4 MEAL planning and budgeting

Keywords: Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, learning, plan, budget

Introduction

In this session on MEAL Planning and Budgeting, you will learn the purpose and function of a MEAL plan and how to develop a comprehensive MEAL plan and budget for your project or programme. Overall, expect to spend about 90 minutes.

Learning Outcomes for this Session

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

1. Explain the purpose of a MEAL Plan and describe the contents
2. Understand how to budget for MEAL activities and list the key budget items
3. Develop a comprehensive MEAL Plan and corresponding budget

1 The Purpose and Contents of a MEAL Plan

1.1 What is the purpose of a MEAL plan?

A MEAL plan is your project or programme's roadmap to implementing your MEAL related activities as intended, in a timely and efficient fashion, and to ensure continuous learning throughout the project and programme cycle. Specifically, Save the Children defines a MEAL plan as a management tool that can be used to monitor and evaluate interventions, projects or programmes. Save the Children's Essential Standards states that all projects/programmes should be covered by a MEAL plan with appropriate resources in place to implement the plan.

MEAL plans come in different forms and agencies refer to such tools using a variety of terms, including M&E Plan, Performance Monitoring Plan, Monitoring Matrix and others. However, a MEAL plan should not be confused with a project or programme framework or results framework, a tool for project planning, design, management, and performance assessment that illustrates project elements (such as goals, objectives, outputs, outcomes), their causal relationships, and the external factors that may influence success or failure of the project. Please refer to Session 3 on Programme frameworks, objectives and indicators to learn more about programme frameworks.

Overall, a comprehensive MEAL plan demonstrates the linkages between the activities we implement and the changes we seek to achieve. A comprehensive MEAL plan simplifies complex information by transforming programming strategy into concrete and practical activities. It forces us to think systematically about each of the components of our project/programme.

It also provides space to identify the indicators or variables we need to measure in order to answer questions about the effects of our interventions, the data collection tools we need to measure these variables, data collection and data management processes (including key staff responsible for such processes), how resultant data can be shared and the key audiences with whom such data should be shared.

With a completed MEAL plan and budget, we can quickly determine if our planned MEAL activities are practical and relevant to the objectives of our project or programme and establish relationships between different components of our work. We can ensure technical and operational quality (e.g. timeliness of project/programme activities as well as accountability to multiple internal (e.g. other departments within your office, Members, Country Offices, Global Initiatives, the Save the Children International Board) and external (e.g. children and communities whom we serve, donors, government partners) audiences. Because MEAL plans demonstrate our successes for projects/programmes with proven results and document specific weaknesses for less successful projects/programmes, they are useful tools for donors to make funding decisions.

1.3 What is in a MEAL Plan?

The content and the degree of details in a MEAL plan may vary depending on the size and nature of the project/programme. Several projects could be captured within one programme-level MEAL plan. In fact, MEAL plans can exist at any level, including country, regional and global. The MEAL plan should cover the entire length of the project/programme.

Save the Children has recommended categories to be included in MEAL plans, but no prescribed format because the actual template depends on donor or other context specific stakeholders. That said, the following components should be considered in MEAL plans and budgets:

- Key project/programme information
- Objectives and Indicators for monitoring, with baselines
- Qualitative information needed for monitoring
- Planned evaluations (projects/programme reviews, mid-term, final)
- Real-time reviews (in humanitarian responses)
- Evaluations of Humanitarian Action
- Training and capacity strengthening of key staff on MEAL activities
- Accountability Activities (e.g. information needs assessment, establishing and maintaining complaints response mechanisms, ways of sharing information and facilitating two way communications between beneficiaries and Save the Children/our partners)
- Data Quality and Validation
- Roles and Responsibilities

- Children and Stakeholder Participation
- Management Information System(s)
- Communicating and using data
- Workplan
- MEAL budget (recommended 3-10% of total project/programme for MEAL activities)

More detailed information on the requirements and timings for MEAL planning and budgeting in a humanitarian context is provided in Session 18 on Measuring Results in Humanitarian Work.

Activity 1 (SAQ)

TRUE/FALSE:
The Save the Children MEAL categories should be used when donor templates for MEAL plans are not available?

---

2 How do I get started?

Step 1: Identify your project/programme goals.

