

PEER REVIEW FOR ADAPTIVE STRATEGY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE SMART PEACE CONSORTIUM

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MEL Practice Paper 1

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About Smart Peace

Smart Peace is a four-year programme funded by UK Aid for strategic conflict resolution in fragile and conflict-affected regions. It is implemented by a specialist global consortium comprising Conciliation Resources as the consortium lead, The Asia Foundation, the Behavioural Insights Team, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zürich, Chatham House and International Crisis Group. The Smart Peace consortium combines expertise in conflict analysis, community dialogue, political-level mediation, evaluation, policy influence and behavioural science to deliver targeted and adaptive conflict resolution interventions in Central African Republic, Myanmar and Nigeria.

The combination of diverse methodologies and approaches used across Smart Peace requires a diverse range of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) tools. This paper is the first in a series of short practice papers introducing the various MEL methods utilised in Smart Peace: peer review, outcome harvesting, SenseMaker and strategy testing.

A defining element of the Smart Peace consortium is adaptive strategy by design: deliberate efforts to ensure that the partners rapidly learn and adapt in response to insights obtained during project implementation. These characteristics are central to the value for money approach of the Smart Peace consortium, and to its ability to cultivate innovative ways of working together. One example of innovative Smart Peace collaboration in practice is the application of a low-burden peer review method in each of the Smart Peace contexts. The first part of this note outlines this innovative peer review method, while the second part explains how the method has been adapted to serve the Smart Peace consortium, and the benefits it has delivered in practice.

Collegial peer review in a consortium

Partnerships succeed when organisations combine their efforts in pursuit of shared objectives, supported by clear decision-making structures, effective collaboration methods, and ongoing learning and adaptation. These same essential elements underpin the success of the Smart Peace consortium, and are essential to its value-for-money claim. The foundational proposition of Smart Peace is that the consortium partners will produce more value for peace by working together in an iterative and adaptive manner, and that the insights obtained will help shape other initiatives across the sector. This learning note outlines the practical benefits gained by the Smart Peace consortium in applying an innovative model of peer review in its operations.

The value for money imperative

Effective use of public funds in peacebuilding requires practitioners to apply the highest standards of professional judgement in complex, volatile and ambiguous settings. In this respect, peacebuilding is like an alpine mountain expedition or open-ocean navigation: good results depend on sound judgment and iterative adaptation in difficult conditions, including when visibility is limited.

These rapidly changing and uncertain contexts mean that value-for-money will only be achieved if operational teams make good decisions at critical junctures. Peer review provides project teams with a trusted feedback loop at key gateways, helping to ensure that pivotal professional judgements are both well-informed and well-considered.



