

Understanding the M.E.A.L System

Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (M.E.A.L) are part of everyday project management activities and are critical to the success of all projects you will put in place.

You may have often heard of the M.E.A.L system mentioned in the planning field, but what is it?

M.E.A.L is an international standard system that involves monitoring the project's progress, making adjustments, and evaluating the results. It is used in development projects both at the national level and in international cooperation programs and is composed of 5 phases: designing, planning, data collection, and data analysis, use of data.

To begin, let's see how the four components of the acronym are defined:

- Monitoring is the continuous and systematic collection, analysis, and reporting of data about project progress;
- Evaluation is the methodical evaluation of the progress, the implementation quality, and results of the project, both ongoing or completed;
- Accountability is related to the commitment to meet and balance the needs of all project stakeholders (someone who has an interest in and/or an influence on the project, such as donors or partners);
- Learning is the set of processes and resources that enable purposeful reflection for more intelligent decision-making.

Now that we know the definition of the M.E.A.L components, let's bring them together to understand in detail how the system works.

How the M.E.A.L components work

M.E.A.L is like a puzzle of four pieces in which all of them are interconnected and work together, informing and being informed by each other. For instance, monitoring, by providing information and data, helps to identify what should be studied by the evaluation teams and supports the evaluation itself. It is also key to demonstrate progress to stakeholders by promoting accountability and learning by helping teams in making evidence-based decisions during the implementation of the projects.

I. Monitoring and Evaluation: the differences

Although Monitoring and Evaluation are often presented as a unicum, it should be noted that they are actually two different disciplines, with significant differences. You can understand these differences by analyzing the questions posed by the two disciplines: for example, monitoring staff tend to ask "Did we do what we said we would? Are we delivering the products and services we indicated?", while the evaluators will ask "Is the project making a difference? How well is the project functioning?". Additionally, monitoring and evaluation differ in terms of purpose, frequency, responsibility, and use of data.

2. What about Accountability and Learning?

Project teams must engage in accountability, with both proactive and responsive actions that can meet stakeholders' needs. Accountable projects are more relevant and will generally have a better impact, as well as high sustainability over time.

When we talk about accountability, we are referring to 4 specific characteristics. In particular, transparency, promoted by the team through the sharing of all information with stakeholders; alignment with standards, meaning demonstrating that project work was conducted in accordance with agreed-upon donor requirements; responsiveness, that requires a commitment to provide appropriate feedback on how stakeholders' inputs are informing project decisions and last, but not least, participation, which is promoted by the project team to receive different inputs from the stakeholders involved that are used to set the parameters and conduct the M.E.A.L. activities.

Project teams must also engage in learning processes. Learning requires the involvement of stakeholders in a thoughtful discussion of what has worked and what hasn't. The conversations should draw on monitoring and evaluation data to inform decisions. A project can embrace learning through different approaches, such as incentivizing learning, encouraging a spirit of curiosity, sharing information, and promoting adaptive management.

The structure of the M.E.A.L model

After analyzing the components of M.E.A.L. and how they work, now we can look closer at the structure and organization of a M.E.A.L. model, starting with the consideration that M.E.A.L. is present at every stage of a project: from the first steps of the design to the last closing activities of the project.

As mentioned before, project M.E.A.L. activities are organized into five phases:

- Designing Logic model
- Planning M.E.A.L.
- Collecting M.E.A.L. Data
- Analyzing M.E.A.L. Data
- Using M.E.A.L. Data

These five phases will be analyzed separately and in detail later on. For now, it is important to highlight that these five phases together form a loop that promotes continual, intentional accountability and learning. The evidence from M.E.A.L. data is used by the team to adapt their project design and, if necessary, redirect their management decisions. Moreover, to make sure that the impact is sustainable, teams should always keep in mind two cross-cutting themes during every phase of M.E.A.L.: participation and critical thinking.