The first step in creating a MEAL plan is to identify your programme or project goals and activities that you plan to implement. A good MEAL plan begins with the specific objectives of the project/programme. In fact, a comprehensive MEAL plan can serve as an effective tool in creating a coherent project/programme proposal as it can reveal gaps in planning and any underlying assumptions we are making. What are the products, materials, and capital goods (outputs), short- or medium-term results (outcomes) and long-term results (impacts) your project/programme intends to achieve? These goals and activities are typically specified during the proposal writing phase. Usually this information is articulated in your programme framework document and is described in the form of a results framework, logical framework or any other types of framework that were used to design the project/programme (see Session 3 on Programme Frameworks, Objectives and Indicators for more details).

Next, consider the context of your project/programme. No project/programme takes place in isolation. It is important to understand the national and local policies as well as the administrative structures that can affect the implementation of our project/programme. Any contextual information that can be collected prior to the start of the project/programme will provide a critical basis for understanding the risks, if any, associated with successful implementation of MEAL activities.

Assumptions are our underlying beliefs about the beneficiaries or stakeholders and programme as well as our hypotheses about factors or risks that could affect the progress or success of a project/programme intervention.

Project/programme workplans should not be included within the MEAL plan – the MEAL plan is a separate management tool that should be developed in parallel with the project/programme workplan. As project/programme designs are modified, so should MEAL plans be modified.

Activity 2 (SAQ)

TRUE/FALSE:
A MEAL plan and budget can and should be written by the MEAL specialist or team alone.

Step 2: Identify your project/programme indicators and targets.

The second step in creating a comprehensive MEAL plan is to identify the indicators you will use to measure the progress and achievements of your project/programme, as well as targets. Underlying all MEAL plans is the need to determine what it is we are trying to measure and why. Identifying and selecting both quantitative and qualitative indicators is critical prior to beginning MEAL activities. Remember that indicators must be:

- SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic/Relevant, Time-Bound)
- Linked to your project/programme MEAL plan
- Useful for programme decision-making
- Consistent with international standards & other reporting requirements (as appropriate)
- Realistic to collect (feasible).

While indicators are initially selected during the project/programme design phase, they can change over time as the context evolves. Just as a project/programme can change throughout the funding period, so can a MEAL plan. You need to ensure there is a mechanism in place to guarantee the continued relevance of the MEAL plan to the project/programme.

When setting targets for your indicators, you must focus on what your project/programme can realistically achieve given your human and financial resources and the environment in which you are operating. For each indicator, consider the following factors: baseline levels, past trends, donor expectations and logistics to achieve targets. In addition to the magnitude or size of change over time, when setting specific project/programme targets, you must also decide on the direction of change that is desired over time. You may also wish to establish annual or intermediate targets for multi-year projects/programmes.

Step 3: Select your data collection methods and data sources for prioritised indicators in your MEAL plan.

There are many ways to collect data. The choices you make will largely depend upon your available budget and the availability of human resources. Key factors here include the availability of skilled staff familiar with conducting monitoring and evaluation activities, the appropriateness of the methodology for your MEAL objectives, and the context of your project/programme (e.g. political, social, security). You will also need to determine whether any special studies will be conducted and what study design will be used. You should also carefully consider the internal and external capacity to conduct any special studies (this includes technical capacity as well as cost considerations).

Something that often is neglected when developing a MEAL plan is the need to assess the MEAL technical capacity of your project/programme. When preparing the MEAL plan, you must at least consider the existing data collection systems and staff capacity in MEAL. The programme may have a MEAL unit with staff trained in monitoring and evaluation methods that will be responsible for leading the development and coordination of the MEAL plan. If this is not the case, then there may be individuals who are motivated and have an interest in monitoring and evaluation. It is important to identify those people even if they do not have a formal monitoring and evaluation position; it is also important to work and strengthen the capacities of these people in MEAL. Assessing current capacity and using resources that are already available will help us to avoid duplication of data collection and reporting and collecting information that will not be used. Finally, no matter the size of your project/programme, each data collection strategy you select should be as rigorous as possible to ensure the data gathered are objective and unbiased or impartial.

Step 4: Decide upon your data analysis, quality assurance/validation and management strategy.

