IMPROVING

INTRODUTION

SHARED COMMITMENTS

IMPLEMENTING

FUNDING

EVALUATING

IMPROVING

ANNEXES

IMPROVING

HOW CAN THE CORE HUMANITARIAN STANDARD BE USED TO IMPLEMENT A MONITORING, EVALUATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING SYSTEM?

This section describes practices and tools that can help to translate the quality and accountability demands of the Core Humanitarian Standard into a Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system that is adapted to the specific needs, demands and resources of an organisation, consortium or programme.

This section is split into two parts:
1. The introduction underlines why and how the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) can be used in a Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning system.
2. Practical files and tools are provided to help implement a project Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system based on the quality criteria of the Core Humanitarian Standard.

It is particularly aimed at those who are responsible for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning within organisations, consortia or programmes.

INTRODUCTION

◢ Why use the Core Humanitarian Standard to implement a project Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system?

MEAL challenges

Many organisations encounter the same difficulties in relation to the way monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning mechanisms are implemented.
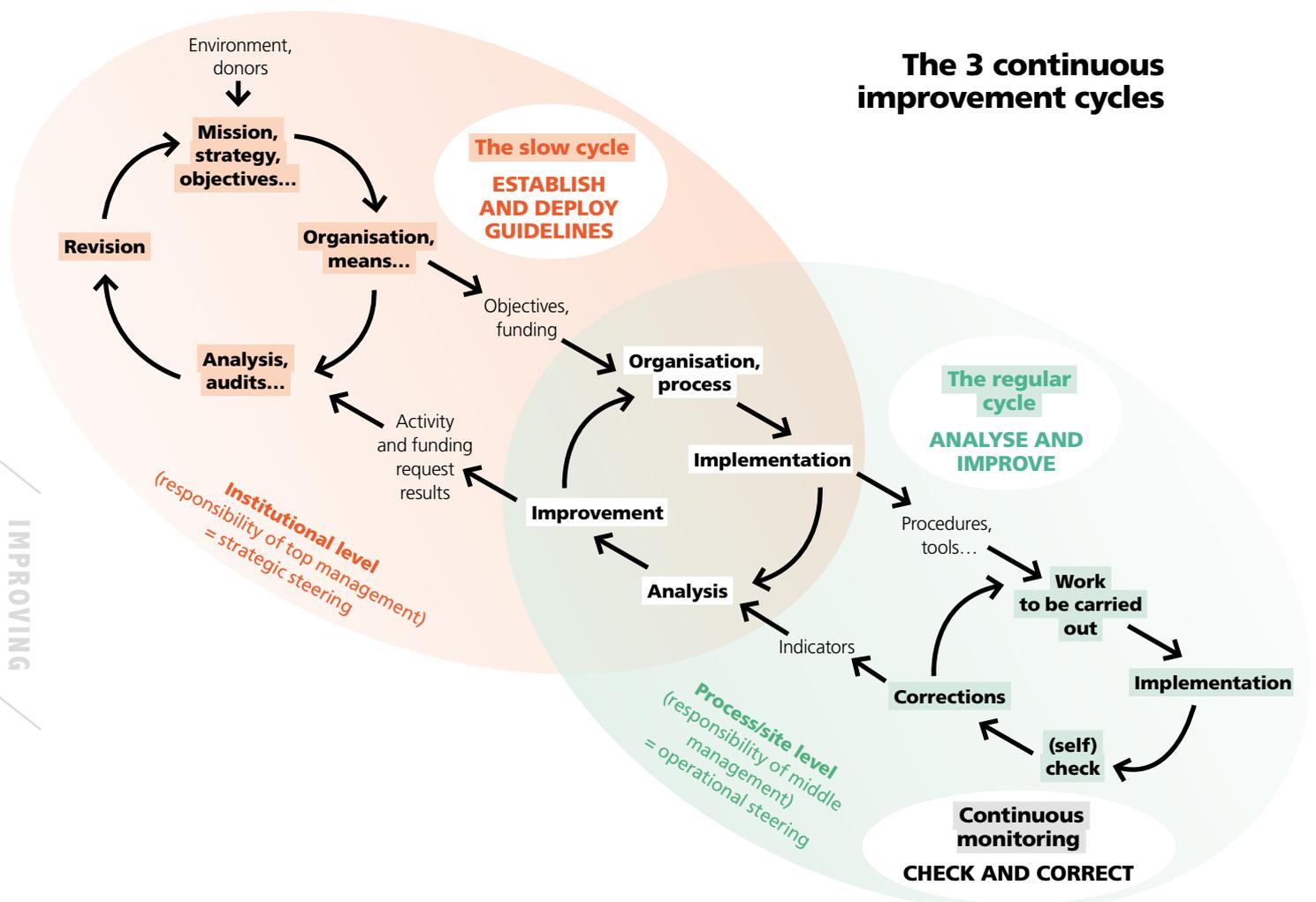
These problems include:
- A lack of understanding of what Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) activities involve and of how they can increase the quality and accountability of the assistance delivered to communities and people affected by a crisis;

