Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL)

9 Use of MEAL data

Keywords: Data, use, decision making, accountability, management, continual improvement, quality, learning, communicating information

Introduction

Using MEAL data helps us to understand what does and does not work, and is critical to the success of Save the Children's projects and programmes. By using MEAL data, we can adapt programming in light of the findings for continual improvement. This, in turn, helps us to maximise the effectiveness of our interventions.

MEAL data is not only used for ensuring that we are on track to meet our programme objectives, but also for learning and accountability. The data that we collect and the way in which we collect that data helps us to be accountable to a wide range of stakeholders, including children. By ensuring that we are taking account of their views and opinions in the data we collect from them and that we are feeding back that data and the resulting decisions, we are increasing our accountability.

Learning Outcomes for this Session

Knowledge and Understanding

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

1. Describe the purpose and value of using MEAL data for decision making, learning, accountability and continual improvement

2. Link the use of MEAL data to the Learning Essential Standard and its Procedures

3. List practical examples of what we use MEAL data for and how different audiences may use this information

Practical and Professional Skills

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

1. Know what questions to ask of MEAL data

2. Know how to review data and formulate recommendations for maintaining/improving programme quality

3. Develop and use action plans and action trackers to follow up on MEAL actions

4. Plan and budget for activities to disseminate and share learning

1 The Purpose and value of using MEAL data for decision making, learning, accountability, and continual improvement

Why using MEAL data is important

Activity 1 (SAQ)

List at least three reasons why you think using MEAL data is important? Refer to 'Self-Assessment Questions (SAQ) Answers' at the end of this document to compare your points to the key points listed there.

MEAL data can be used for various purposes. Usually, the first thing that we use monitoring data for is to track project progress towards its objectives and targets. It is also used to communicate to government, donors, and other stakeholders, and to provide evidence for evaluation and advocacy.

In terms of quality and accountability, it is equally important to use MEAL data to learn about what works and what doesn't work in our programming and how our target groups are responding to our interventions. By doing this, we can make informed decisions to improve our programmes. This could, for example, lead to actions such as changing our strategy, our activity work plan, our target group, our geographic location, etc.

To ensure our programmes are accountable to beneficiaries, we should be processing their feedback and complaints, and communicate results back to them.

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> ### Learner activity (Exploratory)
>
> Does the time distribution illustrated in the pie chart in Figure 1 look familiar to your context?
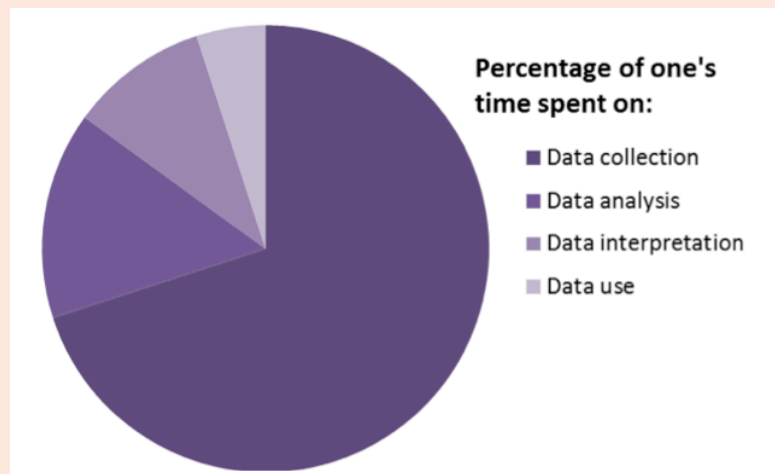>
>
>
> **Figure 1:** Time spent on Data Processes
>
> While using data can be very valuable, we need to be mindful of the balance between data collection and data use. Usually we collect so much data, that there's no time left to analyze, interpret and act on all this information.

1.1 Essential Standards

The Save the Children Quality Framework, as described in Session 2 on the SCI MEAL system overview (see also http://tinyurl.com/OneNet-QualityFramework, lays out what quality means for Save the Children. In terms of using MEAL data, you may have noticed one of the essential standards as articulated below:

- Evidence exists to demonstrate that MEAL data is used to inform management decision making, improve programming and share learning within and across programs and/or functional areas

Indeed, complying with this standard means that Country Offices have documented procedures for reviewing data, applying findings to improve programming and share learning. Evidence of this may include: minutes of program meetings, proposals which demonstrate learning from previous interventions, and feedback from accountability mechanisms used for program development.

