UAF Asia & Pacific's Approach to

Monitoring
Evaluation
Accountability
Learning

Unlearning to Forge New Learning Paths
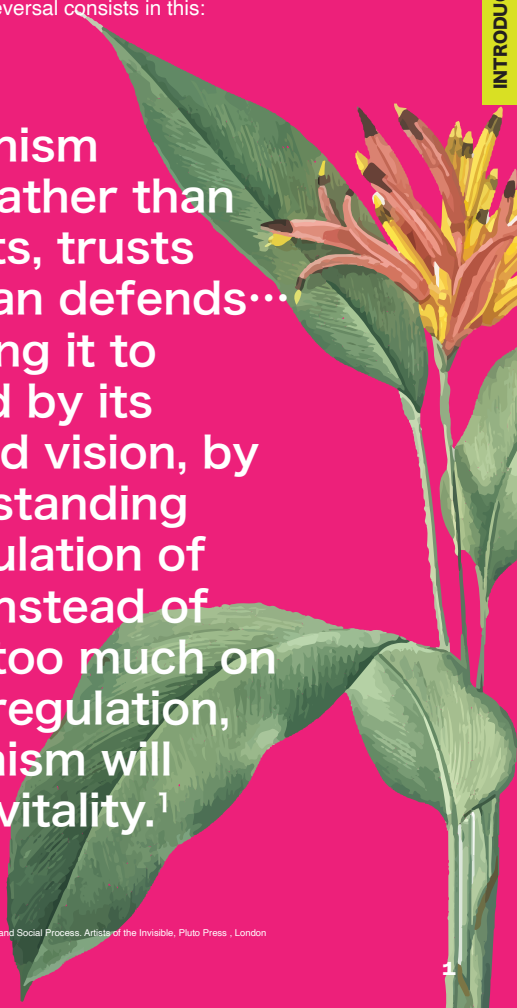
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The wholeness, health and value of a social organism is not only up to us, but up to that which we allow to work through us. The reversal consists in this:

The organism permits rather than constructs, trusts rather than defends… By enabling it to be guided by its values and vision, by its understanding and articulation of its task, instead of insisting too much on rule and regulation, the organism will maintain vitality.[1]

1 Kaplan, Allan (2002) Development Practitioners and Social Process. Artists of the Invisible, Pluto Press , London (p106/7).

Urgent Action Fund Asia and the Pacific (UAF A&P) is a feminist fund that offers emergency support and resources for supporting resistance from, and building resilience of activists and non-binary defenders of Asia and the Pacific.

It is the youngest of a suite of Sister Funds who are part of the global feminist movement, all involved with similar rapid response grant-making to activists and defenders. UAF A&P has thus been able to learn from its sisters' over twenty years of experience in traditional Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL), understand the tool's inability to meet rapid response grant-makers' needs, and innovate from there.

Given UAF A&P's identity as a first mover in crises and emergencies, the use of Emergent Learning (EL)[2] is serving it well in its need to rapidly adapt to and manoeuvre in a complex, constantly shifting terrain.

The approach is enabling us to collectively convene, reflect and draw on everyone's skills and resources to formulate a unique response to every crisis, moment of growth, or moment of polarity. It is also fostering experimentation with a more collaborative mode of working and programming.

2 Darling, Marilyn; Guber, Heidi; Smith, Jillaine; and Stiles, James (2016) "Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation", The Foundation Review: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1284 Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol8/iss1/8

It is unsurprising therefore, that in a recently conducted external assessment of the global Sister Funds' approaches to MEL, the authors[3] suggested that a significant cultural shift is going to be required to adopt

"a cohesive and comprehensive MEL[4] Framework that address the 'silos' within the Sisters (i.e., between grants, resource development, communications, operations and governance)". Most noteworthily, they highlighted how UAF A&P's EL approach "has the greatest synergy, at present, with the cultural shift that will be required".

3 A cohesive and comprehensive MEL.

4 Report of the capacity review of monitoring, evaluation and learning among the sister funds and the collective space of the sisterhood, Jan 2022 (See pg 3).

4

This document describes UAF A&P's innovative approach to Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) which centres on a values- and learning-based approach, with a strong emphasis on the 'A' and the 'L'. We reflect here upon how this approach to MEAL is dynamic, contextual, and above all a central part of organisational life, where the whole team is part of its co-creation. It is not an add-on.

M Monitoring

E Evaluation

A Accountability

L Learning

We see how it is helping the organisation strengthen and adapt its strategy and practice, be accountable to the defenders it works with, the women's rights and feminist movements it supports, as well as strengthen its own internal feminist culture of care, natural self-expression and vitality.

The following sections will start with a brief recount of the definition as well as history of EL in the organisation (Part I) before moving onto characteristics, practices, and the evolution of this approach (Part II). Part III, IV and V will then present three major contributions EL brings about, with theory, practice, and results covered in each.
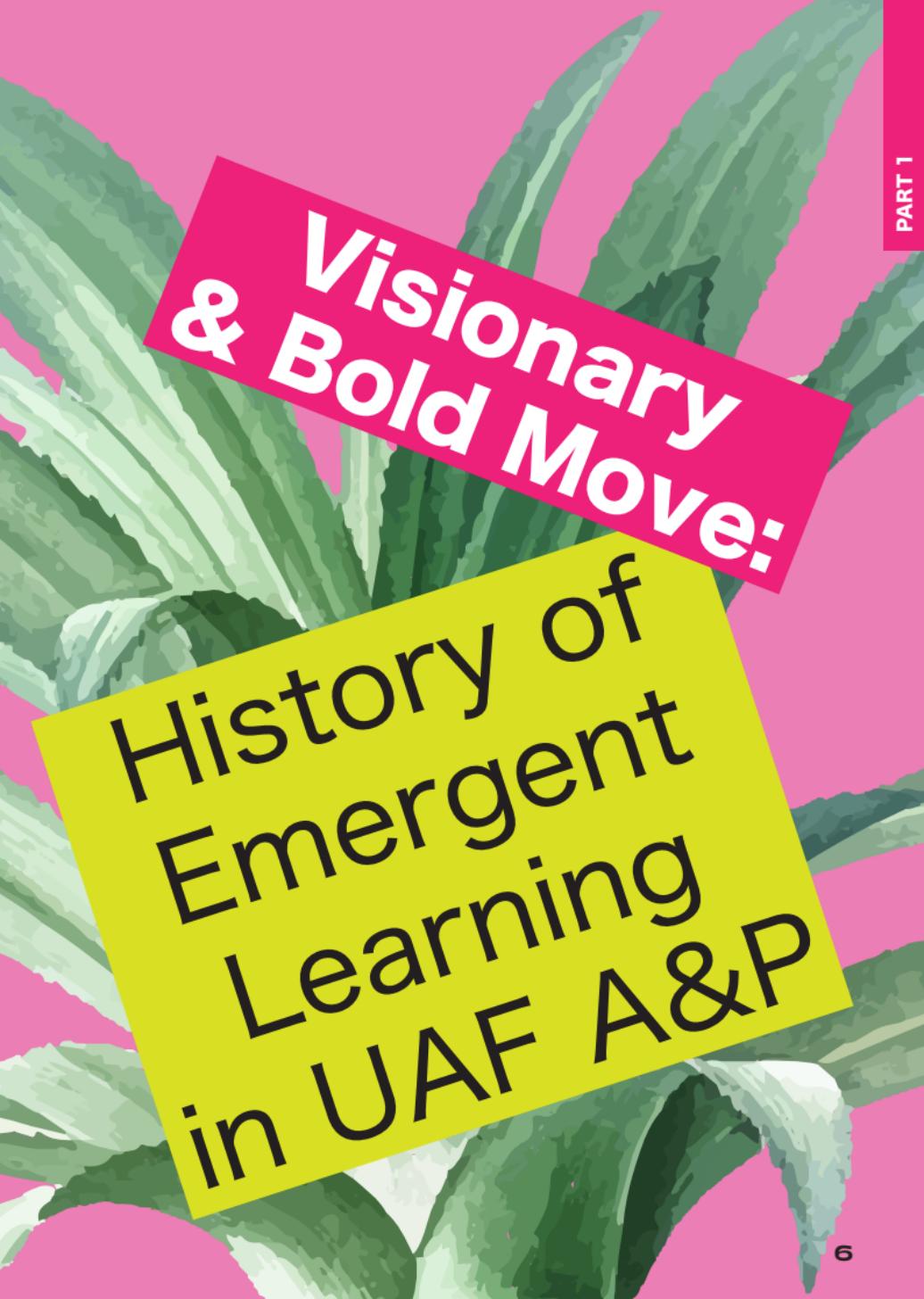
Visionary & Bold Move:

