaluations and research, internally and externally.
- A DRC Evaluators Network of DRC staff participating in DRC evaluations has been piloted.

2016 will see the piloting of Country Programme Level Evaluations, and the piloting of a system of Organisational Learning Questions, giving direction to evaluations, and maybe Annual Reviews as well. The Learning Questions have been approved by Extended Senior Management Group (ESMG).

2.5 **MELMOPs** – Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Minimum Operational Procedures – were introduced in December 2014 with the purpose of providing guidance and support to DRC Operations. They were finalised and disseminated in 2015. The MELMOPs consist of templates, guidelines, tools and publications designed to help staff think through minimum MEL requirements. Specifically, the MELMOPs have been designed to achieve four distinct outcomes:

- DRC operations have a clearly defined and documented M&E system
- DRC operations have adequate and dedicated resources for M&E
- Relevant DRC projects are evaluated, and evaluation findings are used to inform strategic decisions
- DRC operations share lessons learned and document the use of evaluation findings.

The MELMOPs are intended to ensure some commonality in DRC's MEL system, thus avoiding some of the problems caused by staff turnover. They are accessed through a dedicated web page, and represent a considerable amount of work.

2.6 A **MEL Compliance Self-Check** has been devised and was sent to all countries in August, 2015. The checklist is designed to assess compliance with the MELMOPs. The Self Check has stressed the minimum expectations on MEL for field staff, and the exercise will be repeated every six months to ensure that each part of DRC knows what is in place and what needs to be done.

2.7 A structure for **M&E Plans** (MEPs) at project level was in place prior to 2013. The templates and guide have since been revised and updated. Most of DRC's data collection occurs within projects, and the M&E Plans are designed to ensure that projects carry out appropriate M&E, or at least understand what the plans and expectations are.

2.8 A DRC **Evaluation Policy** has been produced, and was finalised and rolled out in 2015. The Evaluation Policy contains minimum standards for evaluations in all DRC countries. It includes – amongst other things – statutory requirements for at least one evaluation to be carried out each year on a project, programme or strategy within each DRC country. It also provides a framework for initiating, planning, implementing and ensuring the strategic use of evaluations across DRC.

2.9 Annual Reviews conducted within each DRC country are carried out for many different purposes. The M&E Adviser(s) has sought to enhance learning within these reviews by re-emphasising the documentation of lessons learned through **Lessons Learned Notes** (LLNs). It hopes that

improvements in M&E brought about through MELMOPs and enhanced training (see below) can enhance the quality of information produced through the Annual Review process. The LLNs are also expected to be produced after evaluations in DRC countries, as well as real-time reviews and evaluations facilitated by DRC Head Quarters (HQ).

- 2.10 **Real Time Reviews** (RTRs) are triggered by DRC declaring a corporate emergency. They are usually conducted when there is a rapid scale-up such as in CAR, Iraq, South Sudan and Ukraine. The idea of the RTR is to support organisational learning within DRC, and also to help the country team take stock of the situation before committing itself to further action. The RTR is a kind of 'formative evaluation' that is mostly concerned with adjusting strategies and plans in the light of experience and knowledge. The first Review took place in the Central African Republic in August 2014; the second in Iraq in November 2014; the third in South Sudan in January 2015; and the fourth in Ukraine in June 2015. A Guidance Note for the use of Real Time Reviews in DRC has been developed. RTRs were acknowledged by various DRC HQ staff as a 'significant change' and a 'big step forward'.
- 2.11 A **DRC M&E Training Course Guide and Training Workbook** have been developed and introduced to transfer the MELMOPs (and Evaluation Policy) into organisational use and practice. These include a DRC M&E Blended Learning Course (supported by INTRAC) and an induction module for new staff. M&E review and support missions have also been carried out, although to-date the M&E support team has only really consisted of one member so support has been necessarily limited. These initiatives have generally been very well received, although the reviewer only spoke to one member of staff who had actually undergone the training. However, there remains a vast (and probably insatiable) appetite for more and training and support.
- 2.12 The M&E team has also initiated a series of **Evaluation and Learning Briefs** that seek to disseminate learning.
- 2.13 All countries and regions are now expected to have at least one M&E Focal Point. These Focal Points vary from country to country, and in many cases are only part time. Some have been supported through targeted M&E training, and some have participated in online conference calls. The idea is that the M&E Focal Points will become a Community of Practice on M&E and ensure support for DRC M&E work going forward.
- 2.14 The Extended Senior Management Group have approved a set of **Key Organisational Evaluation Questions**, which will be developed by DRC to guide evaluation and learning at the strategic level. These will be linked to the forthcoming DRC Strategy.
- 2.15 In summary, progress has been substantial and impressive over the past two years. Developing M&E systems in complex organisations is not an easy task and there is little external guidance, which means that staff in most complex organisations are to some extent re-inventing the wheel each time. However, the reviewer found no obvious gaps in what the Global DRC M&E adviser has done, and there were no activities that were felt to be superfluous or unnecessary. The Global DRC M&E adviser should be commended for what has been achieved over the past two years.
- 2.16 Having said that it is very obvious that many of the changes are much more visible at DRC HQ levels, and understanding of these changes becomes successively lower the further away from HQ. This is inevitable given the lack of resources enjoyed by the DRC M&E adviser(s) and the timescales involved. Nonetheless, the eventual success or otherwise of DRC's M&E systems will rest on how far there is understanding and buy-in amongst regional and country managers, and how far technical capacity can be extended to project levels. This is something that will be much harder for DRC than for a newer organisation – lessons will have to be unlearned as well as learned, and that will take both time and resources.

