SMC's Policy on learning and evaluation

Adopted by the SMC board on 27th September 2018.

1. Background & purpose

SMC's core values[1] emphasise our role in God's mission as agents of transformation and reconciliation; working for a just, peaceful and sustainable world where human rights are respected. This vision calls us to engage with complex issues, to which there are rarely simple solutions. It requires us to engage with each issue in its context, drawing from existing knowledge as best we can, and then learning from what we do and the changes we see. In order to learn our way forward and be adaptive, we need to link together the collection of evidence, engage in intentional and regular reflection, and strategically use periodical evaluations. This policy describes SMC's understanding of what it means to "learn from what we do and the changes we are contributing to" and how this concept of learning needs to be integrated into all programs[2] implemented or financed by SMC[3].

The policy exists as part of a larger system at SMC of financial reporting, accountability, complaints-response mechanisms, contractual compliance, and requirements for funding. These different aspects of our systems live in tension and complementarity with each other. SMC seeks to balance our role of having responsibility for the resources which we steward, our desire to operate with trust in our member organisations, and a commitment to locally-owned resilience and change. SMC's systems together with our long-term relationships help to provide a basis for trust and flexibility, allowing us to have a stronger focus on learning. Proactive learning and open communication further fosters trust in our partnerships, as we all seek to recognise and learn from positive and negative change, our successes and failures.

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[1] See: https://ihs.missioncouncil.se/documents/D9BA6D76-360F-4F1E-9A42-25DA0C1E6AFF/Value%20Foundation.pdf

[2] The term 'programs' is used in this document as a generic term to describe all intentionally planned projects, programs, and organisational initiatives and strategies. sv. 'verksamhet'.

[3] The policy applies to SMC, to SMC's member organisations who receive funding through SMC, and to commissioned consultants, and applies to work both in Sweden and internationally.

2. SMC's view – Why do we need to learn?

All work under the umbrella of SMC focuses on people; their relationships, organisation, dignity and right to determine their own development. SMC's rights-based approach (RBA) seeks to change the attitudes, behaviour and relationships of duty bearers and rights-holders. However, behavioural change is typically unpredictable, influenced by many factors and relationships, and constantly changing. In many cases different actors may not even be agreed on what is the "right" behaviour or how to change it. This is to say that behavioural change is complex. While technical solutions (e.g. boring wells, vaccinations, building infrastructure) should be predicted, carefully planned, and technical best practice followed, behavioural change can rarely be predicted and planned in the same way. Every attempt to influence behaviour is a process of discovery, where we need to be open to the unexpected, and learn our way towards the change we seek to inspire.[4]

This requires adaptive management[5], where we are able to adjust plans and activities based on our growing understanding of a changing context, deepening relationships, and what appears to be contributing to positive change. Our learning also plays an important role in accountability and advocacy (both upwards, downwards, and horizontally), enabling us to communicate about the nature of the issues we are working with and the benefits of the approaches we are taking.

The ability of individuals and organisations to learn in and from their experience and the changes they are contributing to is critical to our ability to support effective and relevant development and humanitarian programs. Ongoing learning and adaptation is a foundational aspect of program quality (as highlighted in the Core Humanitarian Standard, CHS[6]), which organisations must be held accountable for. People typically value learning and aspire to find ways to improve their work, but learning is often not adequately prioritised or budgeted for. The focus of this policy is therefore to establish the requirement that all programs implemented or financed by SMC should include a learning framework to support adaptive management at the operational level, and to prioritise space for learning. The following sections highlight some important principles for learning frameworks including the role of evaluation.

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[4] See Bryant Myers, 2011, *Walking with the poor*, Chapter 9: learning our way towards transformation

[5] Sida's evaluation guide (2018) uses the term 'Results-based management' which Sida defines very similarly to adaptive management.