History of Emergent Learning in UAF A&P

WHY AN ALTERNATE LEARNING APPROACH?

Since its inception, the Board and UAF A&P's leadership[5] were drawn to and invested in making UAF A&P a learning organisation. We wanted an approach that would be congruent with the feminist values that the fund was founded on, and offer support to the organisation to function effectively amid ongoing complexity, change, and volatility in Asia and the Pacific (we might say life in general). Simultaneously, they also wanted to strengthen individual staff's capacity to grow, become more conscious of themselves, and co-create a culture of care.

Usually, a dedicated MEL function is responsible for making sense of data collected, which is often directed externally to donor reports. By contrast, learning in UAF A&P is not done either by the leadership, or by outsiders to the programs, or for back donors primarily.

5 UAF A&P's founding co-leads were Mary Jane Real, and Virisila Buadromo, with Kamala Chandrakirana as the Regional Board Chair. Mary Jane served as UAF A&P's co-lead between 2017 and 2020. Virisila continues to co-lead the organisation. Current co-leads are Virisila Buadromo and Vinita Sahasranaman.

The learning approach adopted by UAF A&P attempts to ensure that data is made sense of by the entire team, and through such processes, cultivate a learning culture and practice across the whole organisation.

Our intention has been directed towards everyone feeling empowered to integrate MEAL into their core work, and share with each other so each team member knows how to find their own answers.

Choosing a different path of doing MEL that prioritises Accountability and Learning is a significant innovation for this small fund. It has taken vision, courage, boldness and perseverance to sustain its use.

It is an imperfect work in progress, currently heavily reliant on the practice anchored by the learning facilitator, the thinking support from the founding Co-Leads, and the ongoing commitment by both current co-leads. The whole team has also actively participated in co-creating and cultivating this approach through their own experimentations and practices.

WHAT IS EMERGENT LEARNING?

Emergent Learning (EL)'s greatest innovation is putting emphasis on learning and making the thinking behind processes and practices visible, helping us see how we see.

After any learning moment, EL tools are proactively designed to apply reflective insights to both new plans and existing opportunities. EL uses forward-looking learning questions with associated experiments to guide direction[6].

A learning question is posed by and to ourselves to think about what we are trying to accomplish, what we know so far, and what it will take to achieve the outcomes we set for ourselves[7]. Each learning question might have more than one strategy that can contribute towards 'answering' it, and different strategies might be more appropriate under different conditions.

Proposing strategies as 'hypotheses' encourages experimentation, inviting us to test our thinking rather than assuming them as 'truths'.

Hypotheses are in the form of 'if, then' statements which include 'indicators'.

[7] See Fourth Quadrant Partners, 2020, How to Craft a Powerful Learning Questions.

They encourage us to flesh out the underlying thinking which we can check back against. We revise them when they don't turn out to work. Only once we know for sure how our proposed strategies translate well in the specific contexts we are facing, do we **'institutionalise'** them.

This approach allows our learning on **'what we need to learn'** to guide us in both strengthening our existing strategies and in noticing emergence in the contexts in which we work. Multiple hypotheses from all perspectives help us sense the spaces of emergent change panoramically. It also leads to less division between learning, evaluation, and planning.

If one takes out the word **'measurement'**, and instead directly links ongoing observations with pre-existing data, then there would be more commitment to recording and analyzing data at every stage of work.

With data seen and used immediately as we prepare for the next cycle of questioning and testing, the recursive feedback loop is complete with clear value added.

Knowledge is then about "experimenting with a constantly evolving set of hypotheses about how to succeed in a dynamic environment"

(Darling et.al, 2016:61).

In inviting us to bring disciplined attention to making conscious the links between how we think (our heads), how we feel (our hearts), and how that affects what we do (our hands and feet), it offers an integrative practice and helps challenge two important patriarchal binaries – the mind-body and the subject-object dualism. In Emergent Learning, the first best customer is the team itself, while funding is for expanding the capacity for learning and agency.

PRINCIPLES

Inviting diverse voices to the table

Holding experts in equal measure

Maximising freedom to experiment

Returning learning to the system

WHAT

EL ensures Learning is collaborative and practising Accountability is intentional

Principles of Emergent Learning

EMBRACE FEMINIST VALUES LIKE

Care

Inclusion

Power-sharing

Experimenting with creating new norms

WHAT IS MEAL?