3.0 Main Findings

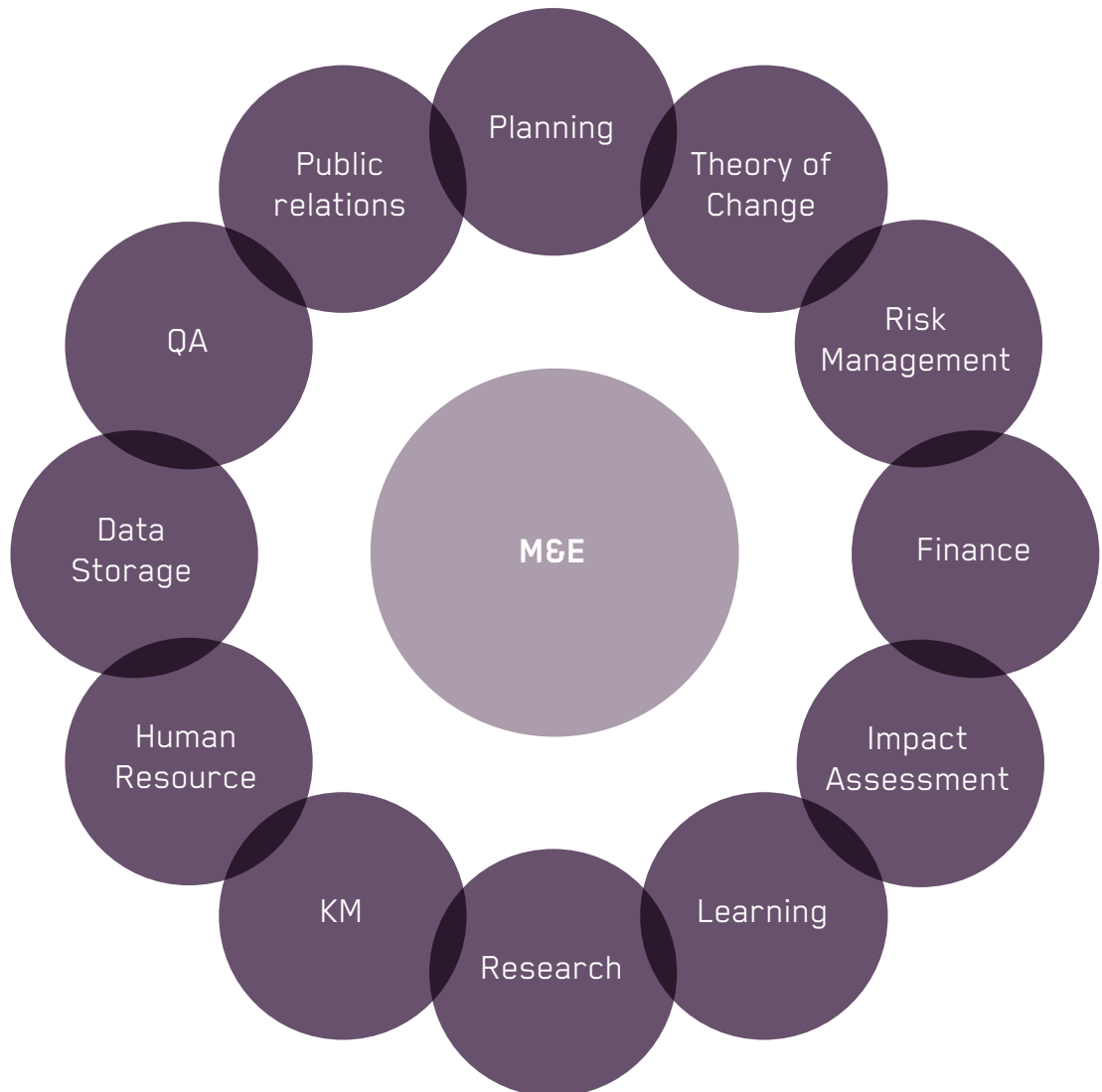
- 3.1 A number of issues arose over the course of the review – some from conversations with the Global DRC M&E adviser and others from interviewees. This section covers some of the main issues arising where additional discussion might be useful. Specifically:
- The purpose of the MEL system
 - The scope of the MEL system
 - Strategic planning and MEL
 - Issues of summarisation and aggregation
 - Learning within DRC
 - Staff attitudes and expectations