[6] See https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/

3. Principles for learning frameworks

A learning approach to change requires an ongoing process of embedding evaluative thinking into the day-to-day implementation of our work, and raising our awareness of behavioural change. It recognises that while initial analysis is important to help initiatives get started on the right track, it is never complete or adequate because we always have more to learn. Similarly, a learning approach recognises that our ongoing monitoring is not simply about checking adherence to plans, but also about keeping our eyes open to change, learning and adapting. At all our different levels of operation, we need to establish rhythms and spaces for learning. This helps us reflect on the change we observe and the feedback we receive while asking ourselves what this means to us, not just in relation to our work, but also our identity, vision, mission, and values. This kind of learning approach requires an attitude of humbleness, curiosity, and discovery, driven by the desire to make the most of the opportunities and resources that we have available to us. It also requires us to be intentional about our learning.

Learning frameworks are about establishing systems that support us in being intentional in our learning by creating an overall picture of how monitoring, evaluation and reflection processes will be used to support learning in our programs. The framework should help us structure these processes by:

- Identifying and prioritising the most important topics and questions for our learning.
- Planning the collection of evidence which can help us explore our questions in greater depth, and understand the realities and different perspectives of the actors we are working with.
- Developing relevant tools and processes to support reflection on this evidence (sense-making), setting aside adequate resources and time.
- Planning for how we can effectively communicate and share our evidence and learning (downwards, horizontally, and upwards) in order to support accountability, transparency, organisational memory, wider shared-learning, and advocacy.
- Clarifying how we can apply our learning through revising plans, processes, principles and policies.

Learning frameworks should help remind us of who we are, reconnect us to our purpose, and refocus us on people.

Participation and power

Participation is a guiding light for how learning frameworks should be designed and implemented. The analysis of power is required to enable reciprocity and participation in learning processes and to counteract discrimination. Relationships in development cooperation often contain an underlying and skewed balance of power, and differing levels of access to information. Because

this unequal balance of power is strong and deeply rooted, new patterns and systems must be created that build fundamental confidence between the parties.

Following SMC's commitment to a rights-based approach and aid effectiveness, learning frameworks should be (in so far as possible) built bottom-up, supporting the learning processes of rights-holders and local organisations in their own development. Our learning processes should involve actors intentionally, as an opportunity to increase their capacity and enable them to "speak truth to power". Those who analyse and make sense of the evidence are those that learn, so careful consideration also needs to be made regarding who is part of the analysis and sense-making processes. Learning frameworks should build on and reinforce a non-discriminatory approach. The process of listening and learning from our work should help reveal unintended discrimination and groups which have been excluded.

Our learning processes are also a means to address power issues in our own organisations, by changing patterns of participation (by including other voices) and by questioning our systems and policies in the light of what we are discovering and the feedback from those we are seeking to support.

4. Learning in relation to SMC's theory of change

In connection to SMC's rights-based approach, an actor-focused approach should be employed, where an outcome is defined as a behavioural change in a social actor that we have influenced or supported. These behavioural changes may be changes in relationships, actions, practices or formalised policies and documents. SMC's theory of change (described in SMC's Policy for a rights-based approach) identifies three broad levels at which these behaviour changes can occur; at the level of the individual, organisations (including informal organisation) and society/institutions. Learning frameworks should help us learn about each of these three levels of change, covering both rights-holders and duty bearers (legal and moral).

Learning can occur at many different levels from refining our practices to challenging our underlying assumptions about how change happens[7]. The priorities of the learning framework should be determined by the program in relation to its context, but emphasis should be given to understanding the behavioural change of the key actors that the program is directly working with and trying to influence. In broad terms learning should support the program in:

- Understanding what change (positive or negative) has happened, how this change happened and how we contributed to this change (positively or negatively).

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[7] See Donald Schön, 1983, *The reflective practitioner*, on double-loop learning.

- Helping discover unexpected results. Learning should help us search beyond program boundaries in order to understand unintended consequences, especially with regards to gender, conflict, environmental impact, and participation (equality).
- Discovering solutions and ways of working with people which are the 'best fit' to the context, local challenges, assets and opportunities.
- Identifying if practices are consistent with the organisations standards (e.g. CHS), values and principles (e.g. participation and inclusion).
- Deepening understanding of partners and stakeholders and the contexts they operate in as we walk with them on their journey.