Mary Jane Real had previously tasted Emergent Learning (EL) and saw its potential in deepening conversations among feminists in the long-term:

> **"We wanted to contribute to seeding this new earth and see new ways of doing and being. Therefore, we were very deliberate about which modalities to engage with as part of building data. That's why, when we adapted EL, we knew it would bode well with our vision for a learning organisation."**
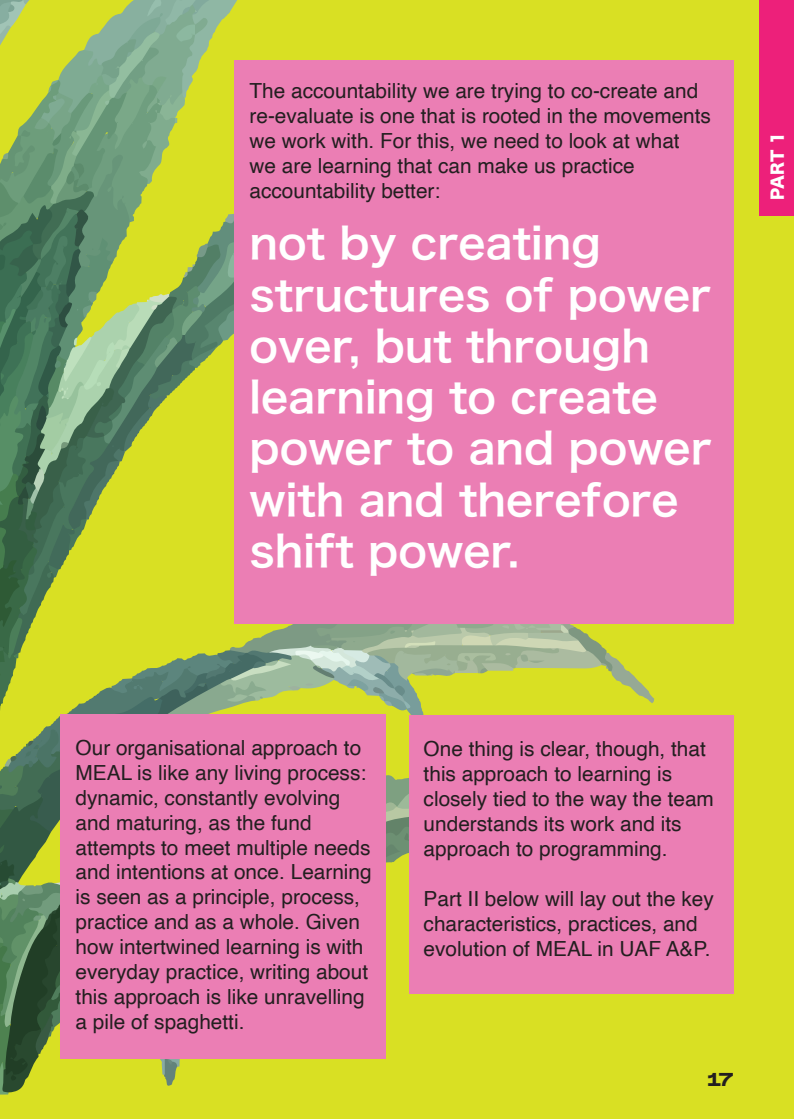
Virisila Buadromo then brought in key aspects of working emergently, inspired by Adrienne Maree Brown[8], as it is more "practical and relates more sensibly to 'reality'". Guided by these initial interests and understandings, EL was adapted to the fund's needs. The team collaboratively developed the MEAL approach with facilitators experienced with not only EL tools, but also the Theory of Change approach and Emergent Strategies.

The fact is, we have learned from years of working with different MEAL approaches that there are no quick fixes and no one-size-fits-all methodology. The traditional, even some of the existing feminist M and E frameworks, don't capture the dynamism and fluidity of what was actually happening on the ground.

Many existing frameworks developed in the west or the global north and imposed upon us are often not relevant to our realities.

8 Adrienne Maree Brown (2017). Emergent Strategy. Shaping Change, Changing Worlds. AK Press, Chico, USA.
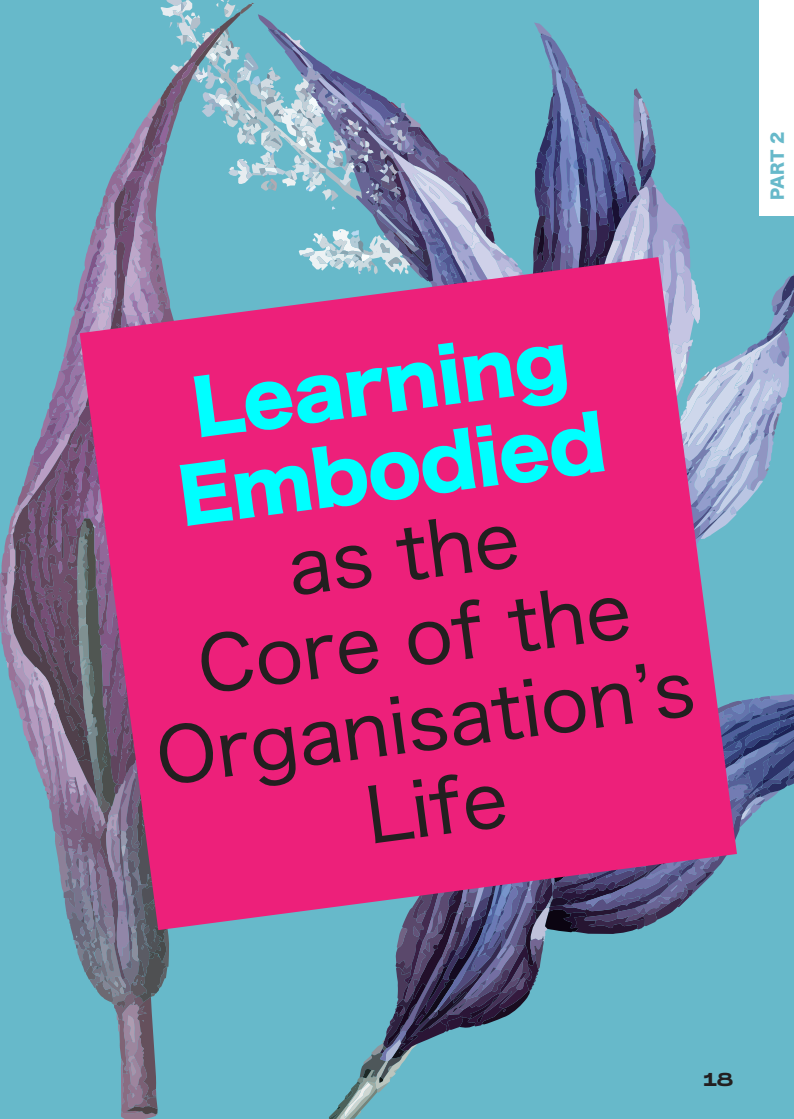
The accountability we are trying to co-create and re-evaluate is one that is rooted in the movements we work with. For this, we need to look at what we are learning that can make us practice accountability better:

not by creating structures of power over, but through learning to create power to and power with and therefore shift power.

Our organisational approach to MEAL is like any living process: dynamic, constantly evolving and maturing, as the fund attempts to meet multiple needs and intentions at once. Learning is seen as a principle, process, practice and as a whole. Given how intertwined learning is with everyday practice, writing about this approach is like unravelling a pile of spaghetti.

One thing is clear, though, that this approach to learning is closely tied to the way the team understands its work and its approach to programming.