The purpose of the MEL system

- 3.2 It is often hard to justify the introduction of new MEL procedures in a large organisation. Some see it as a criticism of what has gone before. Others do not see the immediate value. Contrary to popular myth, improved MEL systems do not always make work easier. They may make it better or more professional in the long-run but this is a different matter. In addition, many of the benefits of an improved MEL system accrue to staff entering the organisation at a later date rather than staff who are already there (and who by definition hold the current institutional memory).
- 3.3 In some cases external pressure from donors can provide the impetus for improvement. But in the case of DRC there is no significant external pressure from donors. This makes it all the more important that the MEL system ‘proves’ itself by generating usable findings that translate into improved practice. This, of course, is easier said than done, particularly as learning at organisational level often comes in the form of a steady accumulation of evidence rather than learning that is immediately obvious and can be readily used.
- 3.4 However, there is some external stimulus. Sida and Danida Capacity Assessments Reports have hinted at the need to improve the organisations MEL systems. In addition, conformity to CHS (Common Humanitarian Standard) requires DRC to show it can “constantly learn and improve”. So there is some external pressure that the Global DRC M&E adviser(s) can use to complement more internal pressure.
- 3.5 Internally, there are a variety of purposes for the MEL system. One of the most obvious (and often overlooked by Head Offices) is basic project management. Managers of projects need to know basic information on finance, logistics, activities etc. Some people interviewed talked about the need to write better proposals and produce better reports; be accountable to donors (or beneficiaries) and make sure projects are implemented according to DRC principles. Higher level wishes included feeding data into management decision-making, using information for advocacy, and helping set boundaries around DRC’s decentralised culture.
- 3.6 It is important that the Global DRC M&E adviser(s) are aware of the different motivations throughout the organisation. It also needs to appreciate that it can never be all things to all people and to an extent it needs to manage the different demands on the MEL systems. People agree they want improved MEL but they don’t always agree why they want it. Managing expectations will therefore be a constant battle.

The scope of the MEL system

- 3.7 Allied to this issue is the scope of MEL within DRC. Most large organisations have M&E departments, but their scope of work is often wildly different. Some M&E systems are well integrated with planning; others are not. Some M&E systems cover learning, whilst in other organisations there may be separate learning departments. Likewise Knowledge Management (KM) may be integrated with some M&E systems and not others. Indeed M&E can cover many different areas in different organisations (see diagram below based on my personal experience of developing M&E systems.)



- 3.8 In the case of DRC, the Global M&E Adviser(s) are responsible for learning as well as M&E (or at least have tried to frame learning as a key part of M&E), and are also entering areas such as KM and planning. This is fine up to a certain point. But the Global M&E Adviser(s) need to be careful that they do not include more and more functions within their scope as ultimately they will not be able to cope with the workloads. There is arguably a need to be much more explicit about the scope of the M&E system; what it should cover, what should be covered by other departments, and how it interacts with other departments.

Strategic Planning and MEL

- 3.9 It is normally acknowledged that good M&E requires a level of good planning. And good strategic M&E requires good strategic planning. In DRC, countries and regions are expected to produce Strategic Planning Documents (SPDs) that are rolling three-year plans. These are operationalised into one year results contracts (RCs) that are reported on quarterly. In theory the quarterly reports and annual reviews feed into improved SPDs that are adjusted each year. These decisions were not made by the M&E team but are part of the system it needs to work with.
- 3.10 The result is that a large amount of the reporting done by DRC countries and regions is against one-year operational plans. Whilst understanding the rationale behind this (especially the desire to ground SPDs more firmly into operational planning) it is a weakness in terms of strategic M&E. In the opinion of the reviewer, reporting quarterly against the RC will always result in activity-based reporting. In addition it will make it harder for data collection, analysis and decision-making to be focused strategically within countries and regions.
- 3.11 The counter-argument is that RCs are real documents that relate to DRC projects, and are 'owned' by country and region staff, whereas some SPDs are treated more as virtual exercises and are not owned. Indeed some project staff do not even know that the SPDs exist. Thus there is a situation in which reporting against the SPDs is seen as more strategic, longer-term and focusing on outcomes and impact; but risks reporting against something that is not owned and not seen as relevant. On the other hand reporting against the RCs means reporting against something that is owned, live and relevant, but risks reporting against short-term activities.
- 3.12 The DRC Global M&E Adviser will pilot some cases where country programmes plan, collect/analyse information, and evaluate based on 3-year strategic programme documents (e.g. Sudan and Jordan). The reviewer agrees this is the right thing to do, although cautions that some people within DRC think there is a risk that this will turn into an academic exercise. The reviewer agrees it is right to trial this in just a few countries in the hope that this may inspire other countries. But if this is to happen then to some extent it will be necessary for the system to 'prove itself' by generating learning that is actually used to improve performance at different levels of DRC. This is not necessarily a given (although representatives of at least one country believe the new approach has already made them look at objectives differently).

Issues of summarisation and aggregation

- 3.13 Aggregation and summarisation are always issues that provide headaches for large NGOs. At the risk of over-simplifying; an emphasis on aggregation across countries and projects means countries and projects being forced to collect information to the same definitions and standards irrespective of their capacity to do so or whether they find that information useful. On the other hand too little summarisation and it can be hard to see the wood for the trees at organisational level.
- 3.14 In this respect, the DRC Global M&E Advisers seem to be charting an appropriate course. There are some initiatives that can lead to better summarisation across the organisation (such as the development of common learning questions linked to the new strategic plan) and attention is being given to raising minimum standards across all countries whilst removing the need to aggregate outputs, as was previously the case.
- 3.15 The great advantage of removing the need to aggregate is being able to treat different regions and countries according to their needs. If large organisations focus on aggregation a great deal of time is spent bringing all countries up to standards that will allow aggregation across entire portfolios, because the quality of portfolio information relies on good M&E within each and every country covered. But within DRC it is possible to focus on different levels of support, for example:
- Providing support to countries that are struggling with very basic M&E that is needed for project management.
 - Allowing other countries to develop and enhance their capacity to conform to the minimum standards.

