

## Introduction to Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL)

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### What is MEL?

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, or MEL, is a set of processes by which organisations' projects and programmes can be designed, managed, evidenced and understood. MEL is an inherent part of the project life cycle and should begin in the planning stages of the project.

#### What does monitoring mean?

Monitoring is 'the systematic and continuous collection and analysis of information about the progress of a development intervention. Monitoring is done to ensure that all the people who need to know about an intervention are properly informed, and so that decisions can be taken in a timely manner.'<sup>1</sup>

#### What does evaluation mean?

Evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. 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.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Monitoring.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/12/56/41612905.pdf>

## What is the difference between monitoring and evaluation?

**Monitoring** is done more regularly through the project and its main function is to make sure that things are going according to plan, and to identify if that is not the case.

**Evaluation** only happens once or twice during a project and takes a wider view, considering the consequences of the project, both positive and negative. Both processes should complement each other and, together, should helpfully inform your work.

**Learning** is the attainment of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught. If you view monitoring and evaluation as a learning tool to improve and adapt, you will benefit much more from the process. Hence, monitoring and evaluation are means by which your organisation can gain knowledge and skills to support more effective strategies and methods to improve your work.

## MEL tools: how and why to use them

MEL tools are used from the start to plan and track projects, and work out whether your activities are having the desired impact. There are many different elements of MEL, and it can be as simple as a spreadsheet being filled in regularly, or complicated enough to need a whole team to manage it. You may also have come across instances where it is referred to as MEAL, which is Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning or just M&E, for Monitoring and Evaluation.

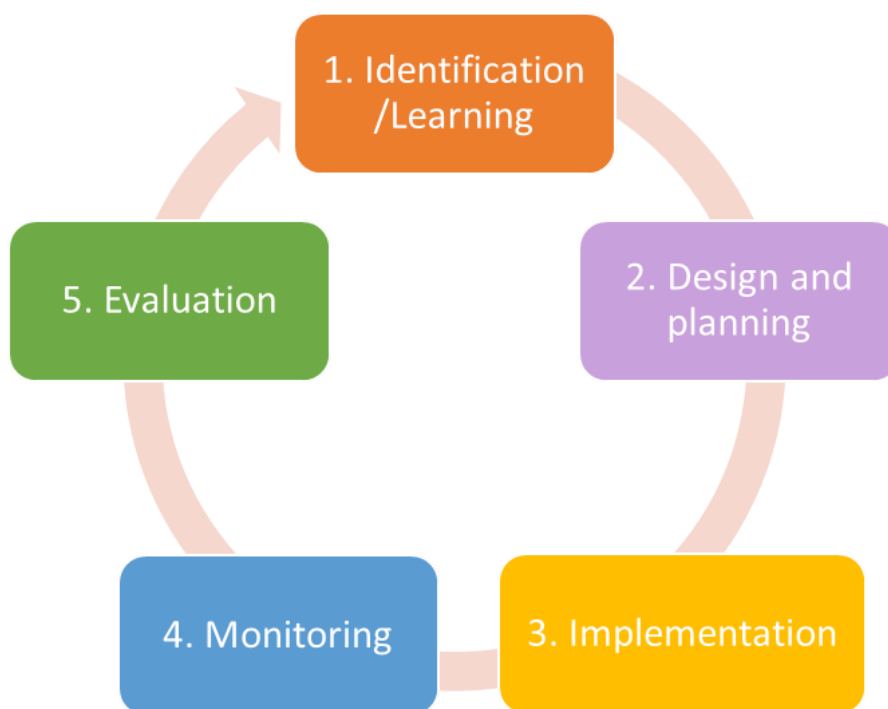
MEL is	MEL is not
An ongoing process that is integrated throughout the whole project	A task or tasks that occur separately from the project activities or towards the end of the project
A useful framework to help you to understand how you are progressing towards your project goals	An imposition from a donor that is only useful for them to judge your work
A framework through which you can learn about and alter your activities to ensure that they are their most impactful	Just a way to measure if you are succeeding or failing, where you do not then adapt your activities based on learnings
A selection of different data and comprehensive pieces of information that, together, give you an overall understanding of your project - <b>what you measure matters more than how much you measure</b>	Simply a numbers game where the more quantitative data collected, the better
Useful to inform future interventions and project plans	A separate task that is done for each project and then never looked at again once it has been submitted to donors

## How and when is MEL done?

There are many different ways to conduct MEL in projects, and lots of different tools that can be used. Don't let the scale and potential put you off, you can start small, and gradually expand your understanding and skills.

MEL is an inherent part of the project life cycle, and should begin in the planning stages of the project. You should be thinking about how you will be measuring the progress as part of your planning.