Part II below will lay out the key characteristics, practices, and evolution of MEAL in UAF A&P.

Learning Embodied
as the Core of the Organisation's Life

From an emergent learning perspective, a group has learned only when people are conscious of their thinking, notice their results, reflect on those results, change their thinking and actions—and when their new thinking and actions produce better results, even as circumstances change.

(Darling et.al 2016:64)

IN THEORY

Embodied emergent learning starts from recognising that we are part of the cycle and breaking the subject-object dichotomy; this is rooted in the key feminist value of reflexivity. In the traditional outcome-output method, you don't see yourselves as a part of it. In Emergent Learning, on the contrary, the team recognises that both the people we work with and ourselves are change agents. This requires us to work reflexively, deepen self-awareness to see our positions clearly in grant-making practice and processes, reflect in real time, interrogate our privileges and shift how we use them.

As both practitioners and observers, we evaluate changes through capturing not only the way we are engaging with others and those we are giving funds to, but also seeing how that change is happening within ourselves and the team. Building such a reflective muscle helps us put the principles of flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness into concrete practices.

Sometimes learning can happen in the moment of a single process or day, or in a longer-term, ongoing process. The majority of the UAF A&P team have been part of growing and creating this approach to learning as an ongoing practice; the tools with which to facilitate it, including keeping values at the centre, have been part of the process from the beginning.

Moving beyond the individual and coming together for EL requires strong collective trust in the process, for which dedicated facilitation and an open-source approach are crucial.

The next section will briefly explain how EL is weaved into the organisation's life.

To use EL for MEAL, facilitation is indispensable. This is because, to make emergence visible to the team on an ongoing basis, there is no set templates or easy answers; dedicated people in the team need to commit to the practice of constant research, development and innovations.

We have realised that as long as team members endorse the spirit and values that drive the process, this method anchored by a few can continue to yield results.

While every job description includes learning, the core learning function is still primarily held by a few. They are responsible for carrying specific aspects of the learning function, such as establishing habit of EL, keeping the team in the grooves of pursuing 'true' observation, and ensuring that learning is brought back into the ecosystem for everyone to see what is emerging from 'seeing the whole'.

This is also true for reflective moments involving the whole organisation, where facilitators who are removed from day to day functioning, yet still invested in the team, are necessary to support with reflections and habit-changing that can lead us to higher levels of learning and sense-making, so that everyone can fully participate.

The core learning function and external facilitators have applied the following tools and systems in UAF A&P for the team to embody learning in the everyday:

MECHANISMS FOR PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Inspired by the notion that **"success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener"[1],** different mechanisms have been used to support staff in growing their own self-awareness, and bringing attention to personal transformation. These include personal learning questions and organisational pauses. More on this in Section III.[9]

Our Learning approach is based on Emergent Learning processes that recommend a cyclical, non-linear approach to learning that includes collective planning, reflection and sensemaking, to aid a culture of experimentation and flexible working and adapting to changing situations and opportunities.

9 Bill O' Brien, quoted by Otto Scharmer (2018:8).

We start our annual learning processes with Planning huddles—a place where staff collaboratively assess and agree upon their individual work plans and collaborative processes with other staff members and the experiments for the year. While experimentation is an on-going process, especially in our context as a first responder to crisis or unexpected opportunities, we have strengthened our reflective muscles, with convening collective reflection spaces, not just among the team every quarter, but also with our core ecosystem—which includes Board, grantees and advisors. Their feedback and inputs are also documented as part of our feminist learning approach, and then sensemaking is done collectively. Our knowledge products, including our Annual Report are our ways of 'returning learnings back into the system' to transform it into a public good. The sensemaking helps us with adaptation—our work through the pandemic, Myanmar and Afghanistan—where we continued to tweak and adapt the ways we function and are in service of the communities we work with is a testament to the success of our learning approach.

At a more ongoing, daily or weekly, level, most staff have internalised the practice of reviewing all specific actions or events before and after implementing them. Currently, the tools such as Before Action Review and After Action Review (BAR and AAR) are being used more consistently.

Before Action Review (BAR)

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After Action Review (AAR)

These practices are intended to help those responsible for implementing an action clarify and share their thinking, including intentions and operating assumptions, with a wider circle of people involved in that action, and build current practice on previous lessons learned.

Conversations occurring as part of these reviews have the potential to both build team coherence, create conditions for understanding and allow new 'aha' moments to emerge.

Figure 1 captures the current flow of 'formal' learning moments built into the monitoring of programs and evaluating progress as part of ongoing program management.

PLANNING
Twice a year

Tools:
Work Plan Meetings

EXPERIMENTATION
year-long

Documentation tools
Learning logs

REFLECTION
Multiple times a year

How?
BAR + AAR
Working Groups
Teams
Individual

Where we are
July/Aug:
Breakdown to breakthrough: **Huddles**

Nov: Looking back to move forward: **Process**

ADAPTATION
Evolving new hypothesis

Resting hypothesis that have become practice

putting learning back into the system

SENSEMAKING
Tools:
Learning reports
Annual report

WHAT

Learning rhythm demarcates specific times for sharing one's own reflections and hearing other perspectives.

Learning rhythm

WHY

It offers the opportunity to test assumptions and check in on our own biases and blind spots. All the spaces where different members of the team are in conversation are about seeing emergences, learning, and moving forward with them.

WHAT

As a part of the learning Rhythm, team huddles are intentional spaces for sense-making and feeding learnings back into the systems. Huddles invite all team members to actively engage in having their own and at times, team reflections. They are laborious but rewarding journeys.

HOW

Each huddle has a focused question, rooted in the realities of that moment rather than only narrowly looking at the stated outcomes for the year. Bringing everyone together across individual areas of responsibility to make sense and meaning of their own experiences, to become aware of the patterns being created between them as a whole, creates conditions for emergence within the team.

Regular team huddles

WHY

Sue Soal, a social process and evaluation practitioner reminds us of the deeper value inherent in these spaces—that reflection and evaluation is about: honoring what is there and living… allowing that to show itself and thereby reveal what will be next. Then it will be possible for us to help the situation take its own next step that has emerged out of its own situation… because it is IT'S next step. Remember, the wholeness of a situation does not mean it is perfect. (Soal, email 15-5-2019).

Our current MEAL approach helps cohere strategy, learning, accountability and planning, which enables the organisation to continually re-create itself, be responsive and adaptive.

In terms of its formulation, it has evolved from an early version of each team having separate learning questions to the current, more integrated form with goals as core learning questions, and teams seeing their learning in some, if not all, of the four key outcome areas collectively identified.

This modified approach allows the team, including the co-leads, to intentionally see ourselves as a living process and take collective responsibility of our successes or lack of progress and therefore, better ideate ways forward. Within the first year of implementation (2021), we saw a breakdown of silos and the team beginning to work in a non-dual way. This evolution shows that EL offers the team a bamboo-like scaffolding to facilitate cross-team learning and collaboration while the 'construction work' goes on inside, and constantly evolves with it.