- Pushing ahead with more strategic M&E for those countries that have a genuine desire to push the boundaries further.
 - Trialling and piloting new approaches within parts of DRC that are keen to explore and experiment
- 3.16 Indeed, one great advantage of this more flexible approach is that all countries can benefit from approaches piloted in just a few countries (e.g. applying lessons learned). If the new approaches prove themselves it is arguably more likely that different countries will adopt them and invest in them than if asked to by HQ.
- 3.17 Currently, there are no burning issues that DRC has to deal with in this area. But that is not to say they may not come up in the future, and at some stage DRC will need to tackle the issue of summarisation and aggregation. The different options include the following:
- Reintroducing the meta-evaluations that were carried out in the past.
 - Developing and using a set of Key, Organisational Evaluation Questions.
 - Reintroducing the system of aggregating outputs (deliverables) across DRC.
 - Using the Lessons Learned Notes system to summarise learning at global level.
- 3.18 These are not mutually exclusive, and more than one option could be taken. At present the reviewer's advice is to concentrate more on the Organisational Evaluation Questions (as already endorsed by the ESMG) and to assess how these might be used to enhance global summarisation. But in any event it is important that the ESMG agrees on a strategy for summarisation going forward. The issue is not 'burning' at the moment but it may become so at any time, and DRC will not want to be caught unawares.

Learning within DRC

- 3.19 Much learning happens outside of M&E, and much M&E has little to do with learning. There is obviously a large intersection – M&E that supports the generation, sharing and dissemination of learning – but it is usually important to know where M&E responsibility begins and ends. DRC has a clear ambition to be a learning organisation, but it is not immediately evident how much of that is expected to be down to the Global M&E Advisers and the Policy Division in DRC, and how much through other organisational processes. Many of the people interviewed as part of this review reflected this confusion. And some questioned whether DRC could ever be a serious learning organisation without a profound change in culture.
- 3.20 Lesson learning can be divided up in many ways within NGOs. However, this section briefly examines four areas. (In all areas it is important that lessons learned are eventually translated into enhanced performance; whether that is within DRC or elsewhere.)
- Supply side lesson learning
 - Demand side lesson learning
 - Targeted lesson learning
 - External lesson learning
- 3.21 Current efforts by the Global M&E adviser to enhance supply-side lesson learning is focused around improving the quality of M&E at all levels (as learning rarely takes place without adequate understanding of what has been done and what is changing as a result), and enhancing the annual reviews so they become better vehicles for capturing and disseminating learning.
- 3.22 However, the reviewer had some reservations about the annual review process and the associated lessons learned notes. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, a number of staff interviewed felt the annual review process is already packed with different activities and requirements and there is

little room or appetite for the generation of learning. (Whilst accepting the argument of the DRC Global M&E Adviser that the annual review process was originally intended for learning and is to some extent being 'reclaimed', it nevertheless does not change the perception). Secondly, some people interviewed were concerned that recorded lessons learned were too often at the wrong level – either so context-specific as to be little use outside of a specific locality or too generic to be applied. Thirdly, the reviewer has concerns about the sheer volume of lessons learned notes that could be produced (e.g. eighty a year if each country produces one, and at least one evaluation in each country produces one). And lastly, having conducted similar exercises in his own organisation, the reviewer has doubts about how much value will be added.

- 3.23 This is not to say the process should be abandoned. But it may be useful to carry out a one-off exercise with significant support and then assess the costs and benefits. This is particularly the case as (apparently) few lessons learned notes have been produced this year, and some of the staff interviewed were not aware they needed to be done. If done as a one-off exercise it would be possible to assess the learning products resulting, disseminate them in an appropriate form (after screening), and use them to help shape the strategic learning questions. It would also be possible to assess whether or not there would be much benefit in aggregating lessons learned to DRC HQ level on a regular basis, or whether it is likely that the same lessons would be generated each year.
- 3.24 There was no consensus either way from the interviewees, but more than one staff member did say that if the system was to work at all it would need to be driven by senior management rather than Global M&E Adviser(s), especially as they would need to be the ones applying the lessons learned at HQ level.
- 3.25 If the Global M&E Adviser(s) or management team at DRC decide to go ahead with the LLNs next year it would be worth exploring whether or not different approaches might be used or trialled in different places – e.g. experimenting with different approaches such as the recent successful failure fairs, asking different questions to solicit learning, piloting different methods for generating learning after evaluations, etc.
- 3.26 In any event there are always going to be limitations to supply-side learning. If people do not happen to have time to read documents, or if they are not around when lessons are disseminated, or if they cannot be found and retrieved when required then they are unlikely to be used. On the other hand, some interviewees thought that DRC should do more to enhance demand-side learning, which means enhancing the capacity of staff to access relevant learning within the organisation as and when needed. As one respondent said "it is ok to disseminate learning but lessons often get forgotten and people need to reinvent the wheel".
- 3.27 There was one suggestion from the field of having some kind of online platform where people can go for advice, although it could be very hard to make this work within DRC (as very busy people would be needed to go online regularly to answer questions from equally busy people needing immediate answers).
- 3.28 Another initiative to enhance demand-side learning would be the targeted lesson learning that would result from the development of a set of strategic learning questions (or Organisational Evaluation Questions) linked to the DRC strategy (and possibly also derived from an initial exercise on aggregating learning through the annual reviews). This is a very viable option, and represents current thinking around best practice within large NGOs. This will require more heavy investment in research than has hitherto been the case in DRC, but most people interviewed were very positive about the current plans. The idea of strategic learning questions has already been endorsed by ESMG, and would also suggest the need for some HQ-initiated strategic evaluations.
- 3.29 One or two people interviewed also mentioned external lesson learning. This would involve DRC systematically capturing, disseminating and using lessons learned from other organisations in the humanitarian field. The DRC M&E Adviser(s) might have a role in capturing and disseminating such learning but obviously cannot be expected to lead the process.
- 3.30 However, this leads to a wider issue – that of knowledge management within DRC. The DRC M&E Adviser(s) are expected to lead on M&E, and to do that they need to enhance learning within

