

## STRATEGY TESTING: CONNECTING LEARNING TO ACTION IN THE SMART PEACE CONSORTIUM



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### MEL Practice Paper 4

**Authors: Marly Augustine and Tabea Campbell Pauli**

### 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 fourth in a series of short practice papers introducing the various MEL methods utilised in Smart Peace: peer review, outcome harvesting, SenseMaker and strategy testing.

Strategy testing is The Asia Foundation's flagship monitoring and learning method for flexible aid programmes. Closely linked to the organisation's 'thinking and working politically' and adaptive management approaches, the method aims to build on the idea of how change happens rather than what change needs to happen. Strategy testing helps development practitioners to design, implement and evaluate responsive, politically informed and effective programmes.

### What is strategy testing?

**A structured way to learn:** Strategy testing offers a structured method for translating learning into action. Through an iterative process of stocktaking, learning and decision-making, this approach requires teams to consider new information, changes in the operating environment, achievements and roadblocks, and to adapt programme interventions accordingly. The result is a dynamic, responsive, and politically informed programme with a higher chance of achieving the ultimate outcome.

The strength of the strategy testing approach is that it encourages a regular and systematic review relevant to programme aims. Simply put, strategy testing enables us to navigate a complicated and messy landscape of interests, incentives, institutions and influence, and to apply the findings to our programme. Strategy testing sessions guide teams to identify and employ more effective strategies towards achieving the ultimate outcome, or at least establishing its preconditions, in the next phase of implementation.

**Programmes need a theory of change:** In order to apply strategy testing effectively, each programme should begin with a theory of change or 'programme logic', articulating the ultimate outcome and laying out the expected change pathways. The theory of change is informed by a detailed understanding of the context as well as mapping of the key institutions, relationships and interests necessary to consider in planning how to achieve the ultimate outcome. Strategy testing and theory of change development requires a nuanced and regularly updated understanding of the local political dynamics. For The Asia Foundation, this contextual and institutional mapping usually takes the form of a political economy analysis.

**Strategy testing requires a commitment to building strong relationships, flexible design, an openness to experimentation, and high levels of trust between team members.**

**Trust is critical to reflection:** In addition to a comprehensive understanding of context and key dynamics, strategy testing at its core requires a commitment to building strong relationships, flexible design, an openness to experimentation, and high levels of trust between team members. For each strategy testing session, programme teams arrive prepared to reflect upon what has taken place since the last session – in particular, relevant changes in the external environment, shifts in interests and relationships of key institutions, and programme assumptions, achievements or identified roadblocks. Based on the results of every strategy testing session, programme teams document the key updates to the theory of change. This process enables them to adjust the programme logic to adopt more effective strategies, learn by doing, and achieve meaningful change.

**A flexible process:** Programme teams convene for a strategy testing session at regular intervals. The frequency of strategy testing sessions depends largely on the fluidity of the environment (e.g. in a rapidly changing situation, strategy testing sessions may be convened more frequently, such as fortnightly or monthly, according to the flow of events) and preference of the programme team. These sessions can be intensive and time consuming, as they seek to examine and unpack the many facets of programme progress, including changes to the context, updated understanding of institutional factors, and achievements as well as challenges. The advantage of this process is the opportunity to critically explore progress in a holistic way and build a shared understanding of programme priorities and realities, thereby connecting learning to action through necessary adaptation.

## Components of a theory of change<sup>1</sup>

- **Problem statement:** The main problem you are trying to address.
- **Analysis of key dynamics:** Political, economic, social and institutional factors relating to the problem. Includes analysis of key stakeholders, interests and relationships.
- **Interventions:** Includes strategies and activities. What you will do to achieve your intermediate outcomes.
- **Intermediate outcomes:** Also known as preconditions. Intermediate outcomes must occur for the ultimate outcome to take place.
- **Ultimate outcome:** The major impact or change your programme is trying to achieve.

**The importance of facilitation:** Where possible, the session facilitators should not be members of the team but should ideally be familiar with the operating environment, context, and issues being addressed. Having a certain degree of distance from the programme and team allows the facilitator to see the situation with an outside perspective, draw attention to areas that may be overlooked by the team, and pose critical questions that prompt discussion and learning. (See more on the ‘critical friend’ role below).