Every comprehensive MEAL plan should include a method for analysing and assuring the quality or validating the data you gather, both qualitative and quantitative. Linked with this can be a capacity to strengthen strategy to enhance MEAL specific skills of staff. For example, workshops to raise awareness of the MEAL plan, data collection methodologies and tool development, familiarity with Excel or statistical software packages such as SPSS. The MEAL plan should also specify, for each indicator, the individuals or units responsible for management and implementation of the MEAL plan, as well as how the data will be received, stored and accessed. It should describe "data flow" from initial collection to final storage (including physical storage of original data collection tools and electronic databases) and use.

Step 5: Identify your strategy for reporting and disseminating data.

When crafting your MEAL plan and finalising the MEAL activities you will implement, it is critical to consider if, when and how you will interact with stakeholders and beneficiaries your project/programme serves with respect to your MEAL activities (please see Session 7 on Accountability for more details). A dissemination strategy is required that will specify how to deal with the results of your MEAL activities, how widely you would like to circulate the results and the stakeholders you wish to target. Stakeholders could include learners, teachers, policy makers and other decision makers. As you will learn in Session 9, Use of MEAL Data, it is critical to think about how you will use data gathered through different data sources from the very beginning of your project/programme to conserve limited human and financial resources and to ensure you are continuously learning and improving your interventions throughout the project/programme cycle.

Consider the level of participation you require from each group, including children and youth. How often should your team meet with key stakeholders? What form will these meetings take – information sharing for particular groups, circulation of final reports, individual discussions, or other fora? Will data be made publicly available? Involving children and youth in meaningful and appropriate ways takes careful preparation and planning. For example, if you plan to share the lessons learned from a final project evaluation with children who participated in the project, you cannot simply provide them with a copy of the final report. The key messages will need to be simplified and adapted so they are understandable, relevant and age-appropriate. This topic will be covered in greater detail in Session 8, Children's Participation in MEAL.

Activity 3 (SAQ)

TRUE/FALSE:
The involvement of most stakeholders in MEAL activities should be limited – they aren't interested and we should be careful not to share results unless they are positive.

Activity 4 (SAQ)

Below is a list of key terms associated with MEAL plans – match each of the terms with one of the definitions listed below.

Terms

1. Data source
2. Dissemination
3. Indicator
4. Validation

Definitions

A. Process by which findings and learnings of monitoring and evaluation are communicated to the relevant audiences. In particular, refers to the communication to beneficiaries (children, communities, governments) in which we are working to ensure and increase our accountability.
B. Quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means to measure achievement, to reflect the changes connected to an intervention, or to help assess the performance of a development actor.
C. The document, dataset, person, location or activity that contains or generates information and facts.
D. The process of cross-checking to ensure that the data obtained from one monitoring method are confirmed by the data obtained from a different method.

---

3 MEAL budgeting

3.1 MEAL activities requiring a budget

Budget allocated towards MEAL activities should include both sources of funding and any existing gaps. MEAL-related costs that should be included in the project. Budget might include the following:

- Baseline studies or data collection activities

- Establishing a monitoring and evaluation or Management Information System (MIS)

- Training and capacity building for all staff and partners involved in developing and implementing MEAL activities

- Ongoing, routine monitoring activities, including supervision visits, data collection activities, printing of questionnaires, travel and refreshments for respondents, and data inputting

- Mid-term review (if required)

- Final evaluation (if required)

- Learning events and dissemination activities, including publications and public meetings where appropriate

- Staff time/salary for dedicated monitoring and evaluation personnel can also be included.

3.2 MEAL as a percentage of project/programme budgets

As a rough guide, 3-10% of your total project budget should be allocated towards MEAL activities. This should ensure that implementation is not adversely affected while project/programme results can be documented reliably and credibly.

The final allocation for MEAL costs will be highly dependent on the size and complexity of the project and the project design (evaluation design). For example, a small stand-alone intervention that is focusing on distribution of teaching materials in one district (with concrete outputs and outcomes) may require less funding for MEAL activities compared with a multi-country initiative focused on implementation of national policies.