the organisation. But they do not have the resources (time, expertise or money) to develop and administer a whole Knowledge Management (KM) system within DRC. Such a system would need to be supported and promoted by senior management in DRC, and would (probably) require a great deal of investment as well as (possibly) a culture shift.

- 3.31 This then is the dilemma of the Global M&E Adviser(s). Do they work with what exists and do their best to enhance learning within existing systems and processes, knowing that will fall short of a full learning strategy within DRC? Or do they engage in 'mission-creep' and start to trespass on the territory of KM systems, without the tools necessary to make a success of it? Or do they lobby management to acknowledge the need for a better KM or learning strategy and seek to bring about change in that way? In the opinion of the reviewer, the first and last options are viable but the middle one is not. If senior management within DRC genuinely want to learn and improve to the full extent of what is possible then they need to invest beyond the Global M&E Adviser(s) – the M&E Adviser(s) can support the process but cannot lead it.

Staff attitudes and expectations

- 3.32 As part of this review fourteen staff were interviewed through Skype or in person. The staff interviewed represent a cross section of the organisation in terms of functions and organisational levels, covering Global, Regional and Country Levels. The Reviewer was not involved in the selection of the interviewees and as such cannot assure against any potential bias. Fourteen is not a large enough number to derive any statistical trends; however it was large enough to at least examine some of the range of opinions within DRC. The rest of this section outlines a range of different attitudes held by DRC staff, and outlines their expectations regarding MEL.
- 3.33 Staff who have worked with the DRC Global M&E Adviser were generally complimentary about what has been done and how he has attempted to enhance DRC's MEL work over the last two years. In general, staff felt that the Global M&E Adviser has been "good at communicating", and had helped induce greater prioritisation for M&E, and a greater awareness of M&E throughout the organisation. Some pointed to the fact that two years ago M&E used to be "ad-hoc and an add-on" and there were no standards, and that this has now changed thanks to the DRC M&E team.
- 3.34 Interviewees from both HQ and the field thought that the changes had been more pronounced at HQ level and had yet to fully filter through to field level. One person interviewed said that "not much had changed" at field level over the past two years, whilst another said that trickle down got weaker and weaker as one moved from HQ to region to country to project.
- 3.35 There is no great consistency in how learning is viewed within DRC. Some feel it is a learning organisation and others feel it never really learns. Some in the field are adamant that DRC is a humanitarian organisation and cannot be expected to engage in learning as much as a mainstream development organisation.
- 3.36 As outlined in the previous section, there is a large appetite for training, and numerous demands for more and different training. Those who had experienced the blended-learning course had found it useful, especially the one-to-one conversations, and many people interviewed could point to other staff who had found the training useful. Some people felt that M&E training should be more rooted in the field. Some people also wished that more could be done as in-house training, through HQ or regional support. Other people interviewed wished for a range of different methods such as tools, videos, tutorials and indicator lists. Some expressed a desire to see some kind of MEL online platform that could allow M&E teams across the world to discuss and share experiences, concerns and solutions. Others pointed to the need for more support in technical areas of M&E such as sampling and basic indicator development.
- 3.37 Appreciation of the MELMOPs was consistent, but some also had reservations. Many felt they were "user-friendly" and "useful" (including a representative of the Danish Demining Group (DDG)) and at least one country director said his staff used them all the time. Some, however, felt the MELMOP website was not as useful as it could be. One person said she preferred to get information from people within her region. Another complained that parts of the MELMOP were

not specific enough (e.g. the MELMOPs sometimes said something needed to be done, such as a situational analysis or a logframe, but not exactly how to do it). Another person said it was not that easy to find out through the MELMOP what the actual expectations were in terms of compulsory MEL requirements. More than one person interviewed felt that the MELMOP could be a lot more detailed in terms of concrete steps, timelines and templates.

