

January 2020

MEAL Joint Learning Session 2 Report

How can H2H actors measure outcomes and impact?

The MEAL Advisory Group (MAG) of the H2H Network held a joint learning session 10th December 2020 focused on how to capture outcomes and impact. The session asked participants: How can outcomes and impact be measured by an H2H actor? How do H2H actors currently capture outcomes? What is 'good practice' for H2H actors in capturing outcomes?

This was the second joint learning session aimed at exploring MEAL challenges and sharing practical solutions for humanitarian-to-humanitarian (H2H) actors, who provide specialist global services that support humanitarian responders. The session was facilitated by Itad, under the FCDO's Humanitarian Global Services programme.

Recognized difficulties

In the session, participants explained their difficulties in capturing outcomes and impact, linked to framework limitations, partner information, and questions about techniques.

One challenge was a reliance on 'output oriented' MEAL frameworks, which did not define contributions to a larger 'system' or how outputs contributed to impact in complex non-linear ways. 'At the moment we're only trying to measure what we bring to operational organizations,' noted one participant.

Another challenge was a dependence on humanitarian responder organizations to monitor outcomes and share information with H2H actors when such cooperation did not always happen. Observed one participant, 'A transparent data-sharing culture is missing when it comes to measuring outcomes from (..)

INGOs.' A third challenge was not knowing how best to measure outcomes, and a reliance instead on end-of-project evaluations. 'We will need to reflect particular outcomes and appropriate ways to evidence these,' admitted another participant.

'Mixed method' solutions

Recognizing these challenges, partners also pointed to solutions for capturing outcomes. These mainly involved measuring outcomes with indicators and 'capturing' them through narratives.

Part of the solution then was to use good 'indicators' to quantify contributions. These could include, for example, the number of products used by partners, efficiency gains estimated by partners, as well as testimonies, quotes, and mentions in official documents, policies, or media.

To this end, it was suggested that H2H actors should share outcome indicators in a common bank. 'It might be useful to create an indicator bank that we could all use and adapt.'

Another part of the solution was using the qualitative methods. Reflecting the importance of qualitative information, these included: user feedback, follow-up surveys, case studies, 'impact interviews' with staff and partners, and evaluations. It was also noted that these methods could reveal unintended outcomes.

Keeping it practical

Based on the above, it was suggested that H2H actors wishing to capture outcomes should aim to:

Defining intentions: Interested H2H actors should define intended outcomes and specify how their own products and services intended to contribute. This would mean using clear statements and measurable indicators. They should also consider pooling outcomes indicators into an H2H indicator bank for use and adaptation by others.

Focusing on direct effects: Interested H2H actors should focus on capturing intended changes within their 'sphere of control'. This also means limiting preoccupation with influencing longer-range impacts such as 'saving lives' and 'changing the humanitarian system'.

Being systematic: Interested H2H actors should capture outcomes systematically, reflecting on them to develop a 'learning culture'. This means going beyond single one-off efforts, but also keeping activities small, simple and proportionate.

Dedicating resources: Interested H2H actors should dedicate specific resources to capturing outcomes. This would be part of their annual MEAL plan (see MEAL Joint Learning Session 1 Report).

Tailored solutions

To accompany this discussion, the facilitators offer the following suggestions based on emerging findings and learning from HGS MEAL support. In the absence of recognized good MEAL practices for H2H actors, these remain to be further tested and developed.

1. Focus on short-term outcomes. H2H actors may struggle to measure the outcomes (or 'impact') of their work, given the specialised nature of their activities and indirect link with people in need of assistance. They also face the same difficulties as other humanitarians when it comes to measuring humanitarian outcomes effectively at levels of the project, the programme, the country response, or the 'humanitarian system'. These include the limitations of predictive models, developing

suitable indicators, and the short timeframes of project-based interventions.

To capture outcomes, H2H actors should understand what is meant by direct 'short-term' outcomes. In technical terms, an outcome is the 'likely or achieved short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention's outputs' ([OECD/DAC](#)). In recent years interest has shifted from impact defined as 'changes in state', meaning ambitious big-ticket changes in policy, poverty alleviation, or reduced conflict, towards a focus on more immediate outcomes, defined as 'changes in the behaviour, relationships, activities, or actions of the people, groups, and organizations with whom a program works directly' ([Outcome Mapping](#)). Such outcomes can be logically linked to a programme's activities, although they are not necessarily directly caused by them.

Focusing on short-term outcomes still requires aiming for a longer-term outcome goals. Donor log frame guidance from [USAID](#), [DG ECHO](#), and [FCDO](#) require an impact statement, project goal or overall objective. But they often do not emphasize or require measurement and reporting at this level. Indeed H2H actors may not be expected to capture the full range of 'Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced ... directly or indirectly, intended or unintended' ([OECD/DAC](#)) or 'wider effects of the project ... on individuals, gender- and age-groups, communities and institutions' ([ALNAP](#)).