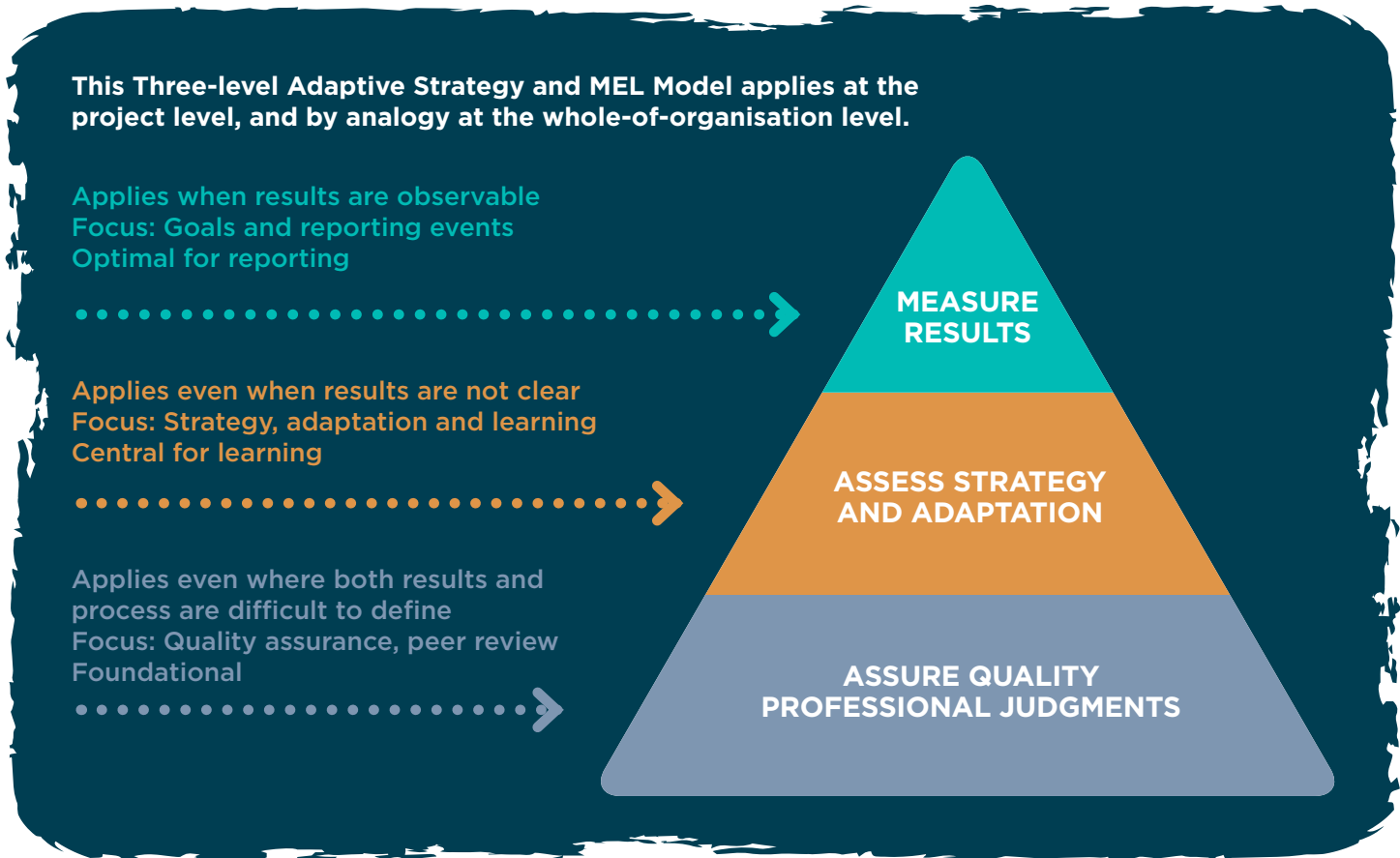
High-quality decisions are more likely where peacebuilding professionals are able to reflect critically on their own analyses, assumptions, objectives and strategy, and then adapt rapidly in real time.

The challenge of navigating peace projects through these complex conflict environments is made more difficult by an internal weakness common to all human endeavours: our own cognitive biases tend to obstruct good judgement. Nobel Prize-winning research by Daniel Kahneman¹ has demonstrated that our most important decisions are hampered by inescapable biases in our thinking. These biases make us less able to see alternative perspectives or call into question our own assumptions and analyses when taking strategic decisions. Research shows that we do not typically make these mistakes when considering the plans of a peer.

Therefore, the most reliable way of countering our own cognitive biases in decision-making is for project teams to benefit from multiple divergent perspectives, challenging and validating the framing of their strategic decisions. If this is done in a collegial and non-binding process with trusted colleagues such as peer review, rather than through an adversarial process or within a fact-finding evaluation, operational teams will have an opportunity to gain new insights or ask new questions which might otherwise be overlooked.

In the Smart Peace consortium, peer reviews form the foundation of adaptive monitoring and evaluation. Peer review offers peacebuilding practitioners a tool with which to address the foundational value-for-money question: ‘Why should a donor have confidence in your judgement?’, while also positioning the consortium’s teams to deliver more valuable results in complex environments by ensuring that decision-making is of the highest possible quality. The more, and more regularly, peer review is used, the better our decision-making gets.

Diagram 1: Three-level Adaptive Strategy and MEL Model



1. Daniel Kahneman received the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his related work on decision-making with Amos Tversky. See Kahneman, D., *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, (New York: Farrar, 2011); Sibony, O., *You’re About to Make a Terrible Mistake!*, (London: Swift, 2020); Lovallo, D., and Sibony, O., *The Case for Behavioural Strategy*, (McKinsey Quarterly, March 2010).

Who is involved?