Specifically, the learning rhythms, including work meetings, team huddles, etc., all come together to help the team stay reflexive. Work meetings focus as much on the operational as on collective well-being and team camaraderie, leaning into emergence in the collective learning journey itself, e.g. adapting to new needs in learning with team expansion.

Quarterly, bi—annual and annual huddles strengthen the ability of the fund and its staff to learn from each effort and revisions made along the way, responding to real—time needs. We have learned that this practice can help co-create feminist organisational forms that are participatory, rhythmic, respectful and care-full.

All huddles are designed to help team members see the interconnected stories around their work, led and actioned by others, that they might have been unaware of previously. The surfacing of such stories have helped staff members identify each other's strengths, and rely on them more to advise, review and collaborate for desired outcomes.

There certainly is still room for growth in each person's embodiment of the principles of EL as well as our extension further into our ecosystem. More learning opportunities exist within and beyond regular programme work, for instance, by transforming monthly staff meetings into a learning space every quarter. We are also experimenting with integrating conscious reflections into convening-like spaces where we formally engage with grantees, donors and advisors.

Making processes instinctive and organic rather than taught or counter–intuitive is another challenge. EL requires an attitude of curiosity and openness from all to experiment and bring out the juice of rich collective inquiry. These deeper attitudes are yet to become part of a habitual way of thinking, seeing, being in the team. But we are also noticing that, with areas of collaboration increasing since the pandemic, team members are leaning on the strengths of other members beyond their formal roles in the organisation, and using the extra skills at hand to move areas of work that were previously not attempted. These experience are important steps towards the direction of more organic learning processes.

Learning for sustained & intentional evolution

IN THEORY

Our MEAL approach helps the organisation adapt and evolve sustainably and intentionally.

This means that our strategies are always contextualised, that is, we learn to identify and apply principles at work instead of aspiring for so-called 'best practices'. This puts us in a position of constant exploration and experimentation. When we experiment, we have to embrace risks and face uncertainties and unfamiliarities. Learning is about acknowledging that this is part of the process.

Inevitably, some experiments would 'fail', but we recognise them as valuable learning, and listen carefully for emergence of new paths.

OUR PRACTICE & RESULTS

Such conscious learning from experience takes dedicated efforts from the learning function to help everyone stay accountable to our thinking and seeing everything as living organisms instead of set templates.
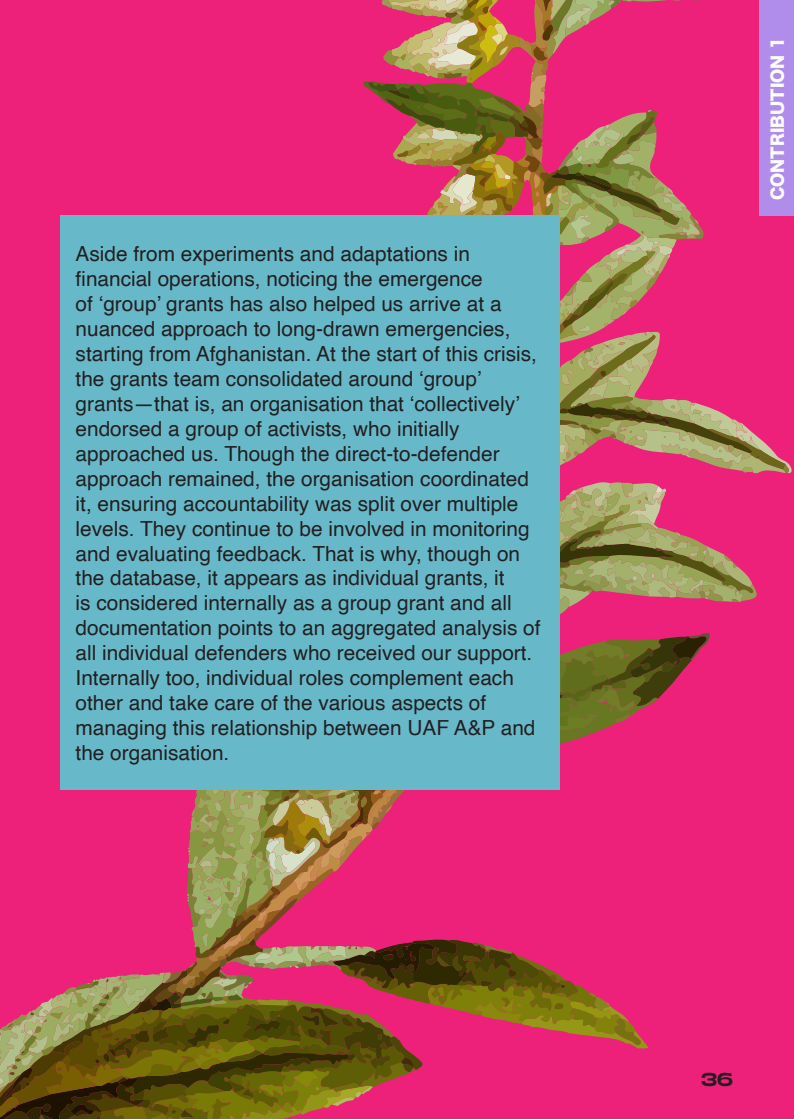
We do this through empowering innovative experiments and facilitating reflections.

The most illustrative example would be the journey of Rapid Response Grant-making team from the crisis in Myanmar to Afghanistan, and now, Sri Lanka. The learning logs of the Lead during the Myanmar crisis, Virisila Buadromo, captures how the team's experiments as an adaptation to the needs of the time later informed UAF A&P's response to the Afghanistan crisis:

"We had heard rumblings from our grantees that the coup in Myanmar was going to happen. Preparations were being made by our advisors and grantees to support defenders on the ground both inside and outside Myanmar. So, when the crisis happened, we were quickly able to send in financial support, to mobilise peer donors as well as other feminist and women's rights organisations within the region to collectively support the different needs of the defenders at that time. That was the first time we started learning to transfer money outside of the traditional financial system. A system, rooted in existing practices in the global south that is predicated on trust-based transactions in communities. What we didn't realise, was that

experience, would later help us be more open to non-traditional ways of making money accessible to defenders in Afghanistan, at a time when all forms of banking systems had collapsed. When I look at it now, this helped us transfer almost $500,000 last year. Through EL, we were getting current data, we were using that in the context of understanding past data and using that to make day-to-day decisions. By the end of the year, we saw we had supported almost 1000 defenders and their families in Afghanistan. To me that is a good example of how EL is useful, and particularly for a feminist grant-maker like ourselves."

