

WITHIN & WITHOUT THE STATE

# A Quick Guide to Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning in Fragile Contexts



**OXFAM**



Children in front of public dialogue sign, South Sudan, Feb 2013. Photo: Crispin Hughes

# MEAL in fragile contexts

**Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) are part of everyday programme management and are critical to the success of all Oxfam’s programmes, including those operating in fragile contexts.**

Without an effective MEAL system we would be unable to track progress, make adjustments, discover unplanned effects of programmes, or judge the impact that we have made on the lives of those with whom we are working. A MEAL system also helps us to be accountable to our stakeholders through information sharing and developing a complaints or feedback mechanism which can help to guide programme implementation.

In fragile and conflicted-affected contexts it is important to establish a MEAL system that takes into account the particular constraints and complexities of the programme, and this is usually what we mean by “limited access” MEAL. As the UK government’s Department for International Development (DFID) writes: “techniques for measuring and managing results in Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations are not fundamentally different to those we use in peaceful and stable countries, but may need to be employed more intensively, and adapted and combined with innovative approaches.”\*

## Key principles of MEAL in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

- **The safety of stakeholders**, partners and communities is paramount. The “Do No Harm” principle will always take precedence over the desire for accountability and the collection of data.
- **Data needs to be collected and stored** in such a way that it can’t be accessed by warring parties.

### WARNING!

Data on ethnicity or religion should only be collected if absolutely relevant to the programme. Even any data that can identify a person or household could be potentially dangerous to the targeted population.

- **Limited access monitoring** is very dependent on trust – in partners, community monitors, and other actors. If there is little or no trust, monitoring will not be possible.



National Youth Debate, Afghanistan, June 2013. Monitoring ‘governance’ projects, with soft objectives, may require creative approaches. Photo: Joel Van Joedt.

- **The monitoring system** will always include a risk or conflict analysis which should be updated from time to time as any changes in the situation will affect the MEAL system.
- **The methodology** needs to be cost-effective, relatively easy to use (it may need to be used by the community or grassroots organisations) and flexible (in case the situation changes).
- **The methodology** needs to be innovative; many programmes in FCAS contexts will have difficult-to-measure, ‘soft’ objectives, such as improving governance, which means innovative tools will need to be adopted. A broad range of monitoring and evaluation tools may be required or need to be combined to measure different objectives. Remember there is not one “correct” or blueprint approach.
- **Be gender aware** – recognise that women and men engage with, and are affected differently by, conflict.
- **Accountability**, in particular, needs to reflect the situation, and the system used needs to be conflict-sensitive so that it does not aggravate grievances, tension or vulnerabilities – both directly or indirectly. It also needs to take into account the perspectives of local groups who may themselves be involved in, or affected by, conflict. Be careful of bias as groups may have their own agenda and Oxfam needs to remain neutral.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION DEFINITIONS

Monitoring and evaluation are different, but related, processes:

**MONITORING** is normally the systematic assessment of a programme’s performance over time. It involves the ongoing collection and review of data to provide programme managers and other stakeholders with indications of progress against programme plans and towards programme objectives.

**EVALUATION** takes place at a particular point in time, but complements ongoing monitoring activities by providing more in-depth, objective assessments of the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of programmes. Formative evaluations are carried out during the life of the programme with a focus on improvement; summative evaluations take place towards the end of the programme and are used to judge its overall merit, worth or effectiveness.

**LIMITED ACCESS MEAL:** data collection and dialogue (including feedback) with members of the affected community, partners, and the implementing organisation by various channels that do not rely on a consistent or guaranteed physical presence of Oxfam staff in the project area.

## Case study: MEAL in Somalia

Oxfam is unable to work directly in Somalia, due to the conflict – which poses challenges for MEAL. But a number of creative strategies have been employed to ensure effective MEAL in this context.

