



**Save the Children**



**The Open  
University**

**Monitoring, Evaluation,  
Accountability and Learning (MEAL)**

# 2 Save the Children (MEAL) system overview

Keywords: Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability,  
Learning, Culture, Quality, Results



## Introduction

This session provides an overview of the components of the Save the Children MEAL system, including the MEAL Essential Standards. It should take around two hours to complete.

## Learning Outcomes for this session

### **Knowledge and Understanding**

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

1. Describe the components of SC's MEAL system and understand its link with the global strategy
2. Understand the different information needs of all audiences
3. Identify the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved
4. Clarify the link with the Save the Children Quality Framework and MEAL related Essential Standards

### **Practical and Professional Skills**

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

1. Assess your programme against the MEAL essential standards
2. Know how to access MEAL procedures and guidelines

## I The Value of Monitoring in our Programmes

### I.2

Monitoring is a basic daily activity undertaken by Save the Children teams across all of our country programmes, and it requires particular skills and experience, resources, and management support.

For an agency that is highly reliant on grant funding, it's of course very important that we can produce reliable data for the purposes of reporting the outputs and outcomes of our work. So grant reporting is a major focus of our monitoring and evaluation efforts.

But the value of monitoring goes far beyond just recording our activities to complete reports. If we manage our processes and information well, then this crucial part of our project cycles allows us to develop a culture of continuous improvement. This means that we use data and observation to drive decision making and planning, that we are responsive to the views of the children and communities that we work with, and that we learn lessons from our work which inform further programme development.

Having systems and capacity across our teams which support Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) is vital for Save the Children to achieve its global strategy and objectives, and to achieve quality in its programmes.

### **Activity 1 (exploratory)**

Think about the reasons why you carry out different types of monitoring and reporting in your programme. List a few of them. Here are some that I thought of:

#### ***Accountability and results***

- To measure and demonstrate our impact, providing evidence that we are delivering lasting impact for children according to our strategy, mission, vision, and values
- To be accountable to ourselves, children, communities, donors and partners

#### ***Effective and efficient use of funds***

- To demonstrate that we are using our funds effectively and efficiently
- To ensure plans and commitments are progressing as expected for the purposes of reporting
- To inform mid-course correction of project methodology

#### ***Evidence and learning***

- To demonstrate that particular activities work best to achieve lasting impact for children and why / how
- To grow our programs and do more for children
- To ensure and improve the quality of our work

#### ***Transparency***

- Increase clarity on M&E responsibilities and access to information

## 2 The Three Levels

We have started to describe our approach to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning across three different levels. Before we look at those three levels (and having explored approaches to ‘monitoring’ above), here is a reminder of what we mean by the key terminology of evaluation, accountability, and learning:

**Evaluation:** The systematic assessment of an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine if there have been changes, and if so, how these have been applied. An evaluation should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both recipients and donors. Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or programme.

**Accountability:** Accountability to children and communities involves giving them a voice and opportunity to influence relevant decisions affecting whether and how we work with the people we seek to assist. It involves giving children and communities the power to hold us to account in ways that influence our policies, priorities, and actions at local, national and global levels through information sharing, feedback and complaints, and participation.

**Learning:** Refers to the systematic incorporation of lessons, recommendations and observations into programme design, including the findings that emerge from accountability mechanisms.

### The Three Levels

**Level Three** – Targeted research, including operational research and in some cases RCT (Randomised Control Trial) type exercises. Collaborating with external partners to carry out effective research, with country offices and members identifying country and/or program specific research questions.

**Level Two** – The MEAL approach which emphasises data collection and evaluation for the purposes of continual improvement, decision making and a sharper emphasis on accountability systems which allow for information sharing and handling feedback and complaints. The MEAL approach includes regular reviews, evaluations and assessments.

**Level One** – Basic Routine Monitoring and Evaluation including the data required for grant reporting and for annual reporting, which includes Total Reach, the Global Indicators, and our Evaluations. Improving data collection and quality, and improving the database are some key activities in strengthening Level I capability.

Of course these levels are not ‘sequential’: we need capacity to be able to work across all three levels at the same time. For example, we can build skills to work with the MEAL approach while at the same time ensuring that we are accurately reporting on our grants and producing data for the annual reports.