Aside from experiments and adaptations in financial operations, noticing the emergence of 'group' grants has also helped us arrive at a nuanced approach to long-drawn emergencies, starting from Afghanistan. At the start of this crisis, the grants team consolidated around 'group' grants—that is, an organisation that 'collectively' endorsed a group of activists, who initially approached us. Though the direct-to-defender approach remained, the organisation coordinated it, ensuring accountability was split over multiple levels. They continue to be involved in monitoring and evaluating feedback. That is why, though on the database, it appears as individual grants, it is considered internally as a group grant and all documentation points to an aggregated analysis of all individual defenders who received our support. Internally too, individual roles complement each other and take care of the various aspects of managing this relationship between UAF A&P and the organisation.

What drove the strategy was an emergence—then the team adapted to this non-default situation, and now this approach will be considered as we deal with emerging crises in Sri Lanka and other parts of the region.

When everyone in the team actively exercises their agency to constantly innovate and experiment like this, our practice as a feminist rapid response funder is the most responsive to ground realities and capable of supporting defenders.

To maintain such an environment that is conducive to adaptations, we count on the team's appetite for risks and continuous reflections, as mentioned in Part II.

Learning for data-driven decision making & accountability

IN THEORY

Learning helps the organisation stay accountable to the defenders it works with as well as the women's rights and feminist movements it supports, through data-driven decision making and power-sharing in the making and use of knowledge for accountability.

For data to effectively inform decision making and process design at work, it is important that we share power. This means making data collection processes participatory, sharing data transparently, presenting them in relevant ways that would inspire opportunities to collaborate, and expanding analytical capacity, e.g. letting the team guide emergence. When a team is equipped with skills and tools to integrate data collection, analysis and sharing into their everyday work, the organisation becomes truly alive.

Power-sharing is practised in the wider ecosystem too. As a funder, much of the data we collect are from and about our grantees. It is therefore important to lay down our value upfront: people we work with are human beings, not disembodied statistics or success stories of the fund.

As a feminist fund, movement building is relationship building and strengthening, not programming. To avoid the pitfalls of grantees being seen as victims, objects or numbers, UAF A&P works with two aspects of accountability to grantees:

a commitment to safeguarding their safety, security and confidentiality, and

power-sharing through co-reflections and co-ideation in convening, so that emerging learnings are retuned to the ecosystem, and grantees can make use of them in ways they choose to

Sharing data transparently

Making data collection processes participatory

Expanding analytical capacity

Presenting data in relevant ways that would inspire opportunities to collaborate

Power–Sharing Looks Like:

OUR PRACTICE & RESULTS

For data-driven decision making, everybody in the team collects data.

What data is being collected and how much is generally informed by whether it is relevant to the organisation's core work, its explorations, or its areas of improvement.

UAF A&P has adopted an integrated approach that is guided by the wisdom of team members and emergent processes rather than MEL software or models.

Collected data are then stored securely, centring the safety of grantees. UAF A&P built a custom database with robust data protection methods to ensure the confidentiality of defenders' information sent to us. Grantee information and the reports that are available on the database feed into quantitative analysis that can advise various programmes on strategies to be adapted or changes to be effected.

When analysing data, we recognise that focusing primarily on 'hard' outcomes, usually presented in numbers, is a patriarchal and capitalistic way of working.

Therefore, we let EL practices guide us to both collect and analyse qualitative data that provide rich, nuanced context within which quantitative data is then interpreted.

Increasingly, for instance, the team is taking note of the invisible labour involved in the strong relationships that are being developed across the ecosystem, which would not have surfaced if we focused solely on quantitative data. All the data are then put together throughout the rhythm of reflective spaces and processes to construct holistic stories which weave in the work of multiple teams working together to achieve one outcome.

We used quantitative data in 2021, for example, to track if and how consultations supported increasing applications from particular countries, or identity groups, such as people with different abilities, environmental defenders or LGBTI groups. This generates feedback for hypotheses we are testing. We have also used anecdotal data observed throughout the ecosystem to reflect on how we are influencing work with and of our sister funds and other Women's Funds.

For data–driven accountability, we intentionally choose to not present individual grantee stories as if they are UAF A&P's impact, and instead, document processes of convening as well as numbers as data. These processes, such as learning circles with defenders, help us complete the loop of accountability with spaces for questions and co-creation of knowledge that feeds directly back into the ecosystem.

In fact, Emergent Learning founders hypothesise that returning learning to the system is core to facilitate conditions for emergence. Inspired by this, we're also planning to expand learning processes into the ecosystem to include board members, advisors and grantees. This will create an excellent feedback loop where we're holding each other to account and share how we are practicing that accountability. For example, as part of a documenting a Webs of Safety and Care grant, an infographic was first designed to get the grantee to reflect back on whether all the players and their roles in their story were captured. Based on their revisions, a graphic narrative was produced, and by sharing that with the grantee participants at a Webs of Safety and Care gathering, it helped more activists and defenders to use them as a resource to reflect on their personal journeys.

Overall, how data is being utilised, by whom and for what, changes over time. With time, the team is likely to be better placed to determine when to use research, evaluative or learning questions[10], and how to better integrate evaluative analyses from statistics available in the database to inform internal EL practices.

The Enabling Defenders (ED) facilitator, working on an innovative program, for instance, acknowledges how the regular quarterly reflective practice helps her 'see' data in new ways. She's realised how certain experiences and stories captured in such reports are not documented anywhere else and are key in helping us understand the context of the work in a much deeper way. She, however, regrets the loss of this discipline in 2021, where it fell through the cracks of all the crises. We hear a warning bell here, that one of the practices the team uses to strengthen itself, is in danger of being 'dropped' due to the team's very success in expanding its reach. In 2022, this tension has been reviewed and addressed.

10 Researchers ask research questions to survey and analyse what exists outside of our own boundaries, typically to help inform our own or the field's future actions. Evaluators pose evaluation questions to collect data on the results of a team's or organisation's activity to assess performance against expected outcomes and, often, to provide feedback along the path. It is not impossible to fulfil both research and evaluative functions in-house. (See Fourth Quadrant Partners, 2020, How to Craft a Powerful Learning Question).

Ecosystem engagement meetings also illustrates this point. Having members of the whole ecosystem engage with each other in mixed focus group discussions during the first three-year reflective review gave the team an embodied experience of the richness such interaction could bring and the fertile soil it can provide for more insights to arise.

Since then, however, with the onset of the pandemic and reflections moving into virtual, time-constrained spaces governed by time zones, UAF A&P has not had much opportunity to create rhythmic learning and 'emergent' opportunities for its entire ecosystem in one space at one time, an ideal situation to facilitate emergence as described by Darling et al. (2016:60):

"Emergence is a process by which, through many interactions, individual entities or 'agents' create patterns that are more sophisticated than what could have been created by an individual entity. And, as a corollary, no one entity (e.g. funder, grantee, or expert) could have envisioned the entire solution a priori."[11]

11 Darling, Marilyn; Guber, Heidi; Smith, Jillaine; and Stiles, James (2016) "Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation," The Foundation Review: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 8. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1284 Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol8/iss1/8

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Learning for power-sharing & collective care

IN THEORY

As a feminist fund, UAF A&P endeavours to give as much attention to the how as to the what. In a world that puts more value on the what, the tangible, the quantities, the visible outcomes, it is sometimes hard to sustain the value of the how, the process, the invisible, the meaning, the quality—especially of relationships and connections. At the end of the day, we believe that the quality of the thinking and processes yield the quality of the product or outcome.