In Somalia, the humanitarian programme works through local partners who are able to come out to Somaliland and meet with Oxfam staff. As mobile phone coverage is excellent in Somalia, technology is employed for monitoring cash transfers, getting feedback from communities, and for evaluating the hygiene programme. A hotline for feedback and complaints asks callers to leave their number and then returns their call. Oxfam staff also use the phone number list to randomly call programme recipients to monitor activities and ask for feedback. Independent monitors who are able to travel to the conflict areas also triangulate reported progress and send photographs of activities such as well-rehabilitation.



Partner registration card with hotline numbers

## Challenges to MEAL in fragile and conflict-affected settings

**1) Challenge:** data will almost always be patchy and of poor quality. This will increase the difficulty of establishing baselines, monitoring progress, and developing theories about how programmes could have worked differently (counterfactuals).

**Solution:** use data from other sources (other agencies, donors or UN); carry out distance surveys using appropriate technology; accept a certain amount of bias and lack of counterfactual; triangulate information where possible (using different data sources).

**2) Challenge:** fragile and conflict-affected settings are highly complex, dynamic and unpredictable. This can make it difficult to develop a clear theory or explanation of how change has occurred and who is responsible for the change (especially in an environment where multiple actors are pursuing similar aims).

**Solution:** look to measure Oxfam's contribution to change rather than trying to attribute particular change to Oxfam; have indicators for measuring Oxfam's contribution to addressing conflict and fragility; include other actors in the theory of change and stress where Oxfam will contribute to the impact of this work.

**3) Challenge:** fragile and conflict-affected settings often have a high staff turnover, and staff may lack skills and experience in monitoring and evaluation.

**Solution:** use local partners, community members, and possible external monitors (other agencies, religious groups or independent consultants from that community) and make sure systems are designed to take into account the lack of experience and knowledge; ensure programme/project staff have good facilitation skills and the ability to probe when receiving information from the above groups.

**4) Challenge:** it can be hard to find innovative ways to measure the achievement of 'soft' objectives such as state legitimacy, trust in institutions, and social cohesion.

**Solution:** develop qualitative methods to ensure monitoring captures a full and accurate picture of the programme; involve community members in deciding upon indicators, as they may be able to identify ways of measuring progress that would not be apparent to outsiders; consider the use of proxy indicators (using an indicator that indirectly measures what you want to measure) tailored to the political, social, and cultural context.

**5) Challenge:** it can be difficult to set up an accountability system which meets the minimum standards.

**Solution:** consult with target population to agree safe, practical, and accessible means for information sharing; agree on a safe and accessible means for feedback and complaints; decide on a degree of transparency which will not jeopardise either staff or partners.

**6) Challenge:** programmes which expect to see results further in the future will face challenges in demonstrating impact in evaluations, either in the mid-term or just after the end of a programme.

**Solution:** be realistic when setting goals and outcomes; have measurable interim outcomes for during the life of the programme/project but show longer-term impact in the 'Theory of Change'; if funds allow, carry out an evaluation after the programme has ended.

**7) Challenge:** staff may face particular risks in carrying out monitoring and evaluation or be unable to access certain areas because of the security threat.

**Solution:** use limited access monitoring with local partners, community members or external monitors; only collect information that is necessary for monitoring process and impact; carry out risk/security assessments, staff briefings, and staff security training; ensure that staff and volunteers are aware of insurance and compensation policies.

### RESOURCES:

Oxfam (2011) *Guidelines for Monitoring and Evaluation in Limited Access Humanitarian Programmes* (email [vwalden@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:vwalden@oxfam.org.uk) for a copy)

DFID, (2010) *Measuring and managing for results in fragile and conflict-affected states and situations, Interim Guidance Note.*

Tearfund (2012) *Monitoring and accountability practices for remotely managed projects implemented in volatile operating environments* White, J., (2011)

*Fragile States and Peace Building Programmes. Practical Tools for Improving Program Performance and Results, Social Impact.*

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