Participation is about requiring contributions from all project stakeholders, in all phases of the M.E.A.L. process. The advantage of including all stakeholders is that it promotes a sense of ownership of the project, and ensures that the M.E.A.L. findings are relevant to the local context, promoting more effective resource allocation and increasing project sustainability (that is, the fact

that the changes generated will live on and have a positive impact even after the material end of the project). Also, it contributes to improving communication and collaboration among the actors who are working at different levels of the project implementation. It can be stated that while on the one hand, a M.E.A.L. process incorporates a variety of stakeholder perspectives, on the other hand, it requires a consistent commitment to critical thinking too because, without this, there is a risk that widespread participation will become chaotic.

In fact, critical thinking is a clear, rational thought process that is open to diverse opinions and based on strong evidence. It is an ongoing commitment to reflection and analysis that orients the actions, to reduce the risk of not properly understanding the context of a project setting. It is an approach that the project team must apply in order to: identify the assumptions that shape their thinking and influence their actions; to test the extent to which assumptions are correct and grounded; to ask thoughtful questions in pursuit of deeper understanding and be open to multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives that reflect different skills, experiences, and evidence.

All aspects addressed so far, however, must move within certain ethical standards.

Ethical Standards in M.E.A.L.

When a M.E.A.L. system is well designed and implemented, projects have the ability to bring change in the focus area, but when they are not, problems like wasting resources and compromising the security and social welfare of participants arise. For these reasons, most organizations require that certain ethical principles are followed to avoid problems.

There are six fundamental ethical principles to consider in the design and implementation of M.E.A.L. activities:

1. Representation: all populations, including the vulnerable and marginalized, have the right to be adequately represented in the data;
2. Informed consent: participants have the right to be informed about their participation in any data collection activity, they have the right to decide whether or not to participate in the activity, and to be provided the results of that activity;
3. Privacy and confidentiality: data collection and retention practices that keep the participant's identity and opinions private must be adopted;
4. Participant safety: precautions must be taken to ensure that participation in data collection does not pose a security risk to the participants;
5. Data minimization: the project should ensure that the M.E.A.L. data collected are immediately relevant to the needs of the project. In addition, projects should keep focused only on the specific data needed to answer M.E.A.L. questions.
6. Responsible data usage: policies and procedures should be established to protect the data collected, ensure it is used appropriately, stored securely, and destroyed when no longer needed.

In addition to meeting these standards, it is also important that the M.E.A.L. is aligned with project requirements.

The alignment with project requirements

As we already know, M.E.A.L. is present at every stage of a project, for this reason, it is important to include it in three important elements of the larger project plan: calendar, budget, and staffing.

As the first step, teams should list all M.E.A.L. activities planned for the project, like monitoring visits, reporting requirements, etc., which should be scheduled in such a way they are not in conflict with other activities. Teams, in collaboration with the stakeholders, should include all the identified M.E.A.L. activities into the project Gantt Chart (a bar chart that illustrates the timing of a project schedule). Furthermore, it should be noted that where there is no dedicated budget, there are no M.E.A.L. activities. In order to have a quality M.E.A.L. well implemented, it is essential to dedicate part of the budget to it.

Budgeting for M.E.A.L. is an iterative process in which you list resources by systematically quantifying and calculating them. Resources include all personnel, materials, equipment, and travel needed to perform the M.E.A.L. activities for the project. Finally, consider that the need for staffing depends on the size of the project and the budget available. As M.E.A.L. skills are complex, for very large projects, the M.E.A.L. can be outsourced to outside specialists, but remember that all project planning documents are interrelated, so make sure the project calendar considers the time needed to hire, contract, and manage outside staff.

Final note: because every project is different, and each project's M.E.A.L. systems reflect its uniqueness and stakeholders' values, use M.E.A.L. tools to adapt them to your context (for example, development projects have different M.E.A.L.s than emergency projects).

This is the end of the first module about the insights on the M.E.A.L. system. In Module 2, “How to design the M.E.A.L. system” we will talk about the first phase of the M.E.A.L.: planning and tools.

If you are interested in knowing more about project writing and evaluation, and would like to have the assistance of professionals, you can email us at ssr@signis.net. At SIGNIS Services Rome we are experts in the sector and have been involved in project writing for the creation and development of communications projects all over the world for decades.

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