- 3.38 Most people who had seen the new Evaluation Policy said they liked it. However, some appeared not to be aware of the requirements within it (such as the requirement to carry out at least evaluation per country per year).
- 3.39 In general, there was a feeling that the newly introduced MEL systems and procedures were proportionate. Nobody said that the DRC Global M&E Adviser was making unreasonable demands on the field. However, there was a comment that it was important to ensure that the M&E Focal Points continued to take the strain of any additional expectations rather than burdening frontline staff.
- 3.40 Overall the comments were not inconsistent with the kind of comments usually received in complex organisations when conducting this kind of review. There will always be people who want more guidance on MEL and people who would be happier with fewer requirements from HQ. One message that appeared most relevant to the reviewer were, the need for some degree of separation in the MELMOP between mandatory templates and procedures – to make it clear what people have to do and how to do it – and advisory documents that will be useful for some staff and not others.
- 3.41 At the same time, the DRC Global M&E Adviser(s) need to recognise that in a large organisation there will always be many different people with different learning styles and needs. Written guidelines tend to be most appreciated by theorists, whilst others prefer to learn by 'doing' or by adapting what others have done. It is always important to have a range of different learning methods open to people, but there is probably no one-size-fits-all approach that will serve the M&E needs of all parts of the organisation. In the opinion of the reviewer the DRC M&E team has done a good job in setting up support and training through different mechanisms. Of course they can be improved in the light of feedback, but now the basic frameworks are in place such change can be incremental.

4.0 Conclusions and recommendations

- 4.1 This section provides a few conclusions and recommendations for going forward. As stated earlier, it is important to recognise that the development of MEL systems within complex organisations is not a particularly well-covered area in development or humanitarian literature. There may be many solutions to different challenges, and a large degree of experimentation is often needed. MEL systems may be influenced by a number of factors including the purpose of M&E, the nature of an organisation, the type of work it carries out, the resources available, and external influences and pressures. Each organisation is different and therefore each MEL system is different. The recommendations below should therefore be seen as 'suggestions' to be adopted or rejected as DRC sees fit. I have divided these into three areas: urgent changes; suggested changes and areas where no change is necessary.
- 4.2 In particular, as the work plan for 2013-2015 comes to a close, there is a golden opportunity for DRC to embed MEL more strongly at different levels of the organisation through the 2020 Strategy. This is especially true for decisions that will shape the scope and extent of the Global M&E Adviser(s) roles over the next few years. DRC needs to decide where it wants the Global M&E Adviser(s) to lead, and where it wants them to contribute. DRC will also need to assess how far it wants to assess its global performance over the course of the strategy as this will have profound implications for DRC's M&E approach going forward.

Urgent changes

- 4.3 The DRC Global M&E Adviser was appointed to provide M&E support and strengthen DRC's global M&E systems. But good M&E relies on interaction with many other areas of work such as planning, learning, research, KM and data storage. The Global M&E Adviser(s) cannot lead in all these areas and should not try. If there are essential areas within DRC that need to change then the Global M&E Adviser(s) need to raise this with management and be clear about the implications. But they should resist the temptation to make themselves responsible for these areas, as this will not be sustainable.
- 4.4 This is most notable in the arena of learning. The Global M&E Adviser(s) can contribute to the development of learning systems. But learning (and improving performance) are wider areas than M&E, and touch deeply on Knowledge Management. If DRC wishes to improve its ability to learn (or as some interviewees put it 'recapture the spirit of learning that existed prior to the rapid growth 10 years ago') then it needs to properly resource these areas and support them through the senior management team. A culture shift may be required and this can only come through senior leadership – the Global M&E Adviser(s) are not in a position to lead this culture shift although they can support it.
- 4.5 In reality this means that DRC management needs to re-define or re-emphasise the role of the Global M&E Adviser(s). All parties need to be clear about how much responsibility the Global M&E Adviser(s) have in areas such as planning, learning and Knowledge Management. Where they are not expected to play a leading role then DRC should make it clear who is expected to play this role.

Suggested changes

- 4.6 Staff in charge of M&E systems in large organisations often play a slightly curious role. In some ways they are responsible for a hugely important function that has large implications for the organisation. However, they rarely have the kind of leverage that other 'matrix management' roles have, and often seek to work through negotiation and persuasion. This is inevitable – you can force someone to fill in a report but you cannot force them to properly analyse information and make considered judgements. But it can also be frustrating. Ultimately, the authority of the Global M&E Adviser comes from the senior management team, and how seriously they consider MEL when weighed against other organisational requirements. It is much easier to run this kind of matrix management role when fully integrated with the management team. In the opinion of the reviewer, the Global M&E Adviser should be ensured a regular role within the senior management

structure, rather than the ad-hoc role currently played. One option would be for the Global M&E Adviser to attend all ESMG meetings where programmatic issues are debated.

