Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Learning for Adaptation:

IMAGINE Adaptation Workshop Report – 3 April 2024

1 Introduction

The IMAGINE Adaptation project aims to understand how we can know what, where, who, how and when cities and local communities are adapting to climate change. To do that, we are investigating different approaches to monitoring, evaluating, reporting and learning (MERL) for adaptation, aiming to reduce uncertainty for local actors involved in adaptation management.

Evaluating progress towards adaptation goals is not an easy task. Goals constantly shift as climate change evolves, along with who is vulnerable, and how. Despite this complexity, numerous measurement approaches have emerged over the past decades to help discern whether our efforts to adapt to a changing climate are yielding any effect.

MERL processes have emerged to try to make sense of this pressing challenge, with mixed results. Implementing MERL is challenging because there is also a diversity of ideas about how we select good information to know whether we are adapting and how to embed this information within adaptation management processes. MERL approaches differ along multiple gradients, from formal to informal, technocratic to participatory, among many others, with no "one-size-fits-all" solution.

To delve into this uncertainty, on 3 April 2024, we conducted two online workshops with people across the globe who have experience with designing and/or implementing MERL systems for adaptation across sectors and governance levels. We aimed to get an impression of the most pressing challenges facing MERL systems now for adaptation, and where we go from here. The following pages summarise how we have done this, and what we have found.
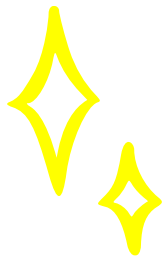
2 Event description

We ran two online workshops at different times to ensure participants across world regions and time zones. A summary of the agenda for each session is below. Each session had 13 and 12 participants respectively.

| Activity	Description
Part 1: Word cloud	Participants could submit one or two-word answers through the Menti platform to answer the question of what features would make an ideal MERL system for adaptation.
Part 2: Collaborative agenda setting (open space)	Participants were asked to submit through a Menti questionnaire what they believed was the single most pressing issue facing MERL for adaptation. Then, they were asked to vote on which of the other participant's answers they agreed with. The top-voted answers were then taken as topics for discussion in break-out groups. The number of topics selected depended on the number of participants, to ensure that each group had 4-5 people.
Part 3: Break out room discussions	Participants were separated into break-out rooms and each group was assigned one topic for discussion, and to answer two main questions: why is this a problem, and how can it be solved? In the process, participants were challenged to think more deeply about the drivers of the topic they were discussing, and further to get creative about how these drivers could be addressed. These were summarised by our team facilitating each group on a virtual board using Miro. Facilitating team members included Marta Olazabal, Ana Terra Amorim-Maia, Cecilia Alda Vidal, William Lewis, and Sean Goodwin.

3 Results of discussions
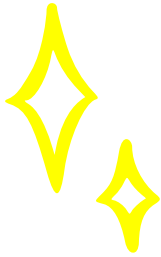
Below you can see the word cloud from each session.

Word cloud

Session 1

Imagine we have already perfected MERL systems for adaptation, what are the key features of these systems?
73 responses
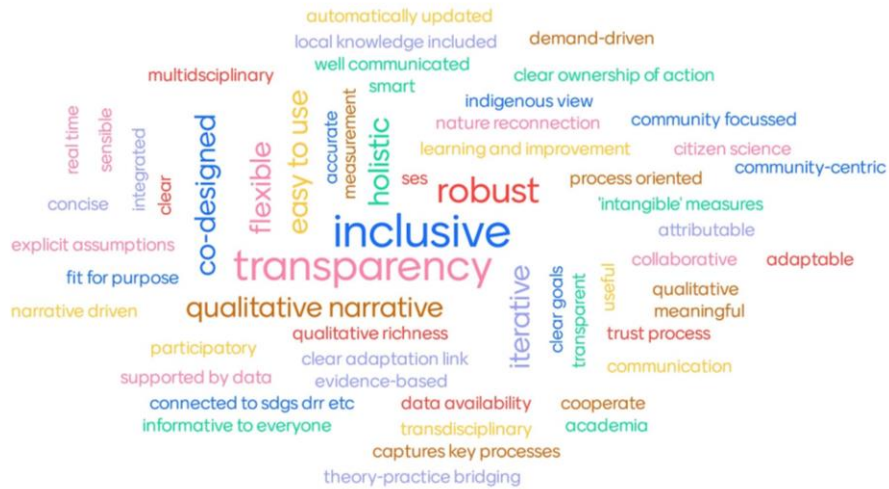
Session 2