In emergency contexts, consistently analysing data from Output Trackers and regular reports as well as using data from Real Time Review (RTR) for action planning is critical. Humanitarian MEAL data should be used to analyse progress against targets and emerging patterns and should be shared with and reviewed by the response team leadership.

2 Ways different audiences use MEAL data.

As we have seen in the SCI MEAL System overview module of Session 2, different audiences have different information needs.

Activity 2 (Exploratory)

Referring to the different audiences mentioned in the exercise and table of section 6 of the overview session (Session 2), who do you think could be highlighted as key stakeholders that use MEAL data for decision making, learning, accountability and continual improvement? Write down how you think these audiences and stakeholders would use data in the ways we just described. You can also include any other potential uses that you have thought of.

Then check 'Self-Assessment Questions (SAQ) answers' to compare your points to the key points listed here. In the next section, we'll have a look at a case study of potential use of data generated by a MEAL framework in a country programme.

One thing you may have noted is that here we do focus on 'internal' audiences that use MEAL data for decision making. It is therefore good to remind ourselves that we may need to produce more user-friendly ways of presenting MEAL data and information for external audiences. The exact format is left up to those needing to tailor information for specific audiences (e.g. producing child-friendly materials for children).

3 Understanding the potential uses of MEAL data

Examples of good practice of using data for decision making, learning and accountability

Let us have a look at the following example from a country programme. You can see some good examples of how MEAL data can be used in this particular context of child protection and education programming. When you have gone through, take a look at the exercise beneath it.

Using data on indicator progress to correct indicator definitions and targets
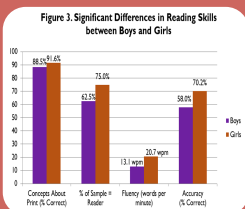
Monitoring data from a Child protection project showed that addressing protection cases for a protection project remained at no progress at all for some key indicators

- On further probing it was understood that there was no clear definition among teams as to what different statuses of addressing cases were.
- These criteria were then revised with technical support, followed by a revision of all data for one year where statuses were reclassified and numbers re-entered .

Using data on the quality of our education activities to inform future design

Data collected on Guiding Principles along what we consider a Quality Learning Environment (QLE) showed lack of "soft components "

- Built the evidence base for the need to address this in future possibilities of improved programmes
- The QLE method adapted to contextually restricted environment – creating project related scores with applicable Guiding Principles for the project and overall scores to document the gaps

Using disaggregated impact data to change programme activities

Baseline results of literacy boost programme found that boys are less competent than girls and out of the 5 literacy boost competency areas, fluency and comprehension scored lower

- During training to the In Service Advisors, emphasis has been made on ensuring that more effort is given to fluency and comprehension areas as well as increased involvement of boys

Using global indicator data to inform further assessments focus

Global participation indicator findings show that scores for safety and doing a risk assessment for children is low and during discussions staff felt that there are no streamlined approaches to doing risk assessments

- A simple risk assessment now included for interventions with children's groups

Figure 3: Examples of Data Use

Activity 3 (Exploratory)

Let's explore how MEAL data could be used in your context. Of the above four brief examples, which one(s) do you think can apply in your context in the coming months. Try to think about at least one additional potential use in your context.

4 Knowing how to use data generated by a MEAL framework

Questions to ask of the data

Now that we have seen why we use MEAL data and some examples of its potential use for different audiences, let us have a look at what specific questions you actually look at when using MEAL data. Indeed, when we use data generated by a MEAL framework, we can ask ourselves and stakeholders quite a wide range of different questions to review the data and formulate recommendations for maintaining or improving programme quality.

