MERCY HANDS
FOR HUMANITARIAN AID
جمعية ايادي الرحمة الانسانية

Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, & Learning (MEAL) Policy

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Overview

The overall purpose of MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) is to measure and assess project and program performance to learn and manage for impactful results. A comprehensive MEAL system is imperative to achieving high quality programming that continuously tracks and assesses the impact of its interventions. At Mercy Hands, MEAL allows us to systematically monitor project performance and objectives over time, ensuring that commitments to donors are fulfilled. It can also help to ensure that Mercy Hands is responsive to feedback from the populations whom it seeks to serve.

Strong MEAL can:

- Improve program and project quality
- Guide program design through the use of real evidence
- Keep the focus on beneficiaries
- Ensure projects are participatory -- in a meaningful way
- Facilitate learning and innovation

What is MEAL?

Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) is the collection and use of data to support decision-making and continuous improvement. With MEAL, programs are monitored and evaluated to become stronger, beneficiary opinions are actively requested and used, the quality of activities are assessed against internationally recognized standards, and findings are openly shared with relevant stakeholders.

M – Monitoring. Continuous, systematic data collecting to track project progress.
E – Evaluation. Assessing the design, implementation, and results of projects.
A – Accountability. Balancing and responding to the needs of *all* stakeholders.
L – Learning. Building a culture and processes to use what we learn to inform decision-making.

Monitoring Vs. Evaluation

Monitoring measures progress against project objectives and outcomes by tracking inputs, activities, and indicators. It is an internal, ongoing process and aids with quick decision-making and short-term corrections. Monitoring data should be disaggregated for different groups (i.e. gender, residency, age, and other vulnerabilities). Although monitoring is often focused on reporting, it can also help Mercy

Hands to develop a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Data collection and observation through monitoring should ultimately drive decision-making and planning.

Evaluation objectively assesses the value and impact of a project. It takes place on a periodic basis, usually at the midpoint and/or after the end of the project, and is often undertaken by external staff (ie. the donor, another organization) in coordination with Mercy Hands. Data from evaluations are used for long-term learning and course corrections. Evaluations look at the project as a whole and validate monitoring results by assessing the projects' activities, outputs, outcomes and impact. They are focused on the bigger picture in terms of impact and sustainability, and so can also explore areas such as the overall program design, its relevance to the context and needs of the targeted population, and internal and external relationships and coordination. Evaluations can also support advocacy and decision-making structures at the country, regional and international levels.

How We Stay Accountable

MEAL can help us to ensure that we stay accountable to all stakeholders involved in a project, and most importantly, to the people we seek to assist. For this to be meaningful, communities affected by an emergency, instability, or poor socioeconomic conditions should be actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of our interventions and have the opportunity to influence relevant decisions. The main ways Mercy Hands uses MEAL to stay accountable is through:

- **Transparency:** Sharing timely, relevant, and clear MEAL findings with all stakeholders
- **Alignment with standards:** Ensuring that donor requirements, best practices, and humanitarian standards are incorporated in projects and programs
- **Responsiveness:** Establishing formal, effective feedback and complaints mechanisms that protect beneficiaries and provide space for their feedback, including on activities and their impact, safety issues, and behavior of staff and partners
- **Participation:** Incorporating input from stakeholders in program design and implementation and making decisions with affected communities
- **Competence:** Ensuring that Mercy Hands staff have the technical and behavioral competencies to deliver our commitments to communities

How We Learn

For Mercy Hands to grow and continue to lead in our core humanitarian and development sectors, we must have a systematic way of incorporating lessons learned, recommendations, and observations into program design. It is imperative to ensure relevance of programming and develop a culture of adaptive management and continuous learning. A strong learning system ultimately enhances our transparency and reputation with key stakeholders, including beneficiaries, sector working groups, partners and host governments. We incorporate learning at Mercy Hands through:

- Engaging stakeholders (beneficiaries, community members, Mercy Hands staff, donors, etc.) in reflections of strengths and weaknesses of project activities
- Valuing and incentivizing learning and curiosity, and challenging assumptions
- Using tools that embed learning in project design (i.e. checklists, lessons learned meetings)
- Conducting timely data analysis and obtaining additional evidence to inform projects
- Sharing key findings with other organizations

MEAL Department Structure & Role

The MEAL Department is an independent body of Mercy Hands. To have a consistent and high-quality strategy across all projects, strengthen accountability and transparency with stakeholders, and avoid bias, it is vital for the MEAL Department to function independently. However, the MEAL Department coordinates closely with project staff in program planning and design, and shares findings throughout program implementation to inform decision-making for both current and future projects.