Imagine we have already perfected MERL systems for adaptation, what are the key features of these systems?
80 responses

Collaborative agenda setting

Below is a list of the most pressing challenges submitted by participants relating to MERL for adaptation, with the number of votes in parentheses (if applicable). Bolded responses are issues that were then discussed in break-out sessions. Note that votes were clustered where votes were distributed across similar answers given by respondents.

Session 1

1. **Finding meaningful indicators that are measurable and attributable to reducing vulnerability and getting buy-in from policy actors. (3)**
2. **Politics. (1)**
3. **MERL for adaptation is heavily driven by results while adaptation itself is process-oriented. (1)**
4. Lack of communication between the involved sectors. (1)
5. Developing indicators and measuring them. (1)
6. Political will. (1)
7. Looking for standardized solutions that fill every case.
8. Having significant KPIs that are sensitive to changes, can be maintained over time, and provides information of different scales and time scenarios to be compared. (1)
9. Finding indicators and metrics (qualitative and quantitative) able to address the multi-risk nature of climate change adaptation. (1)
10. Lack of data. (1)
11. Resources.
12. Lack of clear and measurable goals.
13. Confusion over what "adaptive" truly means.
14. Clear ownership of MERL systems at the appropriate level (nesting and subsidiary important).

Session 2

1. **Defining clear adaptation targets and clear indicators which can measure progress towards those targets over time. (9)**
2. **Implementation that addresses intersectional vulnerabilities. (4)**

3. Developing a MERL system that can be used and compared in different contexts and sectors. (4)
4. Capacity/funding/time constraints. (3)
5. Change the MERL culture in adaptation finance and implementation to communicate and learn from failure transparently. (3)
6. Science-informed policies and decision making. (3)
7. Lack of clear, agreed vision and required outcomes (clear system boundaries). (3)
8. Implementation of climate adaptation measurement and budgets. (2)
9. On-the-ground projects actually occurring. (2)
10. How do we measure adaptation progress and determine success? What indicators and targets are appropriate? How do we navigate shifting baselines and uncertainty with various climate scenarios? (2)
11. Funding/capacity/support. (1)
12. Linking data available or constructable, with decisions required and targets aspired to. (1)
13. What is transformative adaptation and what are the steps that we can monitor along the way? (1)
14. Hampering governance structures.

Break-out room discussions

Below is then our summary of the discussions on the two questions participants were asked to answer in the breakout sessions. In the first session we had three breakout groups, and two groups in the second.

Session 1

Group 1: Finding meaningful indicators that are measurable and attributable to reducing vulnerability and getting buy-in from policy actors (4 participants)

Finding meaningful indicators that are measurable and attributable to reducing vulnerability and getting buy-in from policy actors is a complex enterprise. First, there is a problem with the amount of collected information that is not manageable and requires capacities and resources that are not accessible. A scale, sector or hazard

approach influences how indicators are defined and increases the amount of information collected. This might lead to unilateral decisions based on misleading or irrelevant data that cannot capture the reality of compound effects and risks. A fear of not getting the right data for indicators or not being able to achieve what was promised is also hindering the move from process to progress (from inputs and outputs to outcomes and impacts). As solutions to this, collaboration among sectors, a prompt collection of data and monitoring and keeping a list of ambitious indicators even when there is a lack of data, is seen as essential. There is also a need to change the narrative of M&E, from benchmarking to learning and experimentation as well as a need for clarifying responsibilities and resources beyond political constraints.