These questions can be related to tracking progress, to learning about what works and what doesn't, and to knowing what stakeholders have fed back to us about our interventions, etc. The following box expands on some example questions and related actions that could be taken based on the answers.
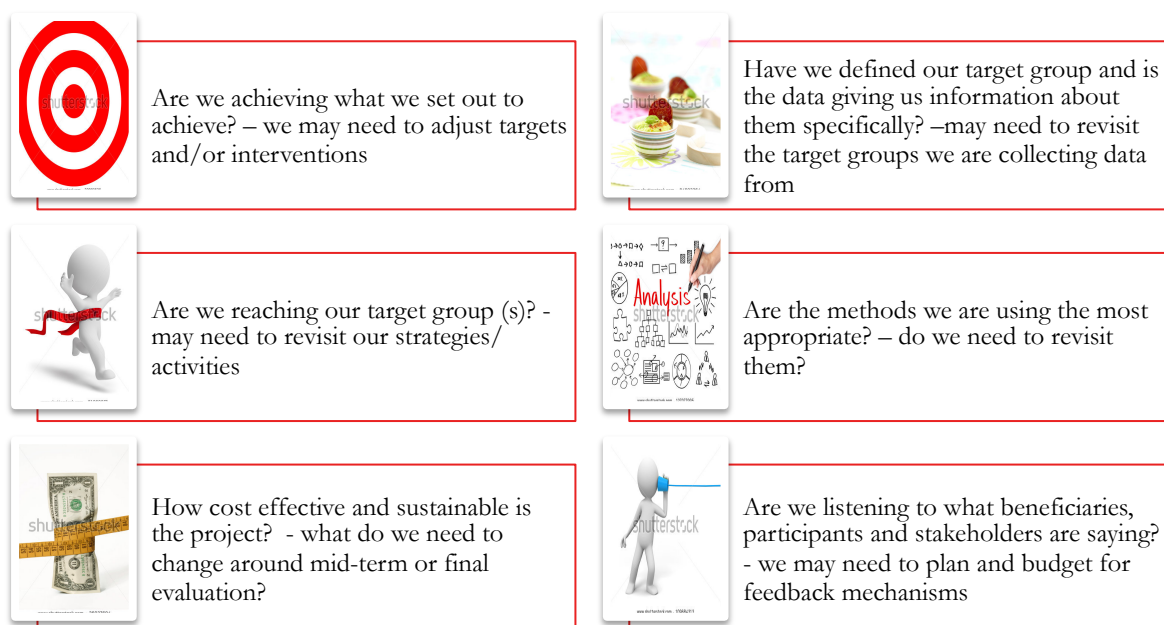

Are we achieving what we set out to achieve? – we may need to adjust targets and/or interventions

Have we defined our target group and is the data giving us information about them specifically? –may need to revisit the target groups we are collecting data from

Are we reaching our target group (s)? - may need to revisit our strategies/ activities

Are the methods we are using the most appropriate? – do we need to revisit them?

How cost effective and sustainable is the project? - what do we need to change around mid-term or final evaluation?

Are we listening to what beneficiaries, participants and stakeholders are saying? - we may need to plan and budget for feedback mechanisms

Figure 4: Questions to ask of MEAL data

If we refer back to the time spent on data collection, it is worth noting that before you start collecting new data from the field, it is essential to examine existing information including relevant reports, surveys, etc. This will help you to formulate questions and avoid duplicating previous data collection efforts.

5 Venues for disseminating and sharing learning

As you know, collecting monitoring data is best done as a routine (e.g. daily, weekly, monthly) activity throughout the project cycle. Similarly, the most straightforward way to integrate data collection into program management is if monitoring, evaluation, complaints, feedback, and assessment data is reviewed and analysed on a regular basis by programme, management and MEAL staff.

The following are some examples of mechanisms that you could put in place for reviewing data and applying the findings to improve programming and sharing learning. It is also important to provide opportunities to discuss the findings with all the people who are interested, including the people affected by the work.

Project team meetings

✓ The Project/Programme Manager or Thematic Programme Manager should ensure regular, frequent project team meetings with field staff and M&E staff, where appropriate, to discuss project progress, challenges and any further or related issues. The purpose of these meetings is to ensure that Programme Managers and field staff are able to make appropriate decisions about project/programme implementation in order to improve programming. Plans for follow-up with clear responsibilities should be decided.

✓ These action plans might be based on monthly field reports submitted to the Manager, which highlight key areas of concern or learning

✓ Ideally these meetings should be held monthly or quarterly with the exception of emergencies where meetings will be held more frequently to inform response planning and implementation.

Senior management team meetings

✓ Monitoring (and evaluation) data should be reviewed by Senior Management as frequently as they review Management Accounts

✓ The purpose of these meetings is to ensure that Senior Management – including the Country Director, Director of Programmes or equivalent and Programme/Thematic Managers – are regularly reviewing monitoring and evaluation data, as they are the ones accountable for that data (see MEAL standard 56 in the Quality Framework). The same applies to declared emergencies with the involvement of the relevant Response and Country Office Leadership/(Extended) Senior Management Team. Country leadership groups should be reviewing monitoring (and evaluation, if appropriate) data quarterly to ensure they are on track to meet their objectives

✓ In categorized emergency response, the response leadership should review monitoring (and evaluation if appropriate) data weekly or bi-weekly in the early stages of a response and moving the frequency to longer intervals over time.