One MEAL Manager based in Baghdad oversees MEAL for all Mercy Hands projects. Whenever possible, projects have at least one full-time M&E Officer, all of whom report directly to the MEAL Manager.

For each project, the main responsibilities of the MEAL Department are as follows:

- Assist in development of the logframe and theory of change to aid in program design during the proposal phase
- Develop M&E plan prior to the start of each project
- Assist with the planning and implementation of needs and baseline assessments, in tandem with the project team
- Coordinate with donor's MEAL Department to ensure internal monitoring meets donor requirements and the needs of the project
- Establish and manage a complaints feedback and response mechanism (CFRM) and ensure beneficiary feedback is incorporated in current and future projects
- Develop a MEAL database and methods for data collection
- Develop templates and tools for data collection and analysis
- Set up a central storage/filing place for M&E documents, templates, and reporting
- Monitor and report achievement of key indicators against donor-agreed targets
- Clean and analyze data from the field to include in reporting
- Assist with programmatic reports to the donor to ensure accurate information and data analysis is provided
- Submit regular M&E reports to the donor
- Support program team in implementing participatory methods throughout the project cycle and ensuring that beneficiary participation is meaningful
- Facilitate internal end of project reviews/learning activities to promote accountability and strengthen projects

- As necessary, coordinate with donor MEAL department to plan internal evaluations or request external evaluations
- Promote awareness of quality standards among program staff (i.e. SPHERE, Core Humanitarian Standards, cluster/sector-specific standards)

MEAL Tools

Below are some of the tools that the MEAL Department at Mercy Hands utilizes:

- **Theory of Change.** The theory of change is a comprehensive and visual description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen.
- **Logframe.** The logframe details the project's indicators and targets and methods of measuring achieved results.
- **M&E Plan.** The M&E plan includes detailed indicators, targets, means of verification (plans for monitoring and measuring these achievements), tools required, and staff responsible for each task.
- **Needs Assessment.** The needs assessment is the process of collecting essential information to plan/implement a project and ensure that the needs of the population guide programming. It captures vulnerabilities at the household level and informs beneficiary selection. It can include:
    - Desk review (research)
    - Key informant interviews
    - Focus group discussions
    - Household surveys
- **Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM).** PDMs target a sample of the assisted population and are used to measure the impact of non food item and cash-based assistance. This includes how beneficiaries used the assistance provided, the safety of its distribution mechanism (including location and timing), the timeliness of the assistance, and to keep its staff accountable to beneficiaries.
- **Baseline and Endline Surveys.** Baseline surveys capture the pre-conditions of a context where program activities are planned. The endline captures the changes to these conditions once a project/program ends. The needs assessment can often be used as a baseline survey.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).** FGDs are conducted with a small sample of beneficiaries or from a selected group of key stakeholders (i.e. village mukhtars) from a particular activity to obtain initial, brief feedback on the effectiveness of the activity, key areas of learning and any suggestions. They can be conducted prior to the beginning of a project to verify needs and program activities, during a project, and/or at the end of a project.
- **Pre- and Post- Tests.** Pre- and post-tests are used to measure development of new skills and increase in knowledge of new topics for classes, trainings, awareness sessions, and more. understanding of new topics.
- **Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) Surveys:** KAP surveys measure an individual's change in their knowledge, attitudes and practices on a particular subject. A pre-KAP is administered at the start of the activity/program and a post-KAP is conducted either immediately at the end of the

program or a specific number of months after the program has finished, with the later option preferred.

- **Questionnaires.** Questionnaires are sets of questions used to obtain quantitative and/or qualitative information from beneficiaries or community members.
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIs).** KIs are qualitative, in-depth interviews with a range of key stakeholders people (i.e. community leaders, mukhtars, residents) in a given community.
- **Field Visit Monitoring.** Field visit monitoring takes place in person by M&E Officers on a regular basis. In-person monitoring helps to capture implementation and documentation issues in a project, as well as ad hoc feedback from beneficiaries.