Save the Children has developed a set of tools and approaches to support level one monitoring, often described as our M&E System. We have recognised that alongside the ongoing grant reporting, we need to be able to generate data through our annual reporting process which allows us to tell a clear and compelling story about the scale and results of our work vis-à-vis the outcome statements in our strategy. The components of the system are explored in detail through this training module.

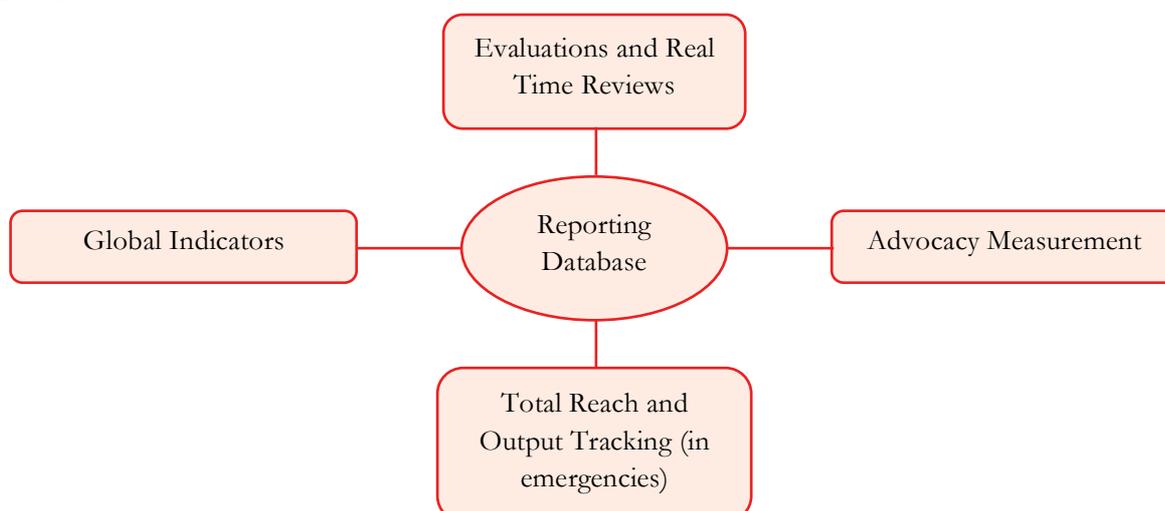
Many country programmes have also developed MEAL systems and capacity which include elements of Level Two above and use monitoring and accountability data to drive decision making, programme improvement and learning. We aim to establish this approach as standard for our country programmes, providing a strong foundation for building a culture of quality.

And of course Save the Children country programmes carry out a very wide range of innovative and high quality research, and we recognise the particular skills and resources that are required to build on this to maximise the value and effectiveness of our research efforts.

### 3 The components of the M&E System (Level One)

#### 3.1

You may already be familiar with the main components of the Save the Children M&E system, which have been developed in recent years to allow us to measure and demonstrate our reach and impact on some consistent measures across all country programmes.



### 3.2

**Advocacy Measurement:** Our Theory of Change places great emphasis on using our ‘voice’, and the voices of partners and children, to advocate for change for children. It aims to influence others to achieve scale-up of proven interventions. Effective advocacy is key to this, and our Advocacy Monitoring Tool (AMT) is the means by which we record the sum of our collective efforts on this.

Through the annual reporting round the AMT captures around 300 separate advocacy efforts each year. These range from local meetings aimed at improving working relations with local authorities, e.g. ‘we met with District Social Welfare officials to discuss the establishment of district level child protection referral mechanisms’, to national level policy breakthroughs with profound impact on children’s rights, such as ‘we successfully lobbied Ministry of Health to budget for nutrition interventions within the new National Strategic Health Development Plan’.

The AMT provides an accurate snapshot of the range of advocacy work undertaken and the policy change outcomes in a given year that were influenced by SC advocacy work. More work is needed to highlight the impact of game-changing policy breakthroughs on children’s lives. More work is also needed to address issues of contribution and attribution; that is, how much of the change was due to the effort of Save the Children and its partners.

Session 10 covers advocacy monitoring and the AMT.

