



November 2020

MEAL Joint Learning Session 1 Report

How can H2H actors develop MEAL ‘systems’?

H2H actors carry out a range of monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) activities, but often struggle to do them systematically given the demands of multiple donor frameworks, project-based funding, and MEAL capacity limitations. This was a main finding from the first joint learning session of the MEAL Advisory Group (MAG) of the H2H Network, which also considered practical solutions and proposals for good practice in this area.

The MEAL Advisory Group (MAG) of the H2H Network held a joint learning session 1 October 2020 focused on ‘Tailoring MEAL systems for H2H actors’. The session asked participants whether their MEAL activities amounted to a ‘MEAL system’, how their MEAL activities are coordinated, and what constitutes a ‘good enough’ MEAL system for H2H actors.

The session was the first in a series of joint learning sessions aimed at exploring MEAL challenges and sharing practical solutions among ‘H2H actors’ that provide specialist services to support humanitarian actors. The session was facilitated by [Itad](#), contracted under the FCDO’s [Humanitarian Global Services programme](#).¹

Sixteen people participated in the session from a range of H2H actors, including specialists in mapping, research, policy and practice. The one-hour meeting, held remotely on Microsoft Teams, involved a presentation, group work, and a group discussion.

The event benefited from the genuine interest and positive participation of MAG members who contributed their inputs during group discussions. The plenary discussion could have been slightly extended to accommodate the engagement.

In all, the session highlighted key MEAL challenges that face H2H actors and some suggested solutions. After the session, facilitators collected additional suggestions based on HGS MEAL support activities and learning to share with the MAG and wider H2H actors.

Main MEAL challenges identified

During the learning session, participants highlighted two key challenges. **First, such organizations rarely conduct their diverse MEAL activities in a systematic way, often because they lack a single MEAL framework and respond to donor-specific project-based MEAL requirements.**

When asked to share solutions, participants highlighted various MEAL activities underway. These included ‘work on indicators’, ‘needs assessments to inform services’, ‘focus group discussions’, ‘feedback surveys,’ ‘postmortem meeting and learnings,’ and ‘impact assessments.’ But participants agreed that MEAL activities are not systematic. Specific MEAL tasks are undertaken in ad-hoc and uncoordinated ways without an overarching framework to guide them. Fitting their broad activity range under one framework is seen as difficult. They also tend to

¹ DFID, Humanitarian Global Services, Business Case, 2018

be project-based and so difficult to integrate under one framework or in one system.

Second, participants face MEAL capacity and resource challenges. MEAL activities are considered resource-intensive and very limited MEAL capacities are available for them.

Highlighting the resource challenges of doing MEAL activities systematically, MEAL activities were described as 'difficult' 'time-consuming', 'very costly', and 'overwhelming'. Establishing indicators and assessing impact were cited as particularly onerous activities. Moreover, donors were reported to be unwilling to fund MEAL positions.

Participants also highlighted capacity gaps that complicated a systematic approach to MEAL. These included a lack of time for MEAL activities, e.g. where operational activities are a priority, a lack of MEAL specialist staff, and a lack of funding for MEAL activities. Therefore, all MEAL activities may be 'done by one person'.

Specific gaps mentioned included too little learning from MEAL activities, a lack of baseline and cumulative progress measurement, and weaknesses in field-based data collection.

In offering solutions, participants indicated that having a MEAL 'model' tailored for H2H actors could help strengthen their MEAL systems. To that end, participants highlighted key components of such a model with standard criteria that might be accepted by all donors.

- Framework: include a framework with well-defined components, contributions from other actors, links to impact at the wider response level (not just the project level) and adopt a longer-term perspective where necessary.
- Resources: use a 'light touch' approach, supported by a plan with dedicated resources (time, people, budget) and allocate 10% of the programme budget to MEAL.
- Function: use the system to facilitate the submission of monthly and yearly reports to donors, and applied learning.

In addition to such a model, participants pointed out that coherence among donor requirements would help to strengthen MEAL systems. In highlighting the responsibility of donors in

strengthening H2H MEAL systems, it was suggested that donors could contribute by establishing coherence in their MEAL requirements and defining benchmarks for what MEAL is expected of H2H actors. To this end, H2H could potentially play a role in assessing or certifying the MEAL systems of H2H actors.

Some participants also suggested MEAL systems could be developed 'collaboratively' with other H2H actors and help from external partners.

Some efforts were reportedly underway through the MAG to coordinate MEAL activities, but establishing a common framework was proving a challenge, and these efforts remained limited and unknown to some other participants. It was interesting to hear that one participant had established a partnership with a research institute to help assess impact and facilitate learning.

Further solutions offered

To accompany this discussion, the facilitators added the following suggestions based on emerging findings from HGS MEAL support. In the absence of recognized good practices in tailoring MEAL systems for H2H actors, a Provisional MEAL model was developed for H2H actors through initial research (see Annex 1). However, the suggestions below are not based on evidence of success among H2H actors and remain to be applied and tested.