- 4.7 Another issue concerns resources. It is easy to budget for activities that are known in advance, and the regular costs of a MEL department (salaries, travel, evaluations, etc.) are easy to predict. But in large organisations it is unlikely that organisational level learning will come in readily usable form. It is more likely to come as suggestions and hints that need to be explored in more detail if they are to be acted upon. This suggests a need for flexible resources that can quickly be mobilised as needed in the form of rapid reviews or short pieces of research. As it expands, this is something the Global M&E Adviser(s) and senior management should consider. Many large organisations are developing broad learning questions or are engaging in 'developmental evaluation' and these areas require a flexibility of resource that is not currently present within DRC.
- 4.8 The reviewer agrees with the Global M&E Adviser that there is a need to change the reporting system against the SPD, as quarterly reporting against a Results Contract is unlikely to ever provide the kind of strategic M&E thinking that DRC appears to desire. Having spoken to different stakeholders the reviewer is persuaded that the Global M&E Adviser has the right approach – piloting the system in a few areas and then seeking to learn lessons and adapt approaches in the light of experience. If the new approaches work then it is likely others will adopt them in time. And unless countries and regions are wholly committed to the thought processes behind strategic M&E it is unlikely that much of value will be achieved in any case.
- 4.9 Ultimately, however, it is likely that DRC will need to address the area of strategic reporting at some stage as it is unusual for such a large organisation to have so little in the way of M&E and learning at strategic country level. The Global M&E Adviser(s) should therefore focus on facilitating better strategic MEL at country level in the long-term, but be cautious about the pace of change within individual countries who are not ready for such change. More harm than good will come from seeking to impose strategic processes on countries that are not ready for it, or whose challenges are far more basic (such as improving simple project management)
- 4.10 On balance, the reviewer feels that the Global M&E Adviser(s) are right to stress learning within annual reviews even if there is opposition. But there are reservations about expecting too much from the LLNs as a regular exercise. If insufficient LLNs are received this year it may be worthwhile re-launching the idea as a one-off pilot next year, with significant management support, and making it clear how the information will be used, e.g. developing a synthesis report and feeding into strategic learning questions. After that the Global M&E Adviser(s) can make an assessment of whether it is worth repeating the exercise every year. This does not apply to the 'evaluation' lessons learned notes which can be developed by evaluators as part of their contracts as currently planned.
- 4.11 The MELMOP is clearly a significant achievement of the Global M&E Adviser and the reviewer would not want to comment too far as he has seen it but never used it. The access page looks very good and it is something that other organisations may wish to replicate (with DRC permission of course). The reviewer's only suggestion is that the Global M&E Adviser(s) consider whether information needs to be split more clearly to show the difference between mandatory work (such as templates that need to be filled in), guidelines, background information and interesting publications for those wishing to explore further. There are still some people within DRC who do not seem to know the basics that are required of them.
- 4.12 One comment received from one of the INTRAC M&E trainers was that the MELMOP was very good but in some cases staff did not even have the basic knowledge to know how to apply it. There is not a great deal the Global M&E Adviser(s) can do about this, but over time it might be worth investigating whether or not 'examples' or 'illustrations' from different areas of DRC could be used to help populate some areas of the MELMOP1. Most M&E systems people are highly logical theorists, and like to work with guidelines. But many people prefer to work through examples, and this is something the Global M&E Adviser(s) could consider, if they have not done so already.
- 4.13 Finally, although not urgent the DRC Global M&E Adviser(s) and ESMG should start thinking about issues of organisational summarisation and aggregation now, before the new Strategy 2020 has been developed, as it may be too late to do much once the Strategy has been finalised. A

clear need is to develop the Key Organisational Evaluation Questions and assess how they will be operationalised within DRC throughout the Strategy period. Other options (such as meta-evaluations and aggregation of outputs) should also be discussed over the next few months and a proposal put on the table for what is realistic during the Strategy period.

Areas where no change is required

- 4.14 Many systems and procedures introduced by the DRC Global M&E Adviser are working well or have every prospect of doing so. These include RTRs, the introduction of Key Organisational Evaluation Questions, the new Evaluation Policy and the Training Modules. No recommendations have been made in these areas as none are currently needed.
- 4.15 In the opinion of the reviewer the idea of having key M&E focal points throughout the organisation is a good one. Although it will not work everywhere it should mean that over time a broad constituency of people interested in MEL will become embedded within the organisation. No recommendations have been made in this area.

ANNEX A: DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

A: Progress on the work of Strengthening M&E in DRC

- Strategic Priority Matrix 2012 - 2015
- First Proposal to Sida on development of DRC M&E System (2013)
- Completion Report to Sida (2014)
- DRC MEL Inception Report (2013)
- Progress Reports 01, 2014
- Initial Recommendations Report 1, 2014 (recommendations to management and result contact process)
- Presentation to senior management, PowerPoint, 2014
- Second Proposal to Sida on development of DRC M&E System (2014)
- Completion Report to Sida (2015)
- Progress Report 02, 2015
- Initial Recommendations Report 2, 2015 (recommendations to management and result contact process)
- Note on a Country Level Evaluations Approach, 2015
- SMG Recommendation for Decision on Country Level Evaluations, 2015