### 3.3

**Total Reach:** Total Reach is the methodology by which Save the Children arrives at estimates of the number of children and adults reached by our programmes. It allows us to produce consistent data which drives annual estimates across projects/programmes for direct and indirect reach. If you’ve already worked with Total Reach you will know that it’s quite a demanding and involved process, and it needs to be because once the agency has committed to coming up with credible estimates of reach, we need to be able to justify the figures and take account of complicating factors like double counting, as well as the difficult definition of what actually constitutes ‘reach’.

As we have developed a few years of experience in generating reach figures at country, regional and global level, as well as by theme and sub-theme, we can see that the quality and consistency of the data continues to improve, and interesting trends in the changing story of our reach start to emerge. We can see how reach is impacted by spikes in emergency response, or by a small number of very large projects.

The other major ‘counting’ tool that we use is the Output Tracker, which is used in our emergency response programmes to keep careful track of the activities’ outputs, deliverables and beneficiary reach of the overall response. Session11 deals with the Total Reach methodology.

### Activity 2 (exploratory)

Take a look at the most recent reach figures for your country programme. Ask yourself the key test question for Total Reach: Would you be happy sharing these figures with national government and media? If not, what are the reasons for that, and what steps could be taken to improve confidence in the data?

### 3.4

**Global Indicators:** Save the Children has established a list of 22 Global Indicators in an ambitious effort to aggregate results data from across our country programmes. These indicators have been developed by the Global Initiatives, the Global Campaign and the Humanitarian Team, and are agreed across SCI and the members.

The global indicators were developed to measure progress towards the global outcome statements in our strategy and although originally billed as ‘outcome indicators’ they are in reality a mix of output and outcome level indicators, and they vary quite widely in their type and complexity. Some require a single number, or a yes no answer, while others require survey and sampling techniques to build the data.

Global indicator sets have been used in other agencies with varying degrees of success. Some peer agencies have abandoned them because it proved too difficult to gather consistent data against them across multiple country programmes. Save the Children has the advantage of only having a small number of indicators per thematic area, and we remain very committed to building capacity and credibility in reporting these indicators to help us better understand and communicate the results of our work.

Later sessions in this training module provide a comprehensive orientation to the global indicators.

### 3.5

#### *Evaluations*

An evaluation is a systematic assessment of an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or program. Evaluations should provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both recipients and donors.

Evaluation is different from monitoring, which is a continuing assessment based on systematic collection of data on specific indicators as well as other relevant information.

Save the Children produces around 170 evaluations per year, some of which are internal (carried out by SC teams) and others of which are external (carried out by independent consultants). In emergencies we carry out Real Time Reviews to help us understand the quality of the response and management actions needed to improve quality.

As an organisation our principle challenges with evaluations are:

1. Effectively capturing the learning from the vast knowledge base of our evaluations so that it is used to inform our programme development
2. Ensuring management follow up the recommendations that emerge from evaluations and reviews.

## 4 Components of the MEAL Approach

Complementing but moving beyond our Global M&E system components, the MEAL approach aims to emphasis the collection and use of data to support decision making, accountability and continual improvement. It seeks to ensure programmes are not only Monitored and Evaluated, but beneficiary opinions are actively sought, quality of activities assessed against minimum standards and findings shared with relevant stakeholders and explicitly fed back into program decision making, incorporating Accountability and Learning. MEAL hence represents a practical and conceptual step beyond routine monitoring and evaluation. It involves a commitment to using monitoring data and accountability feedback for the purposes of programme quality improvement and decision making, and this is an approach that we would like to promote and apply across all of Save the Children's programmes. As we described in the previous session, the MEAL approach relates very closely to the components of programme quality outlined in the Programme Quality Framework.

We've identified a number of core components to the MEAL approach, based on the experience of a number of Save the Children programmes, as well as good practice elsewhere in the sector.

These are:

### 4.1 Organisational Culture and Commitment

The key to success in applying the MEAL approach is a management team, including the Country Director, which is committed to making the system work and actively uses monitoring data for the purposes of programme quality improvement. There's obviously a big difference between monitoring just for reporting, and actually taking action on the basis of what monitoring data is telling us. The management team can drive a culture of critical inquiry, transparency and accountability, and this is crucial if we are to succeed in MEAL.

