

# Monitoring and evaluation (M&E): are local government actions contributing to successful adaptation?

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## Abstract

Climate change adaptation is an emergent field of practice for local governments, thus it is necessary to understand how their initiatives are contributing to successful adaptation, and if funds have been invested wisely: this is the role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Recent research of Australian local governments finds that M&E is challenging, and that many M&E efforts track implementation, rather than evaluate effectiveness and efficiency. This paper presents the preliminary findings of a survey and interviews with Australian local governments. It argues there is need for greater evaluative capacity in the sector.

**Keywords:** *Monitoring and evaluation, Local government, Evaluative capacity*

## Introduction

Local governments (LGs) in Australia have been active in climate change adaptation for the last decade, noting that climate change adaptation is a perceived as a particularly local phenomenon that is context specific (Baker et al. 2012; Measham et al. 2011). Many LGs have conducted impact, risk and/or vulnerability assessments (Collins 2016), and over one third have a current adaptation plan (Scott 2018). As these plans are implemented, there is an imperative to understand if and how adaptation initiatives are reducing climate risk and vulnerability, increasing adaptive capacity, and contributing to successful adaptation. Although there are many documented challenges of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) (Bours et al. 2014; Villanueva 2011), it provides an essential contribution for learning what works, for whom, and in what context (Spearman & McGray 2011). However, M&E of climate change adaptation is not perceived to be widely undertaken by the LG sector (Woodruff & Stults 2016), with little documented evidence of the use of M&E frameworks at the local level (Turner et al. 2014). The objective of this research (the first stage of a PhD project investigating the influence of M&Es on adaptation decision-making and practice) was therefore to determine the nature of M&E of adaptation undertaken by LGs in Australia. This paper presents findings of a national survey of Australian LGs, and follow-up interviews with selected respondents, investigating how they are monitoring and evaluating their adaptation plans and initiatives. While there are insights around governance of M&E of adaptation, as well as methodological insights, this paper focuses on the competence of LGs to undertake M&E of climate change adaptation, and the apparent need to develop evaluative capacity within the LG sector.

## Methodology

Following a literature review and compilation of a database of Australian LG climate change adaptation plans (building on Collins (2015)), the research was conducted in three phases. First, an online survey was developed with both closed and open-ended questions. The questions identified if the LG had an adaptation plan, which department had responsibility for the plan, and queried the nature of M&E undertaken. The survey was distributed to nearly 200 (of 540) LGs in Australia through direct email and targeted promotional channels (such as group emails distributed by regional LG associations). LGs that were identified as having a current adaptation plan (per the database) were targeted; however, emails distributed by associations reached beyond this audience. There was a 46% response rate to the survey. The second phase involved initial statistical and thematic analysis to determine emerging themes, and the third phase was semi-structured interviews with five respondents to further explore initial survey findings. The results of the initial analysis of both the survey and interviews are presented.

## Findings

Studies of government adaptation plans have found that M&E is not comprehensively represented (Baker et al. 2012; Woodruff & Stults 2016). This survey supports this notion with just over one third (37%) of councils identifying that their adaptation plans contained an M&E framework. These were mostly developed internally, using resources such as international guidance documents and other council's adaptation or sustainability M&E frameworks. One interviewee noted their framework was evolving as their knowledge and skills increased.

The survey indicated approximately half the respondents (49%) monitored their adaptation initiatives – either as part of an adaptation plan or independent of a plan. Initiatives were both implemented and monitored across council departments, but were coordinated by a single department or team, predominantly the environment or sustainability team. Only 18% of respondents had conducted an evaluation, with approximately half of these conducted internally, which some considered more an informal 'review'. Most indicated it was “*generally too early in our climate change adaptation journey to have considered this [evaluation]*” (respondent).

The majority of monitoring was tracking implementation; that is, checking whether initiatives were implemented according to plan. Many initiatives that were monitored were consequently reported through councils' risk, annual and strategic reporting. For example, one council noted that adaptation implementation was “*included in quarterly reporting of the Council Plan actions, via the Council's Risk Management System*” (respondent). Interviewees elaborated this was often undertaken as “traffic light” reporting, noting whether the initiative was completed,

on-track, or behind schedule. Spearman & McGray (2011) note that while it is important to monitor and report implementation, the focus on accountability limits the opportunity of cross-organisational learning. It was promising that many councils were seeking to develop their M&E efforts further, recognising that they were currently limited. However, 13 respondents stated they were not monitoring adaptation efforts at all, or only in a haphazard manner.

The lack of a common indicator framework to measure adaptation interventions, outcomes, and impacts is a recognised challenge of adaptation M&E (Bours et al. 2014), and survey respondents and interviewees concurred. A variance of indicators was reported. Some councils had developed output and outcome indicators in relation to specific initiatives such as building adaptive capacity through staff training (number of staff trained), or reducing urban temperatures through increased tree planting (number of trees or percentage canopy coverage). Others were monitoring changed conditions and impacts, for example, coastal erosion. Two councils were undertaking processes to measure changed community vulnerability and adaptive capacity through regular, longitudinal surveys.

Many respondents noted governance challenges, such as lack of leadership for adaptation M&E, poor resourcing and competing priorities (which is supported by other research, see for example Measham et al. 2011; NCCARF 2017). However, what also emerged was a challenge around the competence of LG practitioners to develop appropriate M&E frameworks, identify indicators, and to broadly undertake M&E for adaptation activities. It was revealed that LGs' understanding of the broad range of M&E tools and methods and how to apply them was limited. Interviewees noted that while competence in planning and implementing adaptation was growing, M&E of adaptation was a newer area for them where they felt they had to further develop their skills. This suggests the need to build greater evaluative capacity within the LG sector – where 'evaluative capacity' refers to the capacity within an organisation to understand and engage in evaluation concepts and practices, to think evaluatively and to use M&E in planning and decision-making (Preskill & Boyle 2008).

## Conclusion

This research provides empirical evidence of current M&E efforts at the local level. It demonstrates the majority of monitoring undertaken is tracking progress, rather than assessing effectiveness and efficiency, and that little evaluation has been done. The research shows M&E of adaptation is a new and challenging area for LG and it points to a need for greater understanding of the value of M&E and how it can effectively inform future adaptation planning, decision-making and actions. Improving evaluative capacity within the sector is one way we can understand if efforts are contributing to successful adaptation.

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