Other possible venues to disseminate learning include:

✓ Evaluations, Operational reviews, Real Time Review (RTR) action planning and dissemination workshops

✓ Using the Save the Children evaluations repository on OneNet: http://tinyurl.com/OneNet-evaluation-database

✓ Dissemination of Evaluations and RTRs meta-analysis and digests

✓ Stakeholders dissemination meetings

✓ Learning communications, e.g. publications and sharing reports

✓ Country leadership group meetings

✓ Staff learning activities and Inter-agency workshops and learning activities

✓ Communities of Practice

Learning reviews and stakeholder dissemination meetings should be budgeted and planned for annually. More specifically, these learning processes are documented and defined within project and M&E plans. For emergency responses this might happen more frequently and be put in the MEAL section of the response strategy.

6 Using action plans and action trackers to follow up on MEAL actions

Once we have findings, recommendations and learning based on MEAL data documented and shared, we need to find ways that these can be followed up on and incorporated into the programme. One key way in which you could do this is to enter the action points into a MEAL Action Plan Tracker. This is shared with program managers, technical advisors, senior management and any other relevant actors on a regular basis.

Action plans are also a required resource for evaluations and real-time reviews and the country director is accountable for their follow-up and implementation. These action plans should look at the lessons learned during the evaluation and any recommendations made: the action plans should consider how these will be addressed in the future. They should identify resource, financial and/or technical requirements, and must be reviewed by senior management, shared with the regional office and also make clear who is responsible and accountable for which actions. Finally, it is best to develop the action plans in conjunction with local partners involved in the project, where appropriate.

Below you will find an example of headings from an M&E Action Plan tracker. This tracker helps ensure that monitoring supports program quality and improvement. Key findings from regular monitoring are fed into this M&E Action Plan tracker and this tracker is shared with the programme management teams on a monthly basis. This tracker indicates whether agreed actions are being implemented or not. Programme management teams then review this document during their monthly program review meetings.

M&E Action Plan Tracker								
Date of Update								
District	Program /Sector	Action Plan Agreed (as per M&E and A report)	Date of visit	Initial agreed date of completion - per report	Accountable person	Action plan achieved? (To be filled by DPM in Yes or NO)	Comments from Accountable Persons for any delay / issue implementing agreed action	Comments from Line Manager of Accountable Person

Summary of Session 9

1. Using MEAL data is important to: track progress, learn, make decisions for continuous improvement, provide evidence, ensure accountability

2. It is important to plan and budget for learning activities

3. Different audiences use data in different ways and for different ends

4. There is a wide range of ways and venues to share and use MEAL data

5. An MEAL action plan tracker is a good tool to ensure learning is incorporated in programme management.

Answers to Self-Assessment Question (SAQ) Activities for Session 9

Activity 1 (SAQ):

The following are reasons why using MEAL data is important. Do these reasons compare to the ones that you thought of?

- ✓ To track progress vs objectives and targets
- ✓ To learn about what works and what doesn't work
- ✓ To ascertain if the project/programme is reaching the intended target groups and addressing their needs
- ✓ To assess how the target group is responding to the project interventions
- ✓ To make decisions – changing strategy, activity, target group, location etc.
- ✓ To provide evidence for evaluation and advocacy
- ✓ To communicate to government, donors, and other stakeholders, telling a clear and compelling story about the scale and results of work
- ✓ To ensure accountability to beneficiaries by processing their feedback and complaints and communicating results back to them.

Activity 2 (SAQ):

Examples of how different stakeholders use MEAL data:

- ✓ SCI centre/Regional office/Country Office: to decide the continuation of the programme
- ✓ Technical staff: to provide further technical training for continual improvement
- ✓ Children and community: to hold the project/programme and organisation accountable (feedback provided used for continual improvement)
- ✓ Donors: to assess quality and value for money of project/programme and decide on future funding
- ✓ International Organisations and other NGOs: to hold organisation accountable (peer accountability)
- ✓ Academic Institutions: to use evidence to complement academic research.

We also learned that although the level of MEAL information may differ, various types of audiences and stakeholders (as listed in Session 2) use MEAL data for decision making, learning, accountability and continual improvement.

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