#### Activity 3 (exploratory)

Think about your own (country programme). How do managers at all levels support and communicate a culture of quality and continual improvement? What opportunities exist for building consensus and commitment around the quality culture?

In my experience this emphasis on quality culture needs to come from Country Directors and the SMT who should be able to set expectations and inspire teams to apply these approaches to quality improvement. A culture of accountability for results, and an expectation that action is taken on the basis of monitoring and evaluation data is at the heart of this, and it should be prominent in performance plans and reviews. Regular programme coordination meetings can provide opportunities not only to share information on what's happening, but also to review the results of programme quality monitoring and ensure action and follow up.

### Options for Country Office MEAL structure

Country teams have built MEAL capacity into their structures in different ways. Some have invested in developing independent MEAL units, within Programme Development and Quality (PDQ), with a mandate to monitor all projects against agreed standards and provide management actions for improvement. Others have preferred to apply these MEAL principles within the work and responsibilities of existing project teams. Structure might be determined by available resources, as well as by management preferences. Either way, it's clear that ensuring capacity and commitment to MEAL lies with the PDQ team.

### Partners and the MEAL approach

A great deal of monitoring of Save the Children supported work is carried out by our partners, so it's important in promoting the MEAL approach that we also consider partner capacity and resources to achieve this. One way to account for this is to ensure that commitments to monitoring, accountability and quality standards are clearly articulated in partnership agreements, and are explored in partner assessments.

### 4.2 Monitoring Minimum standards

The principle of monitoring projects against an agreed set of minimum standards is a particular feature of the MEAL approach. Minimum standards should be project specific, and must be established by the project team themselves, rather than from elsewhere in the organisation. They can form the basis of a 'checklist' which project monitors can use to establish whether the commitments and expected quality standards of a particular project are being met.

Save the Children's team in Pakistan developed comprehensive minimum standard checklists in order to support the systematic monitoring of quality across all of its projects. The checklists vary in detail. Some of them take the Global Indicators as a starting point, for example using the standards in the Quality of Learning Environment indicator as a basis for monitoring quality in SC supported learning centres. Other indicators are very simple; For example, checking whether the expected number of cricket bats are in place and available in the child friendly spaces. Others make specific reference to global standards such as SPHERE and HAP. The important point is that the minimum standards were agreed by the project teams, and that managers take time to review the monitoring information and take action on the findings.

Other teams wanting to develop their own minimum standard checklists might find the Pakistan standards a useful starting point, and you'll find a link to these and other MEAL resources at the end of this session.

### 4.3 Accountability Mechanisms

Establishing effective accountability mechanisms is another crucial pillar of the MEAL approach, including transparent sharing of information about the organisation and our objectives, and managing feedback and complaints from the children and communities with which we work. There is a separate session on accountability in this training, but we should note here that successful MEAL systems must pay particular attention to listening and responding to beneficiaries, and ensuring that their views are taken into account in programme development and improvement, in particular through maintaining a register of feedback and complaints.

### 4.4 Evaluation, Research and Learning

And finally the 'L' bit of MEAL which emphasises the importance of deliberate efforts on research and evaluation to reflect on operational and technical challenges and achievements, and uses this learning for further quality improvement. As with the continual monitoring, learning does not happen by accident but requires dedicated management support and commitment.

All sorts of research happens across Save the Children programmes. In the MEAL approach we are particularly interested in building skills and capacity for operational research, which investigates operational issues as projects are progressing, and identifies improvements and mid-course correction.

Learning in Action: A review of programme quality in Malawi revealed some excellent examples of learning being put into practice, including this case of the development of the Cash Transfer project and the use of e-payments and mobile technology:

The social welfare cash transfer project was originally based on the Malawi emergency cash transfer programme, which in turn was built on a pilot cash transfer programme introduced by Concern in 2005. Learning on e-payment has been sought from M-pesa in East Africa, including a study visit to Uganda to look at scaling up and sustainability, and from Save the Children's experience of cash programming in Swaziland. Particular learning issues included:

- Ensuring that agents have enough money to meet demand, by linking them to other larger agents (liquidity). They did the learning/problem solving through observation and discussion with partner.
- Changing the project design from a focus on community phones (which didn't work) to individual phones (at a cost of just \$10 each)
- Formative research into different delivery products (mobile, bank based) in collaboration with University of Malawi Centre for Social Research and Oxford Policy Management.
- Examining clients' ability to use the phone, and community access to financial institutions.