## Strategy testing in practice

**By the start of a programme,** the team must have a clear understanding of the theory of change or ‘programme logic’, which will guide decision-making and strategy assessment throughout the duration of the programme. (For more detail, see box on the left).

**During the development of the programme’s MEL plan,** the team should consider how often to convene strategy testing sessions based on the timeline of key project events and activities, the pace of change in the general context, and the programme’s learning and analytical objectives. Strategy testing could be carried out quarterly or at least biannually.

**In preparing for strategy testing,** the team should collate data points on external events, changes in institutional dynamics, and results of interventions carried out so far in the programme. This information could be collected and organised in the form of a ‘programme timeline’, or by using thematic categorisation or mind maps. It is essential that all strategy testing participants familiarise themselves with the programme progress data and contextual updates prior to the start of the session.

1. Based on guidance from the Evaluation and Learning Unit, The Asia Foundation.

## The strategy testing cycle

1. Reflect on the latest programme theory of change documents.
2. Synthesise evidence and reflect upon changes in the external environment, shifts in political, economic, social and institutional factors, and programme outputs and outcomes since the previous session.
3. Convene one or more strategy testing discussion(s) with the programme team. The facilitator should enable information sharing, analysis and decision-making with a focus on programme direction and impact.
4. Document changes to the theory of change based on the discussion(s). Consider operationalisation of changes to the programme logic.

**Strategy testing should be considered only for flexible and adaptable programme designs in which donors and partners are open to adjusting from present blueprints.**

## Smart Peace online strategy testing sessions

Within the Smart Peace programme, The Asia Foundation's team convened online strategy testing sessions, bringing in members of the Myanmar country team, relevant regional colleagues, and external technical and contextual experts. Remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated virtual strategy testing, which was split into two sessions, being sensitive to the level of effort required and taking into account 'Zoom fatigue' that can come from lengthy online sessions.

**Session #1.** In an initial discussion session, the programme team reviewed new information, changes in context and key dynamics, and interventions.

**Session #2.** These contributions were then synthesised and presented back to the programme team for action, first to make updates to the theory of change and then to operationalise these updates.

To improve engagement and increase contributions from all team members, the team used a combination of basic desktop software and virtual whiteboard platforms.

## Key benefits of strategy testing

### Suited to adaptive and flexible programme design

Strategy testing is a highly effective practice for flexible programmes and adaptive management as it maintains 'a strong feedback loop between learning and action'.<sup>2</sup> Though pathways in a theory of change may initially appear to follow a simple, linear trajectory and lead to predictable outcomes, theories of change are in practice expected to be adapted over the course of the programme, often several times. In fact, the original theory of change represents little more than our 'best guess at how we expect our strategies and interventions to contribute to the ultimate outcome'.<sup>3</sup>

This flexible approach to monitoring and learning can prove difficult for traditional aid programmes with pre-determined and fixed outputs and outcomes. Traditional aid programme design can be frustrating for those seeking to address complex and longstanding development challenges which do not have clear and static solutions. As such, strategy testing should be considered only for flexible and adaptable programme designs in which donors and partners are open to adjusting from present blueprints.

The Smart Peace project benefited greatly from strategy testing. The programme was well-suited to the strategy testing approach given its flexible model with few predefined outputs or outcomes, supportive funding partners interested in higher-level change, and an ultimate outcome focused on identifying lasting solutions to complex problems rather than short-term gains.

2. Ladner, D. (2015).

3. Ibid.

**Regular learning and subsequent evidence-based course correction facilitated through strategy testing sessions offers value for money, as fewer resources are invested in ineffective or obsolete strategies.**

The consortium also shared a deep appreciation for context, institutions and research, and held a tacit understanding that experimental solutions must be embedded in local knowledge and evidence. Seeking to identify more effective peace support in Myanmar, the programme by its very nature required an iterative model of assistance which emphasised exploration and trial of new ideas and solutions.

## **Provides value for money**

Regular learning and subsequent evidence-based course correction facilitated through strategy testing sessions offers value for money, as fewer resources are invested in ineffective or obsolete strategies. By following this approach, programme teams adjust more quickly to change, thereby minimising wasted resources.