- **Project teams** include selected members of a team responsible for everyday delivery and oversight of a project or programme.
- **Internal peers** are colleagues from within the organisation, working on different projects and in different regions, whose comparative insight provides a valuable insider perspective.
- **External peers** are sufficiently close to the organisation to be known and trusted, but are external to the organisation, to provide a fresh outlook.
- **Peer review facilitator** is an independent trusted person responsible for preparing for and facilitating a peer review workshop and for producing a workshop outcome note. In the online peer review model, the facilitator is required to invest more time in the preparatory briefings with all participants and begin constructing the broad lines of the anticipated conversation ahead of the workshop itself.

Peer review in practice

In practice, an effective peer review creates a trusted critical conversation between colleagues from both inside and outside a project team, without immediately moving to decision-making, and without imposing binding recommendations. This provides practitioners with the professional luxury of time to reflect on their work and any approaching decision gateways, while offering a greater level of quality assurance for donors and managers.

Process

When convened in-person with a single project team, a peer review is typically an independently facilitated conversation taking less than one day, designed to rapidly focus on the most salient issues and questions facing the project team, and relying on trusted peers to challenge the team's own assumptions, analyses, strategies and intended objectives.

The temporary suspension of decision-making helps to move team members out of a defensive posture, allowing space for otherwise unpopular ideas to be explored without disrupting decision-making authority. The project benefits from a variety of trusted collegial perspectives, reducing the risk of tunnel vision within the team, and providing assurance that key opportunities and gaps have been identified.

Preparation is minimal for the operational team and the peers, requiring only a one- or two-page self-review note from the project leader, circulated immediately before the peer review to draw attention to the most pertinent issues, including those that the team may be overlooking. The facilitator briefs participants regarding objectives and roles before the event to ensure that the process is time-efficient and sufficiently rigorous to be of operational use. Sometimes the operational team will choose to follow the peer review with a separate decision-making meeting, building proactively on the fresh insights and perspectives gained.

Peers

Peers are trusted colleagues from inside and outside the project team, engaged by the facilitator with the consent of the project team.

The profile, diversity and level of experience of peers should be carefully balanced to match the needs of the project. If possible, each peer review should include at least one peer from outside the project's own organisation to ensure a greater variety of professional perspectives. Peer review teams should include both junior and senior colleagues, and an appropriate balance of cultures, regions, ages and genders, to facilitate knowledge transfer across these entrenched but often unseen barriers. The facilitator works to ensure that the peers provide the best possible challenge for the team's project.

Peers require excellent communication and interpersonal skills, in order to provide robust collegial challenge without becoming argumentative or losing the trust of the project team. Individuals with a reputation for open-minded curiosity are ideal in this role.

Peer review helps to move team members out of a defensive posture, allowing space for otherwise unpopular ideas to be explored without disrupting decision-making authority.

Peer review is not

The peer review method is not an evaluation, expert review or assessment.

It doesn't replace more 'investigative' methods used as a fact-finding process, or additional verification of outcomes on the ground. Peer reviews can complement these methods, or fill the gap when external evaluations are not possible, e.g. due to confidentiality requirements, scarce data, short time-frames, or security constraints.

A peer review is not a decision-making forum.

It does not interfere with decision-making authority because peers are mandated simply to ask useful questions, and not to provide binding recommendations or findings.

A peer review is not a performance review or a managerial line-reporting tool.

The best outcomes are obtained when senior managers are absent from the peer review discussion, so that operational colleagues can be authentically self-critical. Project team members should be able to adopt a mental posture of 'discover', rather than 'defend'.

Timing

The peer review process is designed to respond rapidly to operational needs with minimal preparation, and without unnecessary documentation. Because the process is deliberately light, a peer review can be convened at very short notice if needed: ideally with a minimum lead time of two weeks, to ensure that a suitable combination of high value peers are available at the same time as the project team. When convening online, more time is required for preparatory consultations, while the 'plenary' videoconference part of the peer review should be kept to less than a day in total.

In practice, preparing for a peer review typically requires two or three hours from the project lead to compose an informal self-review note. This short note should draw attention to the pressing questions the team asks itself about the project, and will then be circulated to all participants, to help guide discussion rapidly towards the most salient issues. In addition, the project team should expect to spend an hour speaking together or individually with the facilitator, to ensure the peer review process is aligned with operational needs.

Where possible, peer reviews should be timed to precede key decision points, or project reporting and planning milestones. This ensures that project decisions, plans and reports are fully considered and benefit from critical reflection.