Group 2: Politics (4 participants)

Politics control how we conceptualise and define adaptation, which voices are heard, what gets measured, and what receives finance. As a result, politics can pose a number of significant challenges for Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) of adaptation. Local governments often prioritise certain populations over others, and may neglect vulnerable or minority groups. Short political cycles prioritise immediate results, conflicting with adaptation's long-term nature. Limited resources hinder MERL, particularly for costly data collection techniques like sensors. Social interaction and qualitative data is crucial for MERL, but feedback can be contentious if it contradicts expectations. Solutions may involve inclusive design processes that engage with local populations, creating long-term MERL frameworks independent of political cycles, and consensus-building on indicators and metrics (I&M). Finally, transparency regarding the political dimensions can help to break down silos that can in turn enhance MERL effectiveness and overcome political obstacles in adaptation efforts.

Group 3: MERL for adaptation is heavily driven by results while adaptation itself is process-oriented (5 participants)

The problem lies in the predominant focus on results, neglecting the iterative and process-oriented nature of adaptation. The absence of a clear narrative on adaptation makes it challenging to define success and measure progress. Moreover, the failure to learn from other contexts leads to the risk of maladaptation. Achieving a balance

between quantitative and qualitative techniques in MERL is crucial, as is prioritising the replication of processes rather than results when scaling (up, down, and deep) efforts. Transdisciplinary MERL teams are essential, with experts serving as listeners and facilitators, and communities as both users and producers of MERL systems. Fostering ownership and subsidiarity is key, along with context-specific monitoring and the development of a theory of change for adaptation. Access to examples and case studies is vital for promoting knowledge sharing and learning, ultimately mitigating the risk of maladaptation.

Session 2

Group 1: Defining clear adaptation targets and clear indicators that can measure progress towards those targets over time. (5 participants)

Establishing meaningful and relevant targets and indicators for climate change adaptation presents challenges. Shifting baselines and evolving scenarios complicate the establishment of targets. Agreeing on a definition of what it means to be adapted is itself contentious; what's beneficial for some may harm others or clash with other policy goals or societal and ecological aspirations. Successful adaptation is often defined in terms of the absence of risks. However, not only assessing the absence of risks is difficult but more importantly there is more to adaptation than just risk reduction. The current focus on quantitative indicators is not sufficient to measure adaptation, especially when the purpose of MERL is not only measuring but also involving actors, agents of change and people directly affected by climate impacts and adaptations. Qualitative approaches based on ethnographic and anthropological methods can help to capture lived experiences and engage communities in the definition and assessment of progress in adaptation.

Group 2: Implementation that addresses intersectional vulnerabilities. (7 participants)

Intersectionality is crucial in the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) of adaptation as it helps to understand the different vulnerabilities arising from the intersection of multiple identities, often overlooked in traditional adaptation approaches. However, it's vital not

to conflate diversity and inclusion with scientific assessments, especially in policy and environmental science contexts. The social and environmental determinants of health are a tried and tested approach to understanding how vulnerability and social factors manifest as real impact which when combined with the indigenous web of being can create a nuanced approach to MERL design and enable tailored adaptation MERL. This approach acknowledges the privilege inherent in different identities and informs more targeted MERL. Another method could be to use a design thinking approach, focusing on commonalities among impacted groups, and defining vulnerability levels and health-related indicators to enhance adaptation MERL's effectiveness, ensuring inclusivity and scalability in solutions.
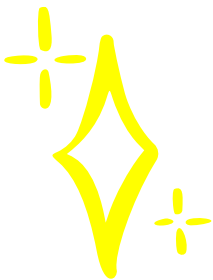
4 Next steps

How to get involved

Do you have experience working with MERL for adaptation? We will be running a survey in 2024 to further clarify the issues raised in this workshop, and identify the key challenges that we aim to address together with local partners in later parts of the IMAGINE Adaptation project. If you have experience with MERL for adaptation, you can register your interest to participate in the survey by filling out this short form.

Additionally, if you are working on an adaptation project in a city, you can find more information on our website about how you can become a case study with IMAGINE Adaptation, which will be a unique opportunity to develop MERL processes for your project.

Credits

Thank you to all workshop participants for their time and expertise in attending this workshop.

Suggested citation

More information about the project:
https://imagineadapt.bc3research.org

Contact: imagineadapt@bc3research.org