### Activity 4 (exploratory)

Think about a time when you have when have used data (monitoring, accountability, evaluation) to actually improve programme planning and implementation, compared to just reporting on activities. What were the obstacles to this? How did this contribute to quality improvement?

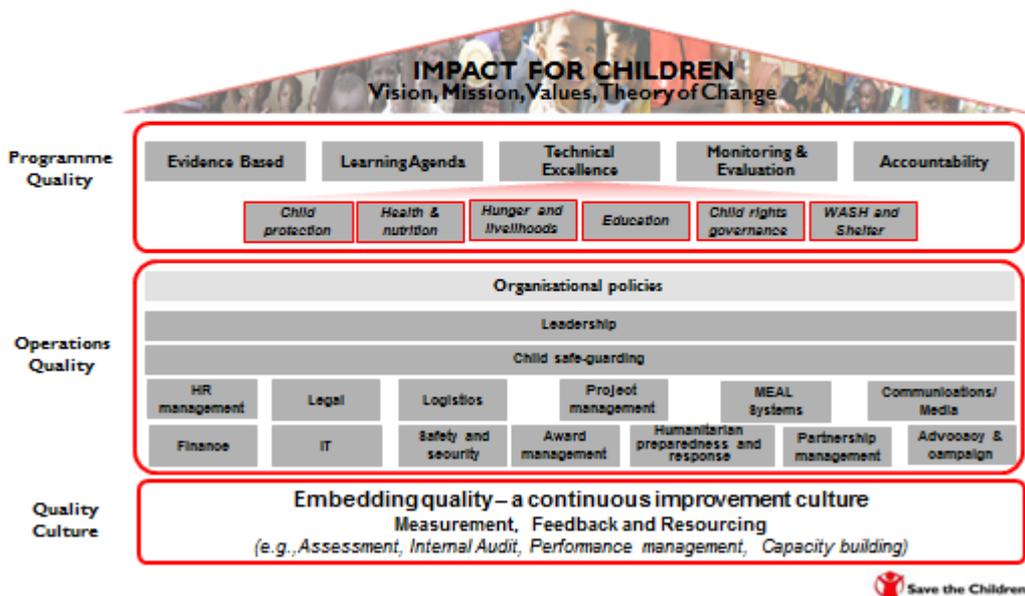
## 5 The MEAL Essential Standards

### 5.1

During 2013, Save the Children revised the MOS (Management Operating Standards) to arrive a shorter list of Essential Standards designed to build consistency and compliance across country office programmes.

The Quality Framework has been developed to present both the Programme Quality and the Operations Quality components of our work, and you can see from this diagram how they fit together. Clearly the MEAL essential standards, as well as others including partnership and advocacy, are crucial in achieving quality outcomes in our programmes.

New dual mandate quality framework captures all aspects of SCI work from vision to embedding quality culture



You may already be familiar with the seven MEAL standards, but here they are again listed below. Note that some of the standards have qualifying statements which help to explain them, as well as particular adaptations for use in emergencies, the ‘humanitarian adaptations’.