- A shortage of staff and volunteers who are sufficiently qualified and trained to support projects effectively;
- Compartmentalised monitoring (in silos) between sector-based operations;
- The lack of overall strategy and planning in terms of quality and accountability;
- The need to "reinvent the wheel" for every new project in terms of practices related to quality and accountability;
- The fact that institutional policy is not clearly translated into operational terms;
- The lack of general information about performance and accountability;
- Etc.

Establishing a project MEAL system based on the commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standard can help to make the steering process more meaningful. A framework of this kind can help to improve the annual planning of projects, the monitoring of results and issues of accountability towards the beneficiaries. It can also harmonise practices between projects and support services more efficiently. Lastly, it can encourage learning and continuous improvement processes while reinforcing general information about performance and the way projects are implemented.

The 3 continuous improvement cycles

Environment, donors

Mission, strategy, objectives…

Revision

Organisation, means…

Analysis, audits…

The slow cycle

ESTABLISH AND DEPLOY GUIDELINES

Objectives, funding

Activity and funding request results

Institutional level
(responsibility of top management)
= strategic steering

Organisation, process

Implementation

Improvement

Analysis

The regular cycle

ANALYSE AND IMPROVE

Procedures, tools…

Indicators

Process/site level
(responsibility of middle management)
= operational steering

Work to be carried out

Implementation

Corrections

(self) check

Continuous monitoring

CHECK AND CORRECT

Institutional quality and accountability management system

An institutional quality and accountability management system can be applied at three different levels:

- The strategic level - to improve the implementation of an organisation's mission and strategy.
- The operational level – to improve the implementation of a portfolio of projects.
- The field level – to improve the implementation of one intervention.

Though the Core Humanitarian Standard can influence these three levels, the COMPASS can have a direct impact on the operational and project levels (green) by helping to implement a **project MEAL system.**

External expectations

The Core Humanitarian Standard can be used because the organisation has made a commitment to respect it. Establishing a MEAL system based on the CHS quality criteria should make it possible to guarantee and prove that these quality and accountability commitments have been respected.

Using the CHS to establish a MEAL system should also allow an organisation to position itself in relation to:

1. the humanitarian and development aid sector's quality and accountability initiatives;
2. the expectations of the general public who are looking for direct involvement and concrete results;
3. the increasingly strong demands of donors in terms of "accountability" and "performance" ("Value for Money").

⚐ How can you use the Core Humanitarian Standard to implement a project Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system?

A MEAL framework can be organised around a set of minimum commitments for all projects, and expected good practice for each stage of the project cycle.

Taking the CHS as the starting point, these minimum commitments should be practical, operational and tailored to the context and capacities of the organisation. They should also be integrated into a continuous process of improvement with a clear baseline, action plan and periodic reviews.