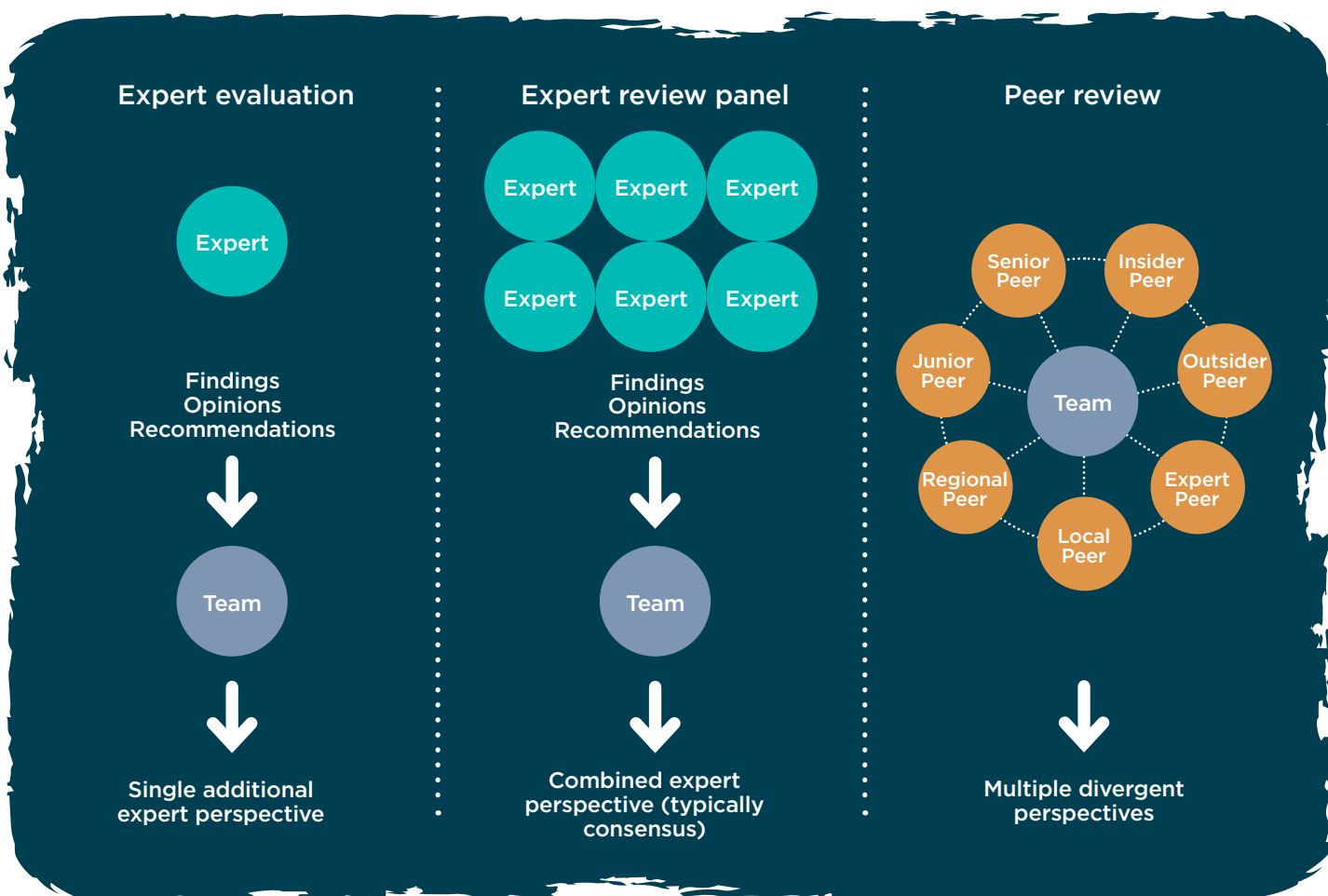
Output

Following the peer review, the facilitator provides a summary note to the participating project team members and the peers. The focus of this brief note is tailored to meet the needs of the project, and records key insights, questions and points of consensus, without making binding findings or recommendations. The main output of a peer review is not a document for the file, but rather better results, through higher-quality professional judgements and faster adaptation. To avoid the documentation becoming the aim, the facilitator should keep this note to around two pages, and leave the project team to produce a more detailed document if this is needed.