1.	Objectives and Indicators	Standard	Projects and programs have clearly defined objectives created using an appropriate logframe, results or other framework. All relevant Global Indicators are included in the program design
	Objectives and Indicators	Hum. adaptation / QS	In humanitarian responses, objectives and indicators are in line with the quality criteria outlined in the Humanitarian standards
2.	M&E Plan and Budget	Standard	Projects and programs are covered by an M&E plan consistent with the procedure, with appropriate resources budgeted to implement the plan
3.	Baseline	Standard	Projects and programs establish a baseline (or other appropriate equivalent) as a comparison and planning base for monitoring and evaluations
	Baseline	Hum. adaptation / QS	If a baseline cannot be established while prioritising delivery of a timely response, then an initial rapid assessment is carried out and followed-on with in-depth multi-sector assessments in line with Humanitarian standards and procedures. In a sudden onset emergency, initial rapid assessments are undertaken within 24-72 hours and followed-on with in-depth multi-sector assessments
5.	Evaluation	Standard	Projects and programs which meet thresholds outlined in the Evaluation procedure are evaluated with evaluation action plans developed and signed off by an appropriate manager
	Evaluation	Qualifying Statement	Evaluation and research reports are shared with relevant Regional and Global Initiative colleagues for the purposes of effective central archiving and knowledge management
6.	Learning	Standard	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
	Learning	Qualifying Statement	Evidence may include: minutes of program meetings, proposals which demonstrate learning from previous interventions, feedback from accountability mechanisms used for program development
	Learning	Hum. adaptation / QS	An Output Tracker is set up according to the deadline in the Humanitarian Categorisation procedures and analysis against targets and emerging patterns are shared with response team leadership at a minimum monthly
	Learning	Hum. adaptation / QS	Real Time Review (RTR) is conducted for relevant categorised response in line with deadline in the Humanitarian Categorisation procedures. Project and program implementation and response strategy is reviewed following RTR
7.	Accountability	Standard	Monitoring includes systems which collect, document and respond to the feedback, suggestions and complaints of beneficiaries. Project related information is shared effectively with beneficiaries

## 5.2

In addition to the Essential Standards there are a host of other procedures, guidance and other resources to support compliance with these standards. Some of these are explored during the course of this training, including the Evaluation Handbook, the Accountability Guidance Pack, and the guidance on using the Global Indicators.

### Activity 5 (exploratory)

Using the back of an envelope, reflect on what you are doing to achieve these standards, and what tools and information you might need to support this. The rest of this training module is designed to help provide some of these tools

## 6. Audiences and Information Needs

### 6.1

It's a reasonable question to ask of any information collection exercise: 'Who is this information for?' Our work does put a lot of emphasis on reporting and documentation, and we generate a great deal of data. But in building our monitoring and evaluation functions and capacity, it's useful to reflect not only why we collect this information, but for who.

Probably the biggest driver of our monitoring and reporting is our donors. But there are multiple other external stakeholders to who we should be reporting for the purposes of learning, transparency and wider communication. These include the children and communities with which we work, and our host governments.

Internal monitoring and reporting can be frustrating if we have no idea where the information is going, or what its purpose is. Save the Children has tried to reduce and simplify the annual reporting process, and while exercises like total reach and the global indicators require substantial time and effort, they do allow us to aggregate information and tell a story globally about our work.

Perhaps most importantly, if we get it right, a principal audience for our monitoring activities is our project teams themselves, given our aims to use monitoring data as way of informing decision making and improving quality.

### Activity 6 (exploratory)

List the internal and external audiences and users for your monitoring and evaluation information. In this kind of stakeholder analysis it is useful to consider a) how important each stakeholder is to you b) how much influence they have on what you do.

Here are some that I thought of:

Internal			External		
Save the Children Board	Member Boards + SMT	Global Initiatives SG	Children	Community / Civil society	
CO	SCI HO / RO		Politicians	National governments	International organisations
Technical staff	Marketing / fundraising		Practitioners	Implementing NGOs	Partner NGOs
			Watchdogs	Media / Public	Academic Institutions
			Donors		