Key steps for establishing a MEAL framework within one organisation

In order to ensure that the commitments are appropriately tailored to the needs and capacities of the organisation, and that there is good understanding and ownership of the initiative amongst members of the organisation, the following steps can be taken[35].

[35] The proposed steps are inspired from the guide "Madac - Modèle d'autodiagnostic et d'amélioration continue" developed by the F3E as a translation of the EFQM model of excellence for the humanitarian and development sector.
See. https://f3e.asso.fr/wp-content/uploads/plaquette_madac_web.pdf

Step 1. Decision – This is the starting point. During this step, the rationale and objectives for establishing an institutional MEAL framework are developed and communicated.

- Why do we intend to develop an institutional MEAL framework?
- What is the scope of this institutional MEAL framework? (projects; sectors; context; locations…)
- Who should be involved?
- What links should there be with external and/or internal quality and accountability standards?

At the end of this phase, a communication statement can be produced to inform the members of the organisation.

Step 2. Preparation – This step focuses on "how" the implementation can be conducted.

- Who will be facilitating the adoption process?
- What are the planned steps? When will these take place? What are the key milestones? How will they be validated?
- What will be covered? What will NOT be covered?
- Who will participate? What will be the deliverables?

At the end of this stage, terms of reference can be developed, including: Goal; Expected results and deliverables; Scope; Action plan; Roles; Governance; Communication.

! Important A MEAL unit can lead the process of setting up a MEAL framework, but everyone involved in the implementation, support and steering of projects should be invited to take part in this process.

Step 3. Assessment – This step analyses current practices, gaps and expectations.
- What are the current strong MEAL practices?
- What should be strengthened?
- What are the specific expectations from the different stakeholders?
- What are the specific opportunities and constraints from the context and existing capacities?

This step can be conducted through a desk review, key informant interviews, field visits, a remote survey etc.

! Important This is a key moment for involving people and underlining their roles in a MEAL framework. It is also a good opportunity to introduce the CHS and other international quality and accountability standards.

At the end of this step, an inception report and an initial list of potential MEAL commitments can be drafted.

Step 4. Identification – This step involves confirming what the priority MEAL commitments are and how they should be implemented.
- What are the confirmed MEAL commitments?
- Which MEAL commitments should be implemented first?
- How will they be implemented?
- Who will be involved?

This step can be organised through a participatory workshop to promote collective buy-in.

The following sources can be used when identifying/confirming specific MEAL commitments:

- **Stakeholders' expectations:** The main purpose of project quality and accountability management is to ensure that the project will meet stakeholder's needs and expectations: what are the key criteria of success for beneficiaries, the authorities, partners, the project team, donors and other key stakeholders for the project?

- **Existing global quality and accountability standards:** Does the organisation have any internal quality and accountability commitments that the project should respect? How should the CHS be integrated into existing commitments?

- **Existing sectoral standards:** Are there any sectoral standards that need to be adhered to and can be applied to all projects? (.e.g. SPHERE standards for water, sanitation, health, food security, nutrition, shelter and settlement; IMAS standards for mine action; Etc.)

- **Legal requirements:** Are there any specific requirements from authorities? From donors? Etc.

Experience from the field - Colombia

The Colombian State has one of the most protective legal corpuses for populations displaced internally by conflict. These national texts include almost all of the United Nations' recommendations (Deng principles) to make up for the lack of international texts to protect displaced persons (as opposed to refugees). The different texts that guarantee the rights of displaced persons in Colombia should therefore be known by all humanitarian actors working with these populations.

4. Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them.

At the end of this step, a final list of MEAL commitments, a baseline and an action plan can be drafted.
The MEAL commitments represent recommended actions that are agreed among a project team or an organisation as minimum quality and accountability practices when delivering assistance to communities and people affected by crisis. They usually take the form of key action points and related tools.

Step 5. Leading change – This step involves implementing a leading change project that will be continuously reviewed and improved.
- How can we progressively implement new practices?
- Who should be informed, trained, and/or involved?
- How can we continuously improve MEAL practices?
- How can we demonstrate improved quality and accountability?