2. Declare limitations. As noted in the learning session, H2H actors face common challenges in capturing outcomes. First, MEAL frameworks or log frames often focus solely on activities and outputs, without much consideration of intended outcomes or causal dynamics. H2H actors often do many implicitly useful things, but may struggle to answer the explicit question 'what for?' and 'so what?'

Second, the 'indirect' H2H model is inherently complex. It typically involves the H2H actor providing services, a responder utilizing these services, and some discernible contribution being made to humanitarian action and results (the formula, then, is basically: H2H provision +

responder utilization = humanitarian contribution). This model may be complicated further when multiple 'levels' of intervention are involved or when it remains undefined whether contributions are intended to global funding portfolios, coordinated responses to a specific crisis, the projects of humanitarian actors, or communities and people affected. Moreover, some H2H actors may be content to provide 'open source' or 'public good' services without giving due consideration to outcomes.

Third, [measuring humanitarian outcomes](#) of humanitarian actors more broadly remains complicated. Besides evaluation techniques for capturing outcomes, many humanitarian actors grapple with monitoring outcomes due to problems of prediction and anticipation, outcome indicators, and understanding the effects of short-term project-based interventions. Nonetheless measuring '[collective outcomes](#)' is increasingly required.

In this context, it is important to develop suitable approaches tailored to H2H requirements. But it is equally important to be clear about the limitations of what is possible, and thus avoid overpromising or overselling H2H outcomes.

3. Think analytically. H2H actors are interested in adapting and applying evaluative techniques for capturing outcomes, aiming to go beyond simplistic metrics or subjective anecdotes. Some applicable evaluative techniques are:

- [Contribution analysis](#): A technique that produces a credible 'contribution story' aimed at understanding why observed results have occurred (or not) and roles played by the intervention and other factors. It involves defining a problem statement, developing a theory, collecting existing evidence, preparing a story, collecting more evidence, and revising the story.
- [Outcome Harvesting](#): A technique that collects evidence of what has changed and then, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention contributed to these changes in programming contexts where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood.

It involves identifying outcomes, formulating them, and then verifying, analysing, and interpreting evidence.

- [Most Significant Change](#): A technique for generating and analysing personal accounts of change and deciding which of these accounts is the most significant and why. It involves deciding which stories, collecting stories and determining the most significant one, and sharing and discussing them with stakeholders to learn what is valued.

4. Use case studies. In practice, H2H actors may rely primarily on case studies and related techniques (See [Intrac](#)) to collect and analyse data:

- Case study: a descriptive study that provides in-depth information on a development intervention. Types include exploratory, descriptive, explanatory
- Stories of change: similar to case studies, but always focused on change. Show how a project or programme has contributed to change
- Testimonials: written or recorded narrative of an individual's experience of a situation
- User monitoring and consultation: web data, visits/following, focus groups, surveys,
- Evaluations

A case study typically uses multiple sources: documents, interviews, and observation (visual data). It provides evidence for outcomes in a joined-up way, measures longer-term and more complex change, and provides rich, detailed evidence of different perspectives. It can tell you why and how something has happened, as well as what has happened (see [USAID](#))

However, case studies also require thought and effort to design, and may require expert inputs. They can also be time consuming. And are often used in external evaluations, more than for routine monitoring. For H2H actors, a light touch adaptation would be needed.

5. View examples. Some H2H actors have tailored approaches for their own

requirements. See the following practices for possible adaptation:

- [Humanitarian Open Street Map](#): Noting its MEAL framework is constantly evolving, it shares learning about core impact areas and 'where we're making a difference' using short stories of 5-7 paragraphs.
- [Ground Truth Solutions](#): Its CEO and senior staff produce periodic opinion pieces / blog posts about different aspects of its work and progress towards achieving goals, using 2–3-page articles.
- [International Crisis Group](#): It publishes Impact Notes. begun as information papers for donors, now publicly available to give 'a glimpse of what we do and how we think we are making progress in pursuit of peace' in 3-4-page feature stories.
- [Internews](#): It prepares stories by staff and partners (i.e. blogs) illustrating how work makes a difference in the world, in 2-3-page feature stories.
- [BBC Media Action](#): It monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of programmes with techniques, including continuous panels, regular and experimental research, quantitative surveys and qualitative techniques, to understand whether and how projects are achieving impact on the development outcomes they are aiming to achieve. It uses policy briefings and blog/featured posts.
- [Sphere](#): It prepares case studies illustrating how Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) standards are applied in practice. Based on reports and interviews with humanitarian practitioners, these 4-page case studies are used for learning, training, awareness-raising.
- [Humanitarian Leadership Academy](#): Its Impact Report, a colourful annual report of 20-pages includes stories and testimonies.
- [CHS Alliance](#): Its annual Humanitarian Accountability Report 2020, asks: 'Are we making aid work better for people affected by crisis?'. It reveals how much progress CHS-verified organisations have made in meeting their commitments to the children, women, men facing disasters globally.



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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.