B: Products or processes developed as part of the project

- Melmop.drc.dk <http://melmop.drc.dk/>
- Minimum Operational Procedures <http://melmop.drc.dk/wp-content/uploads/MEL-SYS-7i-DRC-MELMOPs.pdf>
- MEL Compliance Self Check and CSC Report 2015 <http://melmop.drc.dk/system/evaluation-evaluation-system/mel-compliance-self-check/>
- Use of melmop.drc.dk and feedback to M&E Staff (PowerPoint presentation, 2015)
- Evaluation Policy <http://melmop.drc.dk/wp-content/uploads/MEL-EVA-7n-DRC-Evaluation-Policy.pdf>
- DRC Evaluation and Learning Briefs <https://www.drc.dk/about-drc/publications/evaluation-and-learning-briefs>
- Real Time Review Guideline <http://melmop.drc.dk/wp-content/uploads/MEL-EVA-7o-Real-Time-Review-Guidance-Note.pdf>
- Real Time Reviews – Iraq 2014 example
- MEL framework <http://melmop.drc.dk/wp-content/uploads/MEL-SYS-7.5-DRC-MEL-Framework1.pdf>

ANNEX B: PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

The following people were interviewed as part of the review

- Mikkel Nedergaard, Global M&E Adviser, Operations and Policy Support Division
- Niels Bentzen, Policy Advisor Humanitarian Accountability International Department – Risk & Compliance
- Anders Bastholm Hansen. Programme & Operations Coordinator, DRC Uganda, Horn of Africa & Yemen
- Christian Boehm, Global Livelihoods Adviser, Operations and Policy Support Division
- Rikke Friis, Head of Operations and Policy Support Division
- Søren Lytken Larsen, Programme and Operations Coordinator
- Kristine Impgaard Soerensen, Admin. Grants Officer Middle East and North Africa (MENA)
- Christian Jacob Hansen, Head of Stand Alone Operations Support Division
- Johannes Fromholt, M&E Coordinator, Danish Demining Group, HOAY
- Marine Gourves, M&E Officer, Mali and Burkina Faso
- Marieta Fitzcharles, Program Quality Manager, Jordan
- Lilu Thapa, Country Director Uganda
- James Davey, Interim Regional Director, CASWA
- Rikke Johannessen, Deputy Regional Director, DRC Horn of Africa & Yemen
- Rasmus Stuhr Jakobsen, Chief of Division, Division of Emergency, Safety and Supply (DESS), DRC / DDG International Department

ANNEX C: REVIEW PROPOSAL

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is two years into the process of strengthening M&E. The system development process is coming to a close at the end of 2015, and DRC wants to do a review of the system in order to establish progress and provide some direction for the future. This short document provides some brief ideas on possible timescales and processes, based on an earlier Skype conversation. If a more detailed proposal is required, with costings etc., it can be arranged through INTRAC.

In previous work I have conducted around reviewing M&E systems, the work has been divided into four distinct phases: phase I is a desk review; phase II consists of meetings with Head Office M&E staff; phase III consists of wider interviews with staff from other departments or staff based in other parts of the world; and phase IV covers reporting writing and any follow-up workshops. For each phase, the extent of work required will depend heavily on what is required.

Phase I – Desk review (1 day)

Few organisations contain much written material on their M&E systems, so this phase does not involve a great deal of work. Typically, I would want to look at major strategic documents (e.g. a strategic plan or annual M&E report), and any written materials containing details of M&E systems. These could include templates and formats for reports, M&E guidelines, concept documents etc. Typically, I would expect to spend between 0.5 and 1 day on reading depending on the extent of the material. I would also need to develop a few questions specifically for DRC based on the literature.

Phase II – Interview with HO M&E staff (1 day – 2 days)

This would be best done face-to-face and should involve the core M&E team, together with any other relevant staff (such as Head of programmes if they have line management responsibility for M&E). At least a day is usually required to go through planning, monitoring, learning, evaluation and impact assessment processes in detail, and understand how work is carried out at different levels of the organisation – e.g. global, region, theme, programme, project etc.

The discussion would cover:

- The scope of the M&E system
- The purpose(s) of the M&E system
- Highlights (or main features) of the M&E system
- Definition of the different levels
- Detailed scrutiny of compulsory or recommended processes at each level
- Interactions between the different levels
- Ad-hoc or stand-alone features of the system

In order to facilitate at least a full day I would need to come over to Copenhagen the night before.

Phase III – wider interviews (2-3 interviews per day)

This is where a lot of the time is spent. If strategic interviews are needed with a large number of different stakeholders, including DRC partners and donors then it can become a large exercise

requiring a number of days (in which case I would need to draw on the services of a research assistant). If only a few key interviews are required then, clearly, less time is required. Based on previous experience it is hard to finalise more than 2-3 interviews a day, as responses need to be written up, and a fair degree of time is spent on planning and arranging the interviews. A cautious estimate would be 1 day for 3 interviews and 2 days for 5.

Phase III – report writing (2 days for a short report)

A report of between 10-15 pages can normally be done in 1-2 days. If a much longer report is required then it might go up to 3 days. A report would normally summarise the findings, outline the opinions of different stakeholders, draw some conclusions and make some recommendations. This kind of report would not cover detailed changes (e.g. development of new indicators or detailed adjustments to report templates) as they sometimes take longer.

Based on the above, a minimum requirement for a rapid review would be 4 days (based on a 1 day meeting in Copenhagen, interviews with up to 3 overseas stakeholders and a short-report). A wider (still rapid) review might take up to 7 days if more days are required for interviewing, or more days are required in Copenhagen.

As with all INTRAC consultancies, I would suggest the development of a 'draw-down' contract so that only days worked would be charged for. This is useful if the extent of time required for certain activities cannot be accurately forecast in advance.