This step is based on the continuous improvement cycle. This is a repetitive cycle that includes four steps that occur at every level, and within every activity[36] : 1. Plan: Set the objectives of the system and processes ("What to do" and "How to do it"). 2. Do: Implement and control what was planned. 3. Check: Monitor, measure and report processes and results against objectives. 4. Act: Take actions to improve the performance of processes.

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[36] ISO – The process approach - ISO/TC 176/SC 2/N1289 - www.iso.org/tc176/sc02/public

At the end of every continuous improvement cycle, a report and an up-dated action plan can be drafted.

> **! Important** During this process, it can be useful to identify four different roles between stakeholders:

    Target: Who are the individuals or groups affected by the change? Usually, this will be the project team and any operational partners.

- **Facilitators:** Who is involved in facilitating the change? MEAL support team, project teams and operational partners will usually be involved in this role.

- **Decision-makers:** Who can validate and legitimise the change?

- **Sponsors:** Who has no direct power but is interested in the change and can indirectly support the process? Support teams (Logistics; Finance; etc.) or donors can be interested in supporting changes.

Conclusion - A MEAL system inspired by the Core Humanitarian Standard should be...

PRACTICAL – A MEAL system does not add an extra layer of controls, but rather supports field teams in summarising quality and accountability requirements through a coherent set of guidelines, recommendations and tools.

TAILORED – A MEAL system does not provide ready-made answers for all. Because every humanitarian intervention is different, a MEAL system must be interpreted and applied locally by each organisation in order to be meaningful.

COLLECTIVE – Because everybody contributes to quality and accountability, a MEAL system aims to facilitate the involvement of all to encourage a sense of collective ownership.

COMPLEMENTARY – A MEAL system complements other initiatives to increase the quality and accountability of humanitarian response.

INCLUSIVE – No quality framework can succeed in addressing stakeholder requirements unless it reflects the different circumstances, requirements and needs of different groups.

CONTINUOUS – Acknowledging that quality and accountability is a never-ending process, a MEAL system aims to continuously identify strong points to be consolidated, prioritise issues to be addressed, plan key actions and analyse changes.

The challenges of managing information in a MEAL system[37]

Though the Core Humanitarian Standard can help to prioritise what type of information should be collected and used in connection with a project MEAL system, the following points should be considered carefully to determine how information and communication technology can be used to collect it:

Deploying an IMS: perhaps not such a good idea? - In the case of regular projects, at the level of a mission or an organisation, it is logical at given point to deploy an Information Management System (IMS) that helps to centralise data,

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[37] This sub-section was written by CartONG. For more information about this organization, which provides humanitarian and development actors with specialized support in information management, mapping, analysis and data processing: http://www.cartong.org/

manage data flows and workflows, manage user rights, and aggregate several bricks (such as data visualisation, EDM*, CRM*...).

There are numerous solutions available on the market that can be configured to different degrees, some of which are dedicated to the humanitarian and development aid sector, others adapted from the private sector and it is therefore not difficult to find a solution that meets your needs.

However, experience shows that the deployment of this type of solution too often leads to failure, which can be due to a number of factors. The first of these is an inaccurate and often rushed needs analysis (or even no needs analysis) and consequently a solution that is selected without being sufficiently informed (based on the recommendations of other organisations or the commercial arguments of service providers). When needs analyses are carried out, they often do not represent the different actors who will use the IMS (focusing on the needs of the decision-makers to the detriment of the needs and constraints of the final users at the bottom of the hierarchy) and they do not prioritise needs properly, if at all (indeed, it is impossible in practice to find a solution that covers all needs, and part of the exercise involves holding workshops to prioritising them, and accepting that some processes will not be managed by the system). Lastly, needs analyses often underestimate the importance of having previously formalised business processes or of providing substantial support for their formalisation before they are digitised: the deployment of IMSs often fail because the processes that are digitised are insufficiently mature (e.g. they are applied in very different ways by different actors or in different geographical zones, or they are interpreted in different ways) or their complexity is underestimated (making it very expensive and time-consuming to digitise them).

