Measuring the Outcomes of SEI's work: the Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Communication (PMEC) System

Geographical focus:	Global
Funders:	SEI core
Duration:	Ongoing since 2010

One of the great challenges for an organization working at the intersection of science, policy and practice is how to measure the quality and impact of its work. In 2010, SEI set out to develop a systematic approach to monitor and evaluate projects. The result was the custom-designed Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Communication (PMEC) system, which has become integral to project and organizational management at SEI.

PMEC is based on the theory-of-change approach of the International Development Research Centre's Outcome Mapping methodology, but has been adapted to allow integration with SEI's communication and budget management systems. PMEC is web-based to allow staff to input data from wherever they are. SEI requires all projects to be tracked in PMEC.

The system encourages staff to think beyond a project's activities and outputs, and ask what change they want to contribute towards and which people and organizations could be directly influenced by the work. This helps the project team to focus on the foreseen outcomes and be realistic about the influence they can have in the complex realm of sustainable development and environmental policy. It promotes adaptive management of project activities and outputs by monitoring progress towards the desired outcomes. And it provides a systematic way to share lessons learnt across SEI.

PMEC structure

As its name suggests, PMEC is designed to support project planning, monitoring, evaluation and communications. Figure 1 shows a screen shot of the PMEC navigation menu, with all the key elements. Planning is done in the **Intentional Design** section of PMEC, which includes several elements: an **administrative page** for general information; a detailed project **budget**; a description of the project's **goal/purpose**; a **justification** of the project in the context of SEI's institutional priorities; a **research plan** framed in terms of outcome mapping, a **monitoring and evaluation plan**, and a **communications plan** (developed with the SEI communications team). It also provides a page for a **description on SEI's website**.

The research plan requires the project team to identify specific "boundary partners" – those

Figure 1: Screen shot of the PMEC navigation menu.

who may be influenced by the work, as described in more detail below – and the desired outcomes and progress markers with each. Work packages are related to one or multiple boundary partners, with specific outputs/deliverables. The communications plan uses the same approach to identify the optimal ways to reach the different target audiences.

Monitoring is then based on the designated progress markers. Project teams post periodic "journals" that track the level of change observed in the boundary partner to date; what has contributed to that change; any unanticipated change; lessons learnt; and required follow-up or changes.

Outputs are also logged in this section of PMEC, including publications (books and book chapters, journal articles, reports, etc.), events (workshops, conferences, meetings) and media coverage and activities.

Upon completion of the project, the team must conduct an internal final evaluation, summarizing the key findings, measuring performance against the project's goals, and reflecting on financial and time management, the team's organization and cooperation, the role of partners, and potential lessons for the future. The Most Significant Change methodology may be used in either the monitoring phase or in the final evaluation.

Larger projects (with budgets over 200,000 SEK) must also evaluate changes in indicators identified at the outset, in the outcome evaluation.

SEI and Outcome Mapping within PMEC

The summary above shows how Outcome Mapping concepts are applied across PMEC. A crucial first step is to define the "boundary partners". As shown in Figure 2, that requires defining the project's sphere of interest – based on the issues to be addressed – and then, within it, identifying the people and organizations that SEI or its project partners are in a position to influence, or with whom they would like to build a relationship of mutual influence. Those are the boundary partners.

For each boundary partner, project teams are asked to describe a vision of what will have changed in the partner's behaviour, knowledge, models or concepts used, etc. if the project succeeds. For each of these desired changes,
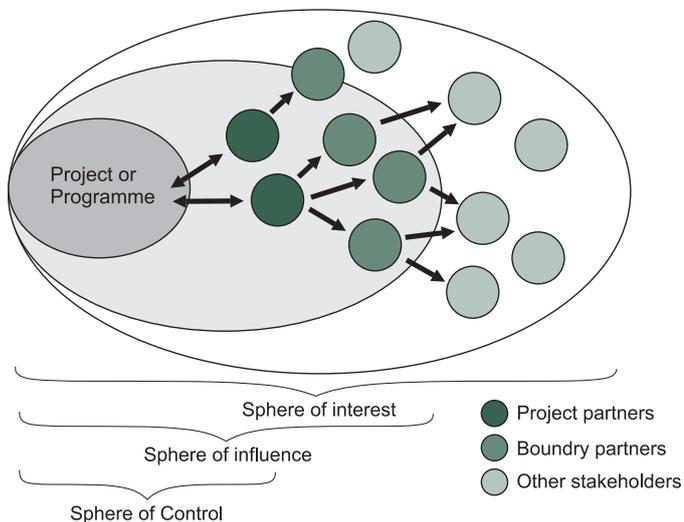
Figure 2: An abstract representation of a project's influence

PMEC asks project teams to list outcome indicators (for the outcome challenge evaluation) and progress markers (for monitoring). Each indicator has a measure that can be quantitative (e.g. number of publications, number of requests) or qualitative (e.g. types of models used, main adopted theory, spatial scale of working). Project teams also have to describe the baseline for each measure, so they can measure change over time.

Projects can identify progress markers, or changes, they "expect to see", more ambitious changes they would "like to see", and transformative changes they would "love to see". It should be noted that change in a boundary partner's behaviour can be influenced by many different factors and greatly depends on how aligned the boundary partner's work is with the planned project. When partners are familiar with the project's concepts and have shown a willingness to learn its findings, there is a greater likelihood that more independent, transformative behaviour change will happen. If partners are not yet aligned with the project, it may be a major achievement just to have them participate in a workshop or accept research findings. Thus, the expect/like/love categories are not meant to be seen as chronological or hierarchical; an expected change in one partner may be as valuable as a transformation in another.

Adaptive project management
The monitoring system allows project teams to track the outcomes of their work and make adjustments if they do not see the desired progress – rather than continuing on a course that is likely to fail. They might even want to ask the boundary partner how the project can better align its activities with their needs. This approach is called adaptive project management. Monitoring changes in boundary partners also helps projects to note any smaller changes that may be occurring and gauge whether and how the project activities and communications are contributing to those changes. The journals also help to

capture details that would otherwise be forgotten in a year's time, or might prove helpful to explain boundary partners' attitudes or behavior in later stages of the project.

Organizational learning
PMEC is designed to not only track and evaluate individual projects, but also to feed into higher-level reporting, monitoring and evaluation. In the intentional design phase, project teams are asked to describe the contribution they will make to six SEI-wide key performance areas:

- Policy relevant scientifically robust research;
- Communications and dialogue;
- Policy process engagement and support;
- Partnership and collaboration;
- Capacity-building;
- Governance and management.

SEI is also structured around four themes: Managing Environmental Systems, Reducing Climate Risk, Transforming Governance, and Rethinking Development. Each theme has a number of objectives, and projects within PMEC indicate which objectives they contribute towards. The final evaluation, done for all projects, includes a reflection on contributions to the key performance areas. These reflections aim to increase internal organizational learning and improve SEI's ability to bridge science and policy. Figure 3 illustrates how information from PMEC flows through SEI's institutional planning, monitoring and evaluation systems.

Figure 3: How information logged in PMEC flows across SEI's institutional planning, monitoring and evaluation systems

PMEC also enables SEI to produce more robust reports for its funders – for individual projects and across larger-scale funding relationships, such as with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). At the project level, PMEC is used to create a project page on the SEI website, internal reports are produced to reflect on progress and evaluate next steps, and the information feeds into reports to the funder. Reports to higher-level management produced annually, such as the SEI Board Report, contain aggregated information taken from PMEC.