Diagram 2: Peer review process



Diagram 3: Distinguishing peer review from expert review panels and evaluation



Adapting the peer review model for the consortium setting

In the Smart Peace consortium, peer review was adapted to harness the full participation of multiple partner organisations in a consortium setting. In addition, the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic provided an unexpected opportunity to experiment with online peer reviews, and to share related lessons with consortium members seeking to move their own review processes to a digital format.



To find out more about peer review, see:

Peer Reviews: Guidance for Facilitators and Participants, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (March 2021)

Valuing peace: delivering and demonstrating mediation results, Ian Wadley (December 2017)

A multi-partner model

The peer review process is designed to suspend decision-making and to allow participants to explore alternative perspectives without defending their existing plans or their usual mode of engagement. This is especially useful in a consortium in which multiple partners bring together different capabilities, professional profiles and organisational cultures. This diversity is a strength if harnessed in pursuit of shared objectives, but it can also be a risk if it undermines consensus and cooperation.

The peer review process is therefore especially valuable in a consortium setting, allowing consortium partners to raise and begin to resolve delicate coordination questions concerning shared operations and activities, or 'competition' for access to key interlocutors, events or resources. In some cases, consortium partners may even hold conflicting priorities, which can be identified and resolved through a collegial peer review process.

Key benefits

- Focus attention on the areas of greatest possible **impact and value creation**, while helping teams tackle obstacles in a constructive way.
- Provide credible assurance regarding the **quality of professional judgements** in the field, satisfying a vital part of the value for money imperative for donors and management.
- Help to build **consensus** among team members.
- Faster and relatively **less expensive** than other MEL tools.
- Provide professional mentoring and **peer-to-peer learning** across organisational silos.
- **Operationally useful** for the project team, in contrast to 'compliance-oriented' methods.
- Provide a rare professional opportunity for teams to **think critically** about their own projects in a collegial environment, without being obliged to defend the validity of their project plans.
- Build **networks** with trusted peers.
- Preserve **confidentiality**, allowing the project team to maintain their existing circle of trust.
- Well-suited for organisations or consortia utilising **adaptive management** in complex environments.

In Smart Peace, we selected the leads from the three operational contexts in Myanmar, Nigeria and Central African Republic to participate as peers for each other's reviews, along with peer colleagues from the analytical or research organisations within the consortium, bringing additional 'outsider' views. The peer review method helped to foster the critical elements of a consortium's success, identified at the start of this paper: shared objectives, supported by clear decision-making structures, effective collaboration methods, and ongoing learning and adaptation.

Online peer reviews

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 rapidly interrupted plans to convene Smart Peace peer reviews in-person during 2020 and 2021. With flights suspended and many cities in an unpredictable cycle of lockdown, the Smart Peace peer reviews were rapidly convened remotely by video conference. This resulted in the development of a new online peer review model, avoiding the costs and risks of physical meetings.

This online format naturally relied more heavily on the role of the peer review facilitator, who became more central to the process of enquiry. In practice, the online format required the peer review facilitator to invest more time in the preparatory briefings with all participants, to identify salient lines of enquiry, and to begin constructing the broad lines of the anticipated conversation between participants. Drawing on these preparatory sessions, the facilitator prepared diagrams and statements to provoke and guide discussion during online plenary sessions. To keep the plenary online discussion both participatory and focussed, the Smart Peace online peer review sessions were limited to 90 minutes each, with breakout groups to help cultivate divergent perspectives, while identifying points of convergence and insights during the collective sessions.

Conclusion

In the Smart Peace consortium setting, peer review has demonstrated itself as an effective tool to promote high-quality judgements, strategic alignment, collaborative consensus and timely adaptation. The challenges of COVID-19 helped prompt innovation as the peer review model moved online, sparking new insights for remote facilitation methods.

Peer reviews help Smart Peace to ensure that decisions are based on a thorough reflective process, contributing to higher-quality decision-making. By seeking to assure the quality of strategic decisions in the field, the Smart Peace consortium is enhancing its ability to deliver valued results and better value for money in the pursuit of peace.

The opinions expressed in this publication represent those of Ian Wadley and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the UK government or other Smart Peace consortium partners.

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