Before deploying an IMS, it is therefore important to carry out a very detailed needs analysis, to move forward step-by-step to test concepts and methods of collaboration (e.g. consider sharing simple spreadsheets before acquiring a more complex solution) and most of all, provide sufficient support during the deployment. It is estimated that the deployment of an IMS requires several months of needs analysis and the deployment should take place over at least a year and is therefore only efficient for projects or processes that last more than 3 years. In any case, there is no magic tool that can be deployed rapidly over a short period. It is better to consider several "small" solutions with limited functional perimeters but which allow a very rapid increase in effectiveness.

« *One size fits all* » or the pipe dream of having a single mobile data collection tool - Logically, organisations are trying to harmonise and standardise the data collection tools that they use for their operations. However, the different tools dedicated to the humanitarian and development aid sector do not yet allow all the needs that exist in the field to be covered. Thus, among tools that appear similar, some are more suited to one-off studies, others to monitoring beneficiaries, and others to monitoring infrastructures. Some have high-level functionalities for controlling the quality of data, while others give priority to rapid deployment. Some are free but provide little security whereas others have a more restricted economic model but give greater control over the management of user rights, etc. The diversity of mobile solutions that are available on the market reflects different functionalities, different sectors to which they are better adapted (population tracking, longitudinal analysis, monitoring of water points, or cash and voucher distributions, etc.) and the different contexts at which they are aimed (for example, if you want data to be shared via SMS without acquiring a data plan or via basic non-smart terminals). Unfortunately, the magic tool that covers every need does not exist yet!

It is therefore important before choosing a tool to analyse your needs and accept, at the organisational level, that certain projects might need to have added functionalities that a standard solution will not be able to cover. Similarly, as the IT market is evolving extremely rapidly, organisations need to be flexible and reactive in their choice of solution (as a technology that is used can quickly become obsolete).

NB : the points below apply to all kinds of technology, mobile data collection tools being only one example of the challenges met.

Managing information in a consortium or the Information Management Officer's nightmare - The implementation of projects via consortiums of partners/operators is increasingly common in the humanitarian and development aid sector. This method of implementation raises very important questions in terms of data management which are often eluded when consortiums are established: should the data of all the partners be centralised, and if so, how? If the members work with the same beneficiary communities, how should individual data be synchronised or cross-referenced? How can double counting be avoided? How can the principles of data protection be respected when a large number of people from different organisations need to have access to the same data? What data sharing agreements should be established between partners? Should data collection tools be harmonised between organisations? Should a data centralisation tool be deployed?

For the time being, it is still difficult to answer these questions appropriately: consortiums' practices and lessons learned in terms of information management are in their infancy, the majority of existing tools having problems of interoperability and there are almost no data centralisation platforms at the individual or household level.

It is nevertheless important when a consortium is formed to keep in mind a few key points: the investment in information management should be proportionate to the goals of the consortium (funding a dedicated IM team and technical solutions) but also to its duration (it is inefficient for a single one-year project implemented by a consortium to deploy a data centralisation solution). As in all technological project, the key to success does not necessarily lie in the choice of tools, but: (i) above all in anticipating the issue via a detailed analysis of the consortium's IM needs and existing practices/constraints/limits among its members; (ii) in the quality and relevance of the processes and (legal) mechanisms for data sharing which need to be as precise as possible. Lastly, the actors involved need to show flexibility in order to overcome any technological bias or ideology that may sometimes exist in certain organisations. Contrary to what is often assumed, organising consortiums does not necessarily concern only the "upper" level of IM (analysis and centralisation), it also concerns the initial level of "data collection" which predetermines the upper levels which, without standardisation, or at least harmonisation, can be a major obstacle to the subsequent willingness to share or synchronise data.