3.3 Final Exploratory Activity

Directions: Compare and contrast the existing monitoring and evaluation plan or MEAL plan for your project or programme with examples of MEAL plans located on OneNet. You can also contact the regional M&E advisor for examples of MEAL plans for this exercise and future learning.

https://onenet.savethechildren.net/whatwedo/me/Shared%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?RootFolder=%2fwhatwedo%2fme%2fShared%20Documents%2f10.%20Training%20modules&FolderCTID=0x012000ACADE6423B2C524E8F5CFF2A9D9DF156

Consider the following questions as you compare these plans:

1. For your current project or programme, do you have a MEAL plan?

2. Does your current monitoring and evaluation plan or MEAL plan align with Save the Children's essential standard and standard operating procedure on MEAL plans and budgets? If no, what is missing? Save the Children's essential standards and standard operating procedures can be found here on **OneNet**.

3. What tools/systems exist to ensure all planned monitoring and evaluation activities for your project or programme are conducted? What is missing?

Summary of this Session

- Save the Children defines a MEAL plan as a management tool that can be used to monitor and evaluate interventions, projects or programmes. A MEAL plan is your project or programme's roadmap to implementing your activities as intended, to conduct monitoring and evaluation activities in a timely and efficient fashion, and to ensure continuous learning throughout the project and programme cycle.

- Save the Children has recommended categories to be included in MEAL plans, but no prescribed format. Always use a donor's preferred template when creating your MEAL plan; if your donor does not have a preferred template, you can use Save the Children's MEAL categories described in the Standard Operating Procedure.

- A MEAL plan should be developed with the Programme Management team and relevant partners and stakeholders to ensure ownership and sense of shared responsibility, especially where they are responsible for any aspect of data collection.

- MEAL activities should be allotted between 3-10% of your overall project or programme budget. The exact amount will vary depending upon the scope of the project and available resources.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQ) answers

Activity 1

TRUE. Because there is no required Save the Children template, you should follow the format preferred by the donor for your project/programme. Many examples of good MEAL plans exist. Please contact your regional M&E advisor or visit OneNet for examples.

Activity 2

FALSE. A MEAL plan should be developed with the Programme Management team and relevant partners and stakeholders to ensure ownership and sense of shared responsibility, especially where they are responsible for any aspect of data collection. The relevant Country Office Thematic Programme Manager is responsible for finalising the project MEAL plan, in consultation with the relevant thematic advisor and Country/ Regional Office monitoring and evaluation staff. In other words, the MEAL unit – if there is one – will need to consult with programme managers to see if the indicators in the MEAL plan reflect actual data being collected and whether that information is the most useful for them in order to make decisions for programme improvement.

If it is a medium or high-risk grant, the relevant Member HQ should receive the final MEAL plan. Overall accountability lies with Country Office Director, and in all Save the Children Declared and some non-declared emergency responses, with the Response Team Leader.

Activity 3

FALSE: A core component of Save the Children's Theory of Change is the formation of partnerships. A core agency value for Save the Children is Accountability. Given this, it is critical that you strive to involve stakeholders in every element of the project/programme cycle, including MEAL activities. Stakeholder involvement should not be kept to the end of the project/programme. In fact, they can and should assist in developing the MEAL framework. This way everyone involved will have a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the programme and how these will be measured. By participating in the design of the MEAL framework, stakeholders can help select appropriate and useful monitoring and evaluation indicators. They should also participate in setting programme targets and regularly review results from MEAL activities.

Promoting stakeholder participation involves building consensus and commitment among them. By doing this, you will create a sense of ownership among partners and a feeling of responsibility for doing their part. It will ensure that the information and results guided by your MEAL plan are consistent with their expectations. It is a continuous activity that requires coordination between all stakeholders including staff from all project/programme components.

Activity 4

DATA SOURCE (Save the Children): the document, dataset, person, location or activity that contains or generates information and facts.

DISSEMINATION (Save the Children): process by which findings and learning of monitoring and evaluation are communicated to the relevant audiences. In particular, refers to the communication to beneficiaries (children, communities, governments) in which we are working to ensure and increase our accountability.

INDICATOR (OECD): quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means to measure achievement, to reflect the changes connected to an intervention, or to help assess the performance of a development factor.

VALIDATION (IFAD): the process of cross-checking to ensure that the data obtained from one monitoring method are confirmed by the data obtained from a different method.

Links to Some Existing Resources

- https://onenet.savethechildren.net/whatwedo/me/Pages/default.aspx
- http://preval.org/documentos/00473.pdf
- http://web.undp.org/evaluation/handbook/

Cover image: © Save the Children