For Smart Peace, the first end-of-year strategy testing session highlighted a mismatch between the contextual analysis and the assumptions that informed original activity design. The programme's dominant focus on Myanmar's formal peace process was a particular concern given that a deadlock in the formal dialogue reduced the effectiveness of this entry point to access key decision-makers and as a vehicle for building consensus between armed actors. As a result, The Asia Foundation's team shifted its plans to focus support toward a more receptive network of diverse stakeholders who were operating outside formal peace negotiations. This shift generated greater return on the investments made in developing training material and allowed the team to focus more on MEL data collection, by virtue of being able to work in closer proximity with the new target stakeholders. Such adaptation is essential for maximising impact in unpredictable environments.

## **Ideal for multi-partner projects and shared learning**

The concept of a 'critical friend' is important for strategy testing sessions. Ideally, all team members participate in strategy testing discussions. Each individual team member may serve an important role in relaying information or insights and/or be the main manager of a critical relationship. In many of The Asia Foundation's programmes, including Smart Peace, teams often rely on a critical friend to serve as an external facilitator, capable of questioning assumptions and steering the conversation towards long-term impact. A critical friend should have a strong understanding of the context and the programme but not be involved in day-to-day operations. The critical friend must be trusted by the team to facilitate honest conversations about progress and roadblocks.

In this case, Smart Peace consortium members, by virtue of the multi-partner initiative working towards a common goal, fulfilled the role of critical friends within the consortium. Each member was familiar with the overall programme and its shared objectives, and had a vested interest in the programme's success. Each Smart Peace partner organisation also brought in a unique knowledge base or skillset which provided for richer discussions at consortium-wide workshops and meetings. For example, The Asia Foundation produced research and planned interventions for peace and conflict mitigation from a governance lens while another Smart Peace partner considered activities from a security sector reform angle. Some consortium members were focused exclusively on context monitoring and synthesis of findings while others sought to better document and identify programme outcomes or trial interventions.



## References & background reading

Debra Ladner. *Strategy Testing: An Innovative Approach to Monitoring Highly Flexible Aid Programs*. Working Politically in Practice Series, Case Study No. 3 (San Francisco, CA: The Asia Foundation, 2015).

<https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Strategy-Testing-An-Innovative-Approach-to-Monitoring-Highly-Flexible-Aid-Programs.pdf>

## Applied learnings from The Asia Foundation's strategy testing in Smart Peace

Consortium research, including the Foundation's *Different Typology of Peace Support* and International Crisis Group's *Changing Peace Dynamics in Myanmar*, highlighted that long-held assumptions on the direction of, and key stakeholders involved in the formal peace process since 2015 were no longer valid by early 2020. In fact, many of the main conflict actors in 2015 were not the primary conflict parties by 2020. Furthermore, buy-in and commitment to the formal peace process had waned and had probably been overestimated from the start.

The main implication of this finding was that pursuing greater participation and engagement in the formal process could well prove to be a futile strategy. In a joint discussion session, the Myanmar hub considered how the changing landscape of institutions, influence and interests required a significant rethink by consortium members towards identifying avenues for more effective peace support.

In our internal strategy testing sessions, we considered aspects of the changing political landscape and their implications. One of our team's main strategies involved supporting conflict actors to be better equipped with critical knowledge of the governance and power sharing arrangements required to participate meaningfully in political negotiations. But who were the appropriate stakeholders now, and were significant political negotiations going to take place?

Recognising that diversity had long been lacking at peace and conflict negotiating tables, we focused on adapting our strategies to ensure greater inclusion. This included adapting training modules and materials for different types of stakeholders; for example, widening the scope of who was considered a key stakeholder to include those working within more informal 'track two' peace processes as well as the high-level political forums. This also involved incorporating new concepts from informal dialogues and institutions into the curriculum and seeking more diverse participants (men and women, youth and elderly, established leaders and civil society activists). Accounting for the different starting points of participants, the team planned for greater mentoring and follow-up with training participants.

The opinions expressed in this publication represent those of Marly Augustine and Tabea Campbell Pauli and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the UK Government or other Smart Peace consortium partners.

## SMART PEACE



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