With this belief, EL strengthens the organisation's internal feminist culture of care, natural self-expression and vitality by using reflection and learning as acts of self and collective care, supporting inclusion, power-sharing, and staff's personal growth.
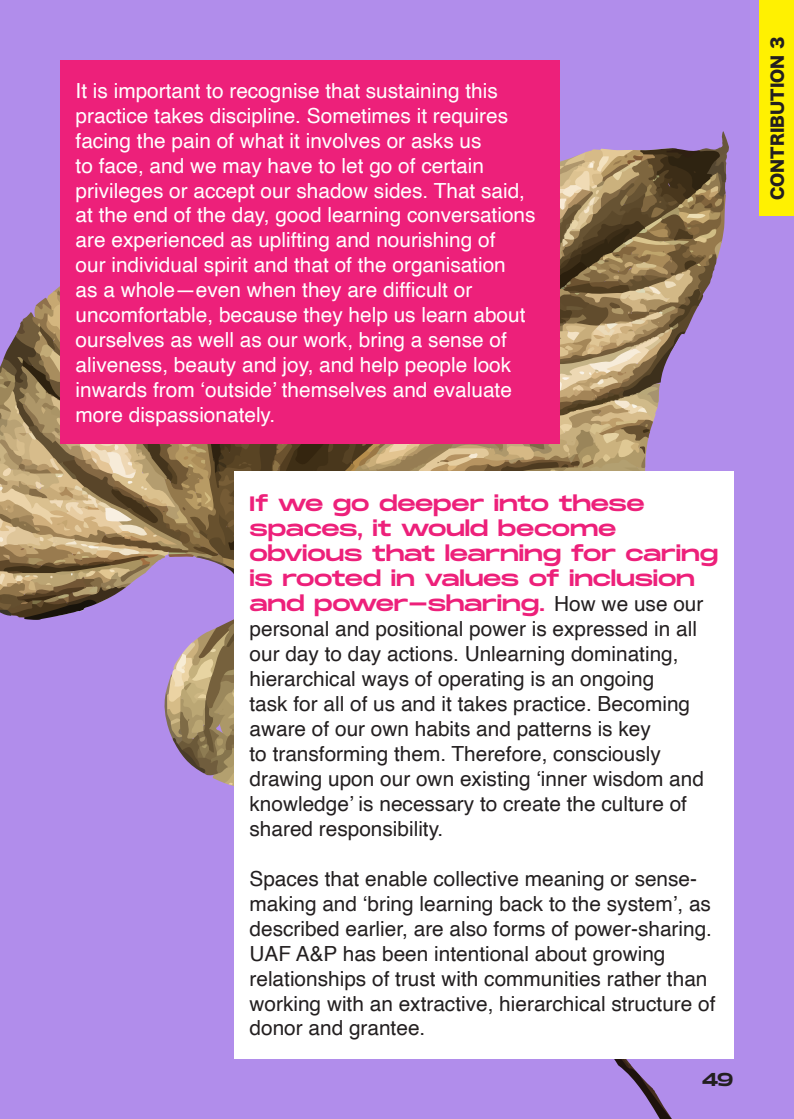
Learning itself is an act of self and collective care, because rhythms create spaces for caring that help us pause at work and intentionally strengthen self–awareness. When we're awake enough, we engage or 'intervene' from a place of inner clarity and agency rather than instinctive reactivity in response to changing situations.

This is in part what helps make the work more impactful, but it is also an act of care, because it makes us feel more alive. In team huddles that work well, more than one team member would comment on how they leave feeling energised, hopeful, more resilient and cognizant of the growth in team collaboration and empathy.

We have also realised from these spaces that being willing to engage with discomfort for a greater good is what truly underpins care and intentional work. Learning to listen to each other, to understand how each person's work fits into and contributes towards a bigger whole, is an expression of collective care, accountability and reciprocity. UAF A&P is choosing to value this practice at a collective organisational level; in the process, all team members are asked to engage in the necessary work of confrontation—with self and with our practice.

It is important to recognise that sustaining this practice takes discipline. Sometimes it requires facing the pain of what it involves or asks us to face, and we may have to let go of certain privileges or accept our shadow sides. That said, at the end of the day, good learning conversations are experienced as uplifting and nourishing of our individual spirit and that of the organisation as a whole—even when they are difficult or uncomfortable, because they help us learn about ourselves as well as our work, bring a sense of aliveness, beauty and joy, and help people look inwards from 'outside' themselves and evaluate more dispassionately.

If we go deeper into these spaces, it would become obvious that learning for caring is rooted in values of inclusion and power-sharing. How we use our personal and positional power is expressed in all our day to day actions. Unlearning dominating, hierarchical ways of operating is an ongoing task for all of us and it takes practice. Becoming aware of our own habits and patterns is key to transforming them. Therefore, consciously drawing upon our own existing 'inner wisdom and knowledge' is necessary to create the culture of shared responsibility.

Spaces that enable collective meaning or sense-making and 'bring learning back to the system', as described earlier, are also forms of power-sharing. UAF A&P has been intentional about growing relationships of trust with communities rather than working with an extractive, hierarchical structure of donor and grantee.

Our identity of a funder affords us the privilege to creatively improvise. We develop and test new models on ourselves first, and know it works before sharing with the world. So when we talk to grantees, for instance, and give them the money to do something new, it has more resonance.

Furthermore, in interrogating assumptions, EL always centres the grantee, rather than what we think is good for them. This gives the power back to the activists so that what we are reporting on are the grantees' priorities.

"**Using EL supports a more holistic approach to work and life – and builds and values the capacity of the so-called 'non-experts'. It recognises the contribution that anyone with experience in the whole system can offer to a solution and can thus challenge patriarchal and hierarchical systems of authority and power**",

reflected Miwa Kubosaki, at the time a 'new' consultant with UAF A&P, after attending her first 'staff huddle' (July 2021), when asked to describe how she experienced this learning process as fostering inclusion, belonging and learning.

Last but not least, EL supports staff's personal growth as a form of care.

Building on the breakaway from the subject-object dichotomy mentioned in Part II, we recognise that the awareness of being part of the change we're creating allows us to preserve precious space for personal growth.

Skills including reflection, listening to understand, managing one's own reactivity and energy are as important as one's political understanding and ideological vision.

We've seen how the role of connection, friendship and trust in building effective and powerful teams and solidarity cannot be underestimated.