1. Think of MEAL activities as a 'system' for evidence and learning. H2H actors conduct a range of MEAL activities, but often in an ad-hoc manner in response to donor requirements. Many feel they lack a MEAL system or do not conduct MEAL activities systematically enough. Some MEAL activities may have evolved organically, using different and inconsistent approaches. H2H actors often wish for a more systematic, coherent, holistic MEAL approach that brings together data collection, analysis, evidence, and learning into the programme management cycle.

For MEAL activities to be a system, they need to work together as a coherent whole. MEAL is a broad term which refers to all activities conducted by an organization aimed at comprehending and demonstrating the impact of

its activities and addressing the question ‘does it work?’ (PHAP). This includes tracking progress, adjusting activities, assessing outcomes, and using information to foster change in the organization or the system as a whole.

For H2H actors, a MEAL system will include the MEAL framework and indicators, data collection and analysis activities, evidence and learning activities, and dedicated resources and capacities. H2H actors are different from ‘operational’ humanitarian actors and have different MEAL requirements, notably for flexible frameworks and cyclical evidence and learning.

2. Align your MEAL framework to strategy. H2H actors may conduct MEAL activities (aimed at serving donors) which are not aligned with their frameworks or use multiple log frames (to meet donor requirements) which are not aligned with their multiyear strategies and do not adequately reflect their fundamental value propositions. Some H2H actors wish for a MEAL system that serves these multiple purposes, reinforces an evidence-based narrative, and strengthens their engagements with diverse stakeholders.

At the heart of a MEAL system lies a MEAL framework. The framework describes ‘what’ is to be monitored, evaluated, and learned. It may be presented in the form of a theory of change, a log frame, or an innovation hypothesis—although we recommend translating it into 3-5 key evidence and learning questions (ELQs) to guide MEAL activities. Instead of responding to multiple donor log frames, a single flexible framework supports implementation of strategy.

For H2H actors, the MEAL framework should be ‘flexible’. Instead of a rigid predictive framework, it should be designed to meet specific information needs, selective in scope, and iterative in application. A simplified framework tool should be tailored to requirements (e.g. an adapted log frame), include systematic consideration of intended users and utilization, and then define 3-5 ELQs to support a quarterly process for generating evidence and learning.

3. Check your MEAL activities are proportionate. Many H2H actors collect data about their activities and outputs, monitor uptake (utilization) in different ways, and invest much effort in writing reports and proposals for donors.

But they may also collect MEAL data that no longer serves a specific MEAL purpose, conduct MEAL activities that have taken on their dynamics, or collect and analyze data that does not support evidence generation and learning. Few H2H actors collect qualitative user data, monitor outcomes or impact systematically, and seize opportunities for systematic learning. In general, H2H actors want MEAL activities to be purposive, light touch, and streamlined to make optimal use of existing capacities.

MEAL activities need to be proportionate to the scale of a programme, no more than necessary for the purpose (i.e. ‘good enough’), and make good use of existing processes. A MEAL system needs to be adequately resourced in terms of finance, personnel and time (Intrac). For external evaluations, a crude rule of thumb is to invest 5-10% of the programme budget (BetterEvaluation), but a MEAL system should be covered largely by existing management and staff capacities. Where advocacy or innovation require structured evidence and learning activities, greater resources would be allocated.

For H2H actors already doing MEAL activities, it may be necessary to review existing MEAL activities, perhaps using a simple process mapping exercise. Look for efficiencies in data collection, where methods are not necessary to address key questions or exceed available resources. Consider automation (using project management and customer relationship software), quality assurance (defining quality standards for each product and measuring compliance), and sampling (collect data about a subsection of products or users to gain insights into the larger universe). Prioritize a more systematic approach to evidence and learning, for example, by generating regular evidence from data collection and analysis and making use of management and board meetings to reflect on progress. See Annex 2 for an indicative list of H2H activities to help your review.

4. Prepare a plan to implement MEAL activities. Many H2H actors lack MEAL plans and coordination. Without a plan, MEAL activities may be pulled in different directions, expanding beyond resource capacities or get deprioritized among other demands. A formalized MEAL plan enables H2H actors to implement MEAL activities

in a coherent manner and within established resource parameters. It is important for a functioning MEAL system.

A MEAL plan defines 'how' the MEAL system works. It describes MEAL activities, timeframes, and responsibilities needed. The MEAL plan should be allocated a budget, sufficient staff time and external support services where needed.

For most H2H actors, a simple 1-2-page plan is recommended to guide MEAL activities on a yearly basis. The plan should be implemented by all relevant staff, coordinated by a MEAL focal point, and overseen by the CEO. It should make good use of the analytical skills and tacit knowledge of staff.

5. Appoint a coordinator to manage the MEAL plan. H2H actors may have very limited capacities for MEAL, few have dedicated MEAL coordinators, and in most cases, the director plays a prominent role in evidence, learning and donor reporting. MEAL may be considered a shared function, but MEAL functions and responsibilities are often not clearly defined.