PRACTICAL FILES AND TOOLS

This section presents different tools that can help to establish a MEAL system based on the Core Humanitarian Standard's quality criteria:

• MEAL Practices Analysis Framework

• Quality & Accountability operational framework

• CHS project management guide

These tools and other support materials are available at the following address: https://www.urd.org/The-Quality-and-Accountability

MEAL Practices Analysis Framework

What is a MEAL Practices Analysis Framework?

This analysis framework provides a series of criteria based on the Core Humanitarian Standard which can be used to analyse the state of a MEAL system.

Why use a MEAL Practices Analysis Framework?

This analysis framework aims to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning system. It also can be used to compare current MEAL practices with the 9 quality criteria of the Core Humanitarian Standard. This tool can be a useful starting point to identify the most appropriate project MEAL system for each organisation, consortium or programme.

Who usually uses a MEAL Practices Analysis Framework?

It is generally used by MEAL reference points. It can also be used as part of an evaluation to analyse existing practices, and in connection with funding to establish quality and accountability requirements.

When should a MEAL Practices Analysis Framework be used?

It can be used prior to, during and after an intervention. It can also be used as a starting point when aiming to change MEAL practices within an organisation, a consortium or a programme.

How is a MEAL Practices Analysis Framework used?

This tool is made up of a series of statements that are evaluated. For each statement, it is necessary to provide evidence for the answers.

How can you get an example of a MEAL Practices Analysis Framework?

An example can be downloaded at the following address: https://www.urd.org/The-Quality-and-Accountability

Quality and Accountability Operational Framework

What is a Quality and Accountability Operational Framework?

A Quality and Accountability Operational Framework is made up of a series of definitions, procedures and tools that explain how an organisation, consortium or programme will ensure that a project is of high quality and is accountable to the different stakeholders involved.

Why use a Quality and Accountability Operational Framework?

A Quality and Accountability Operational Framework translates the principles of quality and accountability into practical actions that are adapted to a specific operational context.

Who usually uses a Quality and Accountability Operational Framework?

A Quality and Accountability Operational Framework is generally adapted to a specific operational context at the country or project level by the people who are responsible for setting up a Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning system.

When should a Quality and Accountability Operational Framework be set up?

A Quality and Accountability Operational Framework can be established, or communicated if it already exists, during the project launch phase.

How is a Quality and Accountability Operational Framework established?

A Quality and Accountability Operational Framework is established taking into account the different points of view of the project stakeholders: communities and people affected by the crisis, human resources, partners, donors, civil society (including the authorities).

How can I get an example of a Quality and Accountability Operational Framework?

An example can be downloaded at the following address: https://www.urd.org/The-Quality-and-Accountability

CHS Project Management Guide

What is a CHS Project Management Guide?

A CHS Project Management Guide is a common framework for implementing and monitoring the projects of a consortium or a programme. It describes the main stages of the project cycle, and for each of these it specifies the objectives, the main requirements, key points, roles and tools. It focuses on the project level and, consequently, does not deal with aspects related to mission/programme management.

Why use a CHS Project Management Guide?

A CHS Project Management Guide helps to translate the commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standard into project implementation and monitoring practices. It can reinforce collaborative work by specifying the roles of the different actors, between those who "do", those who "approve", those who provide support based on identified needs, and those who are informed at each sub-phase of the project cycle.

Who usually uses a CHS Project Management Guide?

A CHS Project Management Guide is specifically aimed at Heads of Project and operational, technical, and support staff who are involved in implementing projects (field and HQ).

When can a CHS Project Management Guide be used?

A CHS Project Management Guide can be established, or communicated if it already exists, during the project launch phase.

How is a CHS Project Management Guide developed?

An outline of a CHS Project Management Guide can exist within an organisation, but it needs to be able to be adapted to the context, resources and specific issues at stake in each operational area.

How can I get an example of a CHS Project Management Guide?

An example can be downloaded at the following address: https://www.urd.org/The-Quality-and-Accountability