The value on focussing on behavioural change outcomes is that they are the steps between our actions (activities and outputs) and the sustainable change at the societal level (impact) that we hope to contribute to. Attitudes and awareness may also be of interest, but they are not as available to observation as behavioural change. Societal change is the accumulation of these multiple smaller outcomes. It is usually beyond the influence of a single organisation or program (requiring broader sector-wide and multi-stakeholder learning frameworks and evaluations) and often requires longer time frames in order to show significant change.

Humanitarian crises present a difficult challenge. They are typically highly dynamic and unpredictable. Direct service delivery interventions are often required to stabilise issues in the short term (e.g. establishing access to water), but consideration also needs to be given to more complex issues such recovery, protection, and conflict sensitivity. The need to act quickly often restricts the extent to which learning processes can happen. However, in accordance with the commitment to learning within the Core Humanitarian Standard, monitoring of outputs, evidence collection, feedback from affected people and data-sharing play an important role in these interventions. This is to ensure that lives are saved, needs of communities are being met, resilience strengthened, and that humanitarian efforts are coordinated to provide proper coverage.

In consideration of SMC's other policies, learning frameworks need to ensure that specific attention is given to gender and inclusion, and the role of religious actors (including the effect of faith in implementing organisation). SMC's funding channels may also have further specific requirements (e.g. baselines), the reader is therefore recommended to consult the appropriate guidelines.

5. Implications & application

Establishing learning frameworks

All programs supported by SMC should have a learning framework to guide the process of learning from what we do and the changes we are contributing to. This is in order to provide a foundation for adaptive management. The framework should be outlined in funding applications, and be of an appropriate size with respect to the overall program budget and the complexity of the issues the program is addressing. An agreed learning framework should be subject to regular review to ensure that it is realistic and useful.

In SMC financed programs the costs for learning systems, including evaluations, should be included within the program budget in the funding request presented to SMC. However, special funds for establishing learning frameworks and evaluating interventions may also be solicited separately through SMCs "added-value" funding.

Evaluation

Evaluation is one specific tool to support a learning framework, and is given focus here as a requirement for all work financed and implemented by SMC (with the exception of the Sida humanitarian Rapid-Response Mechanism, RRM).

Evaluations should follow the principles of the overall learning framework, with the primary objective of evaluations to generate learning among the actors involved about the program's contribution to change. Evaluations should be utilisation-focused, helping to answer relevant questions for the actors involved, especially from the operational level. Evaluations typically build upon ongoing monitoring data. Programs with good evidence-collection and embedded learning processes are more likely to identify meaningful evaluation questions, and yield deeper insights. The OECD-DAC criteria[8] for evaluations should be considered in the design process to help ensure that the evaluation goes deeper than a simple audit of activities. Different kinds of evaluation will focus on different aspects of the criteria, depending on the identified evaluation questions.

As part of the learning framework, participation is a strong value for SMC in evaluations. Evaluations should be designed as a learning process, valuing insight from operational staff and local actors and enabling critical reflection and greater self-awareness for all the actors involved. This requires intentionality, with appropriate methods chosen to ensure that different perspectives (e.g. of

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[8] Efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and relevance. For more information see: http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm and for Humanitarian interventions: https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/eha-2006.pdf

children) are included. Similarly, communication with the intended users of the evaluation needs to be considered early in planning. The final report is not the goal of the evaluation, but rather a means to support documentation, communication and usage of what has been learned through the process. A well performed evaluation is a valuable capacity building opportunity in support of building an active and strong civil society.

For smaller programs, evaluations may be conducted internally. However, an external evaluator can provide a fresh perspective, bring technical research competence, and help facilitate learning in the organisation, and is therefore strongly encouraged.