Below is a **Project Life Cycle** that is commonly used by organisations to plan their projects.



MEL normally takes place within the project cycle as follows:

### 1. Identification/Learning

A project is identified, through research, experience or learning from existing work.

### 2. Design and planning

The project's aims and objectives are more clearly defined, along with the activities through which these will be achieved and how the progress will be assessed. MEL tools such as a [theory of change](#) and a [logframe](#) are developed at this stage and help to produce a comprehensive design for the project. Some donors (including Arise) are interested in finding out what indicators you will use to measure progress even before the project has

begun. You may need to collect baseline data for some indicators even before the activities implementation begins.

**TIP: Set your project goals and outcomes first, as these should determine the other elements, such as activities - not the other way around!**

### **3. Implementation**

The delivery of the project and the associated MEL begin and continue through to its completion.

### **4. Monitoring**

Gather the necessary and relevant data using various methods as the project is delivered to understand how the work is progressing, and to identify if there are any relevant changes that need to be made.

Monitoring happens throughout Implementation.

Measure the defined indicators at set times to understand the progress of your project, to learn, adapt implementation to improve impact, and to share with donors and other stakeholders. Often the results of this analysis are shared with donors and stakeholders in reports.

### **5. Evaluation**

A review of the overall impact of the project and the ways in which it was achieved. This often includes considering how appropriate your methods of implementation were, as well as assessing your achievements against targets. There may be a review halfway through implementation, and it is recommended to always evaluate it at the end of a project.

Apply the learnings when planning for renewal or expansion of your project, and in any other relevant work.

## **Whose responsibility is MEL?**

MEL takes place from initial project design, through to final evaluation and beyond – so whose responsibility is it?

The answer will vary greatly depending on the size and nature of your organisation. Programme teams within established civil society organisations generally include a designated MEL lead (a person or a team). In smaller organisations, the Project Manager will likely take on these tasks as part of their overall responsibilities. These may be shared with other project staff, for example workshop leaders or volunteers.

What is most important is to be clear about the MEL tasks relevant to your work and to ensure that these are being done (on time, to the standard needed, within your budget, etc.).

## **Why do some people find MEL challenging?**

- MEL can be a large, complex and inconsistent field. It requires detailed thought and revision, and sometimes the same terms are used in different ways by different people. It is often confusing because different donors expect different elements to be covered within MEL and use different terms for the same things.
- It is perceived as a source of pressure to respond to donors' requirements and to secure long-term funding rather than for improving how you implement your projects.
- It is time-consuming and expensive to learn and train staff on how to use MEL tools well.
- It is difficult to focus on project management or to reflect on MEL when many frontline groups do not have the capacity to undertake this and are only able to prioritise project implementation on a day-to-day basis.
- It gets harder to make connections between your work (especially when it is preventative) and longer-term impact (outcomes, objectives). However, donors still value seeing the linkages between activities to understand which elements of work impact the others.

## **What are the benefits of MEL?**

Despite these challenges, MEL is very useful once you learn how to utilise MEL tools and are able to manage it as part of project implementation.

- It helps you to amend your project activities based on learning.
- It helps improve project delivery by helping to identify changes during the project itself that will benefit the target community.
- It helps you capture and communicate the evidence of your impact to stakeholders (community members, duty bearers, and donors) in a systematic way rather than struggling to find numbers towards the end of your project when you are thinking of renewal. This is very useful for advocacy efforts you may undertake.
- It allows you to plan better for future renewal or expansion of projects.

## What are the principles of good MEL?

### 1. Measure intelligently

Make sure that all of your metrics serve a purpose and will help to track a relevant aspect of your work. Reflect carefully, and check with your donor if necessary, whether all the data you are measuring is valuable for the future of your project.

### 2. Measure continuously

Make sure that you are recording information at relevant points throughout the project cycle, rather than leaving it to the end when this is no longer possible. For some, this may be daily or weekly, for others, it may be annually.


### 3. Be inclusive

Aim to include project staff, partners, participants, and donors while conducting MEL. You will gain useful insights from them that will improve project design and delivery.


### 4. Share learning to increase overall impact

While this will depend on donor requirements and potential limitations, it is generally beneficial to share reports from different stages with other partners and donors so that they can also learn from your project.


## Further resources to explore

 [ARISE RESOURCES\\_Glossary of Terms.pdf](#)

 [ARISE RESOURCES\\_Logframes.pdf](#)

 [ARISE RESOURCES\\_Theory of Change.pdf](#)

 [ARISE RESOURCES\\_Baselines.pdf](#)

 [ARISE RESOURCES\\_Further MEL resources.pdf](#)