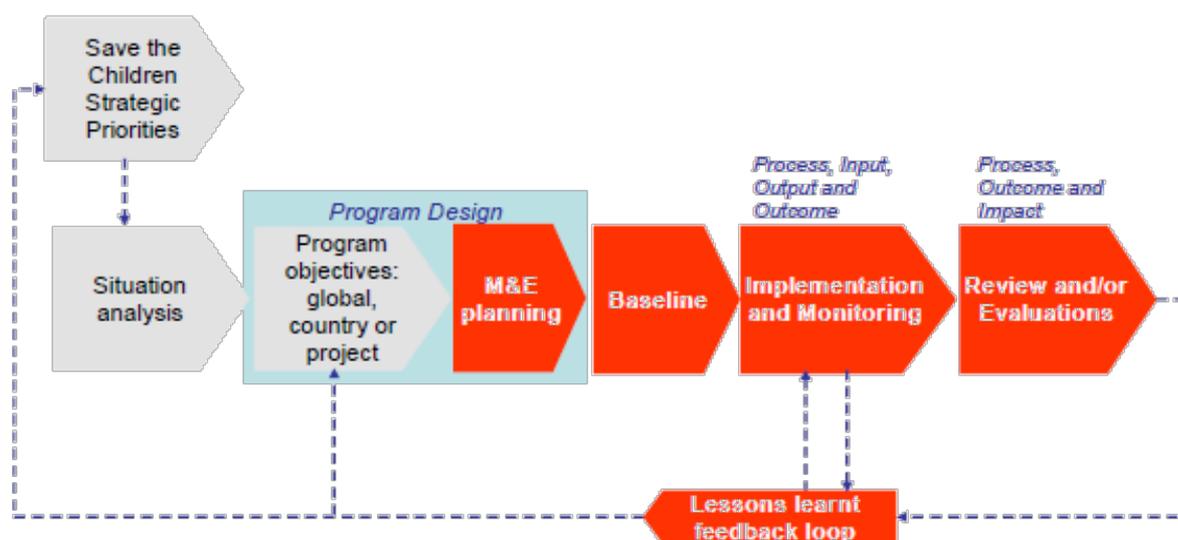
## 7 Roles and Responsibilities

### 7.1

This graphic reminds us that MEAL is a crucial part of the programme cycle, from design to lesson learning, and it is therefore relevant for everybody involved in designing and delivering Save the Children's programmes. Our experience has shown that wherever MEAL functions sit within project and country teams, it is the management commitment to ensuring that these have sufficient capacity and resourcing, which is the key to success.

There's a danger with monitoring and evaluation, which is that because it is everybody's responsibility, it is sometimes unclear where the actual roles and responsibilities lie.

We've seen earlier in this session that effective MEAL systems are essential in achieving quality in operations and outcomes, and in delivering Save the Children's global ambitions, so clarity on the management and resourcing of our MEAL functions is important.



### Activity 7 (exploratory)

List some of the activities that need to take place under each stage of the cycle, and think about where responsibility and capacity lies for these in your team.

Here are some that I thought of, but you might come up with others:

**Design:** Setting indicators, defining an M&E plan, incorporating learning from other interventions, stakeholder participation, budgeting for MEAL, establishing a baseline

**Implementation and Monitoring:** data and information collection grant reporting, beneficiary feedback and response, mid-course correction and management action based on monitoring information supporting partners in data collection and verifying data, annual reporting, monitoring and coding expenditure, monitoring quality based on agreed minimum standards, operational research

**Evaluation and Learning:** planning and commissioning evaluations and research, using findings and recommendations to drive programme development and quality, using accountability mechanisms to improve programme design, publishing and communicating results.

## 7.2

Save the Children's Operations and Programme Development and Quality structure means that MEAL responsibilities are spread across the programmes teams. While data collection and accountability is largely in the hands of operations teams and partners, PDQ teams are often engaged in evaluation, applying learning and quality monitoring.

As discussed earlier in this session, some country offices have established Independent MEAL units to monitor quality, while others have opted to build responsibility for this into existing project teams. Either way, it's clear that ensuring capacity and commitment to MEAL lies with the PDQ team, leading MEAL efforts and managing MEAL resources to ensure independence and to drive programme quality.

## Summary of this Session

1. Effective monitoring allows us not only to report on our grants, but also to measure our progress towards ambitious goals in our strategy and to support programme quality monitoring and continual improvement.
2. Save the Children has developed a set of tools and approaches to support monitoring and global reporting, including Total Reach, Advocacy Measurement, Global Indicators and Output Tracking.
3. A MEAL approach is being promoted by Save the Children as a way of using monitoring and accountability data for learning, quality improvement and decision making.
4. Different countries adopt different approaches to support MEAL systems depending on resourcing, structure and other management decisions.
5. Save the Children has defined the particular components and principles of a MEAL approach and aims for this to become a routine way of working. At its heart is a commitment across the organisation to a culture of quality, transparency and critical enquiry.
6. MEAL standards have been agreed for Save the Children and form part of the new set of Essential Standards within the Quality Framework.

## Resources

For learners within Save the Children you can access the MEAL page on OneNet at <https://onenet.savethechildren.net/whatwedo/me/MEAL/Pages/default.aspx>

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