Specific Criteria for evaluation of work financed through SMC

- All work that is implemented or financed by SMC will be evaluated, either internally or externally, within the program period (except Humanitarian RRM financed projects).
- External evaluation is mandatory for interventions which a) receive SMC funding of more than 1 000 000 SEK/year, or b), have run, or plan to run for over five years.
- All evaluations should produce a report that will be submitted to SMC on completion. SMC reads these reports to deepen our understanding of the program, and also to understand how member organisations are supporting and using evaluation processes.
- Unless explicitly agreed otherwise, all reports will be shared openly by SMC as part of our commitment to transparency and learning.
- For external evaluations, a management response (or equivalent e.g. commitments formed through a participatory process) should be submitted to SMC with the evaluation report. This should include an after-action review of the evaluation process in order to support improvements in future evaluations.

Application of Policy to SMC

The principles and guidelines outlined in this policy are also applicable to SMC internally. Operational plans provide the framework for identifying ongoing learning priorities and how evaluations can strategically support our learning.

As outlined in the introduction, SMC recognises the inherent tension in the aid system at large, in its role as stewarding and being accountable for resources, supporting member organisations and prioritising learning. An important function within SMC in relation to this learning policy is to enable dialogue about these issues so that we can find a good balance and navigate our way through the inherent tensions. This issue is prioritised as part of SMC's operational plans, and evaluations of SMC will be conducted during each program period.

SMC's support to member organisations

SMC seeks to be a resource for member organisations in establishing learning frameworks and conducting evaluations. The specific planning for this is included within SMC's operational planning, but as a broad guide SMC offers advice, financial resources, capacity building material, and training opportunities to [9]support the design and implementation of learning frameworks and evaluations. SMC maintains an open library of evaluations funded by SMC as a support to inspiration, learning and accountability across organisations.

SMC plays an important role in supporting its member organisations in identifying learning priorities. Through SMC's long-term relationships, review processes and capacity development, SMC builds a rich picture of its member organisations and can provide a valuable external perspective helping to ensure that learning frameworks are addressing the most relevant issues. As an external voice, SMC can help raise issues which may be difficult to lift internally. SMC recognises that this is a position of power which needs to be handled sensitively with respect for our member organisations' sovereignty.

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[9] Available at SMCs learning centre: https://www.smc.global/en/learning-center/

Annex – Revision Process

The focus on learning in this policy builds on SMC's former Evaluation policy (2013). The intention of this revision is to highlight the importance of ongoing learning within the complex, actor-focused change that SMC is engaged in with its member organisations and their partner organisations. The motivation for this focus is drawn from an ongoing dialogue within SMC, with our member organisations, and in relation to wider trends and opportunities in the development sector. Significant contributions to the development of this new policy include:

- Questions and issues raised from the 2013 Evaluation policy review process (meeting notes).
- 2015 SMC impact evaluation by Rightshouse which highlighted:
  - The need to focus evaluation on actor-focused behavioural change, relationships and change at the societal level.
  - The need to understand deeper connections to our principles and identity, especially in relation to religion in development and faith-based organisations.
  - Encouragement to use more complexity aware approaches to monitoring and evaluation.

- Experiences from the development of SMC's actor-focused strategy and operational review and planning cycle.
- Learning processes and recommendations from the evaluation of SMC's support to humanitarian work in Northern Uganda by Silva Ferretti.
- Gathering perspectives on learning through MO days and SMC internal capacity development in early 2018.
- Specific review of drafts and policy content:
  - Feedback from SMC Learning and policy unit.
  - Internal reference group representing SMC's Civsam (Andrea Samosir Josephson), Infokom (Sanna Svensson) and Humanitarian (Joel Sverker) funding streams.
  - Feedback from external reference group: Jana Frolén & Niclas Sannerheim (KFUM), Marianne Stattin (Eriks), Stella Lundén (Krf), Cate Broussard (LPI), Silva Ferretti (evaluation consultant).
  - Feedback from Hanna Mellergård (Head of Development Cooperation) and Niklas Eklöv (Head of Learning and Advocacy).
  - Feedback from the SMC board.

Approved by the SMC board 27th September 2018