Yet, it takes time to build and strengthen such qualities in relationships. Such time is seldom taken in the daily pressures of everyday work and meeting deliverables. Over time, we have realised that the practices of listening, working 'emergently', examining perspectives and behavioral patterns all need to be reinforced over and over again. As soon as we start to focus on frameworks and outputs, we lose the focus on and the coherence with the how, the implicit sensibility and skills being learned along the way. Creating conditions to foster the learning of the implicit sensibility, capacity and skills to do this well and over time has not always been sustained in all aspects of the learning rhythms, yet is critical to the feminist culture of care UAF A&P aspires to co-create in its team and within its entire ecosystem.

As outlined in Part II, our EL practices include formal team reflection and learning spaces, organisational pause, team huddles, etc. Formal team reflection and learning spaces are not only dedicated to the work being done, they are also intentionally used to capture how the thinking of the group is evolving and foster team-building.
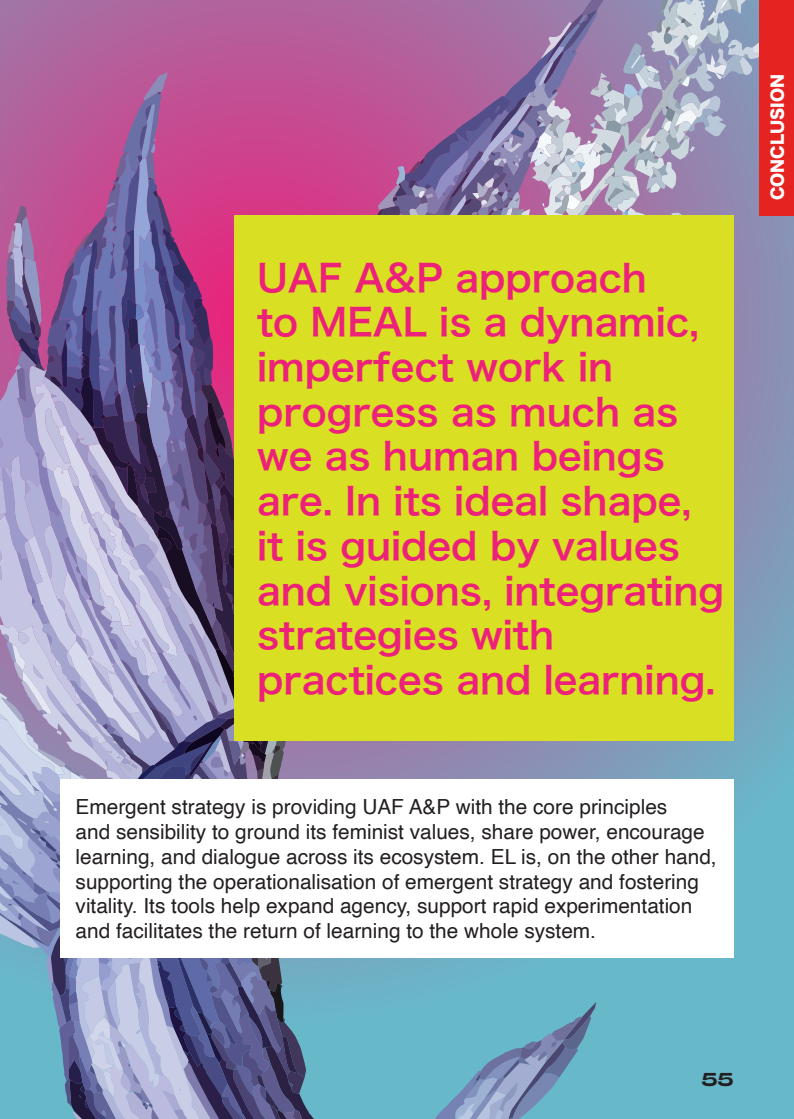
OUR PRACTICE & RESULTS

They deliberately create a regenerative environment that values connection, care, understanding and empathy. We consciously use trauma-informed practices, honour diverse perspectives and intentionally create safer learning environments.

We also intentionally design our bi-annual huddles as spaces that 'bring in the heart' and recognise that inherent in them lies the potential of supporting personal transformations. In this way, the learning work makes emotional undercurrents visible in the same way it makes thinking visible.

Moreover, the Executive Support Facilitator, stepping beyond her primary role, is increasingly fulfilling a role of supporting ongoing learning in the team through play, creativity and emotional processing. Aside from improving team coherence, these practices have also fostered enabling conditions for people to show up with open hearts and attitude, allowing us to be vulnerable and flexible, and as a result, be able to fully engage with emergent learning.

Conclusion

UAF A&P approach to MEAL is a dynamic, imperfect work in progress as much as we as human beings are. In its ideal shape, it is guided by values and visions, integrating strategies with practices and learning.

Emergent strategy is providing UAF A&P with the core principles and sensibility to ground its feminist values, share power, encourage learning, and dialogue across its ecosystem. EL is, on the other hand, supporting the operationalisation of emergent strategy and fostering vitality. Its tools help expand agency, support rapid experimentation and facilitates the return of learning to the whole system.

We are not just creating an approach to MEAL, but recognises that the team is both part of the challenge and the solution. Our way of working is about more than just inputs, outputs and results, but authentic transformation, vulnerability and empathy.

The huddles and conversations help the team recognise that to make change in the world, they need to 'be the change'.

Over the years, we've become aware that we need to change the way we work, change our thinking, some of our habits to make us more open to collaborate, more open to asking difficult questions by holding space to think through what is needed from us and how we can respond to it. But also, to see how those changes are making us reflect on the way we work

as individuals, as a team and see whether those practices are harmful or whether they are generative and see how each of us can learn from that.

As a bamboo-like scaffolding, this approach to MEAL offers an organisational guide to ensure learning is centred and embodied, rather than being a by-product of donor-driven monitoring and evaluation. The 'A' for accountability to create a MEAL rather than a MEL helps us stay true to the values and the defenders whom the fund exists to support. Accountability exists also in the hypotheses about how to achieve results, in addition to accountability to the results. At the same time, this scaffolding contributes to experimenting with creating a more collaborative, non-siloed organisational form and program structure that is less patriarchal. This different orientation is visible in the current strategic plan, where we have a more rhythmic way of working and learning that is holistic, non-linear and reflected throughout the organisation. Learning is ultimately a public good, in service not only to the organisation, its team and programs, but to as many people as possible.

Whatever scaffolding is put in place for the team to utilise, how it gets implemented in practice, relies on strong, invested leadership and learning facilitators' commitment and support. Because it is involved with humans and with learning, it is inevitably going to be impacted by human foibles, imperfections, differences and the messiness of life. It takes time, patience, repetition, discipline and commitment from each individual as well as program teams; every new person needs to be inducted into the approach as it is foreign to most people. We know it works when we live and learn well together. That is, when everyone feels the rewards of discovering new insights, sees the value of putting efforts in to stay attuned to self, context and work, and as a result,

become more conscious of how we do what we do.

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