A MEAL coordinator is responsible for preparing the plan and coordinating its implementation. Instead of being responsible for each MEAL activity, the coordinator should check the activities are carried out and provide any support or guidance where needed—based on the plan. Where possible and appropriate, the coordinator may also take a lead on evidence and learning activities, such as facilitating quarterly evidence

and learning sessions, capturing evidence and learning from these sessions, storing evidence and learning, and preparing evidence-based products (e.g. project designs and proposals, donor reporting, annual reports). The coordinator may draw on external service providers to provide technical support.

Resources available

The following resources may be useful, but they are not specifically designed for H2H actors and of limited applicability:

Bond: Practical support to help NGOs prove and improve their MEL and effectiveness

Intrac: M&E Universe, a free, online resource to support development practitioners involved in monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

Tools4Dev: How to create a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system – step-by-step guide

Itad: Investing in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: Issues for NGOs to consider

Intrac: Resources for M&E, an analysis of resources needed, including finance, personnel and time.

Compass: How to develop a Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

Intrac: M&E of Development Approaches, for CSOs, advocacy and capacity development

Save the Children: Introductory course in Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL)



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Annex 1: Provisional MEAL model for H2H actors

During the inception phase of the project under FCDO’s Humanitarian Global Services programme, the Itad team developed a provisional MEAL system framework for H2H actors based on a mapping of HGS MEAL systems and emerging MEAL practices. Given the absence of an appropriate model to guide the MEAL activities of H2H actors, this broadly outlines ‘what good looks like’ in terms of MEAL systems for H2H actors, offers a reference point for the MEAL support services, and makes explicit the assumptions.

MEAL element	Provisional criteria
1.1 Rationale	Partner proposition: H2H actors should develop MEAL systems to meet the specific requirements of donors, members, the sector and management. This means integrated systems that meet these requirements, and which are designed for their specific value propositions.
	Partner ownership: Donors should support H2H MEAL systems that meet their own requirements as well as the requirements of other donors, management, users, and the sector. They should support evidence and learning instead of data its own sake.
1.2 Systems	Integrated system: H2H actors should conduct MEAL activities in a systematic manner for their specific MEAL requirements. They should aim to establish a MEAL system that is integrated, proportionate and planned. It should include a framework, data collection, analysis, evidence and learning activities.
1.3 Frameworks	Single framework: H2H actors should develop single MEAL frameworks that are coherent, formative, flexible, outcome-oriented, and based on a clearly defined value proposition. These should be translated into 3–5 key questions.
	Flexible framework: H2H actors that are humanitarian innovations may develop a MEAL framework that is more flexible and oriented towards innovation management, including ‘consolidated evidence and learning to sector’ as an output.
	Partner frameworks: Donors to H2H actors should aim to provide funding through Partner frameworks, strengthen their framework ownership, and expect H2H actors to define and test their value propositions. They should support ‘humanitarian innovations’ by allowing greater flexibility (including failure) but require consolidated evidence and learning.
1.4 Data collection and analysis	Rationalised data collection: H2H actors should conduct quantitative data collection and analysis about activities and outputs balanced with focused efforts to consult users and report on outcomes. This may require rationalisation (and/or automation) of output and utilisation data collection, more effective user surveys and studies, and consistent efforts to capture outcomes within the team and with stakeholders.
1.5 Evidence and learning	Opportune learning: H2H actors should adopt a systematic approach to generating evidence and learning. This means periodically generating evidence from data collection and analysis, making use of regular management and board meetings to reflect on progress, allowing opportunities for course correction and framework adaptation, and rationalising proposal writing and reporting to donors and other stakeholders (with one system).
1.6 Capacities	Coordinated plan: H2H actors should appoint a MEAL focal point to coordinate efforts and define specific responsibilities for MEAL activities, making use of analytical skills across their teams. These responsibilities should be defined in a simple annual MEAL plan.
	MEAL investment: Donors should consider investing in MEAL coordination functions to enable H2H actors to generate evidence and facilitate learning about their value proposition, comparative improvements and contributions to the sector.

Annex 2: Some MEAL activities done by H2H actors (indicative list)

Activity	Source	Timeframe	Person responsible	Work hours / budget
Product / publication information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data analytics Management info. 	Monthly	AB	
Service delivery information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management info. Feedback forms 	Monthly		
User/access data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data analytics 	Monthly		
Users consultation by FGD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus group discussions Feedback from members, Board 	Quarterly		
Evidence and learning sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic management group 	Quarterly		
Case studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple case studies with users and responders Relevant external case studies 	Quarterly/Annually		
User consultation by survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey with users, members, stakeholders 	Annually		
External document review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal annual review Directly relevant external review 	Annually		
Advocacy / Stakeholder communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blogs, speeches, presentations based on evidence generated 	Periodic (tbd)		
Donor proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal or joint project design based on evidence generated 	Periodic (tbd)		
Donor reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal or joint project reporting based on evidence generated 	Periodic (tbd)		
Annual report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal reporting and analysis based on evidence generated 	Annual		
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External assessment based on evidence generated, other sources 	3 yearly		