

## Data Limitations to Consider

You can easily see the interpretation in step 5 of the M.E.A.L. cycle is closely related to the previous steps of the cycle. Thus, the quality of your interpretation will be determined by the data you have collected and the analyses you have conducted in the previous phases. Because of this, there are some limitations to consider when making your interpretation.

### Limitations Related to Data Type

These are limitations you encounter depending on the type of data you are interpreting. With qualitative data, in fact, you have to be very clear that your data only represent the perspectives of the people participating in the focus group discussions or interviews and should never be used to make larger generalizations about the population. Rather, you can generalize with quantitative data that has been rigorously collected and analyzed. But quantitative data collection is by nature quite limited in the breadth of information it gathers. "Yes" or "no" answers are clear and concise, but they do not tell the whole story. Given these factors, then, it is important to combine interpretations of quantitative data with supporting interpretations of qualitative data to make the evidence that emerges more meaningful.

### Limitations Related to Sampling and Data Quality

Of critical importance is that you are transparent about your sampling design. If your results are within the desired margin of error, you can make more confident statements and generalizations about how your project is positively impacting beneficiaries. On the flip side, purposive sampling can be used to better understand a specific context or situation. But sometimes, your best efforts to collect data according to your targeted sampling plan are not successful. If this happens, you need to make this explicit in any results you report. In addition, you can only make interpretations and comparisons in relation to subgroups if your sampling strategy allows it.

Remember, then, that with respect to any data, you must be explicit about any existing quality issues and how they might affect your interpretation. Since the information you collect will never be perfect, you must be extremely transparent about the limitations of your analysis and interpretation.

### Limitations Related to Bias

Bias can be defined as any tendency or deviation from the truth in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. Even there could be bias in publication or communication. As we said before, since it is impossible to eliminate all biases in data, you simply have to be transparent about these biases (indicate where they are) to increase the confidence your stakeholders will have in your conclusions and processes. Among the various biases to consider are: sampling bias, when certain types of respondents are more likely than others to be included in your sample (e.g. convenience sampling). This bias compromises the validity of your random sample.

Data analysis bias, which occurs when your analysis includes, intentionally or unintentionally, practices such as eliminating data that did not support your conclusion or having used inappropriate statistical tests for the data set. Data interpretation bias occurs when your interpretation does not reflect the reality of the data. It happens, for example, if your team generalizes the results to a larger population when in fact the interpretation is only applicable to the small group studied; it happens when you still want to draw conclusions about causality, even though the sampling and data collection designs do not make this possible; it also happens when

you ignore type I and II errors. Finally, there are publication and reporting biases, which occur when those who publish or report project results neglect to consider all results equally. For example, it is easy to find many "success stories" among publications, but it is much more difficult to find "failure stories" or "lessons learned" in which what didn't work is analyzed.

## Learning from data

Before starting, let's revisit the concept of learning that we already mentioned when we talked about the second phase, planning, specifically learning planning.

### Adaptive Management

If you recall, we have talked about adaptive management before, but it bears repeating that it is an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments to the project in response to new information and changes in context. We pick up on this concept because it's important to note how it relates to data analysis and use. Meaning that effective adaptive management will collect and analyze project monitoring and feedback data to help project staff make collaborative, timely, and informed decisions. It is then used to ensure that project activities deliver the intended impact to beneficiaries within the approved timeframe, scope, and budget.

Adaptive management also contributes to internal and external learning, and in a project using this approach, learning is not a parallel or independent activity, but a central activity that is part of project implementation. The difference with traditional management is that while traditional management encourages standardization of control and change is top-down driven, in adaptive management leadership encourages interaction and change, which is emergent and contextual (bottom-up logic).

### Organizational Learning

One intelligent use that you can make of M.E.A.L. data is organizational learning, which is the process by which an organization discovers and adapts to new knowledge. As we have seen, there are three concepts that contribute to organizational learning: knowledge creation, knowledge transfer, knowledge retention which you can see again [here](#). A project M.E.A.L. system has the potential to be a key input into your organization's learning strategy. However, to make this happen you must make connections between the project's M.E.A.L. plans and the learning needs of the larger organization. Questions you can ask yourself to make these connections are, for example, if there are learning questions that your organization is trying to answer as part of a larger organizational learning program that could be informed by using evidence from our project; or you can ask if there are standard organizational indicators that you need to include in the design of your M.E.A.L. system to ensure that your data are consistent and comparable to data from other projects. If your answers are yes, then also ask yourself if these activities are in your project performance management plan, communication plan, and summary evaluation matrix.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are some differences between the learning plan and the learning agenda, although the terms are often used interchangeably. The learning plan is focused on project-level learning processes and how they might support improvements in knowledge creation, capture, management, and sharing; whereas the learning agenda is a set of general questions directly related to the work an operational entity conducts.

## **Sectorial Learning**

We have already mentioned this as well, but let's take a closer look at what it is. You have to keep in mind that the M.E.A.L. project can also contribute to sector learning, that is, learning within a particular subject area or sector. This is an important use of M.E.A.L. data, and organizations share learning with the field using a variety of channels. Traditional methods of sharing project learning through activities include making evaluation reports publicly available, documenting best practices in case studies and white papers, publishing academic articles, and presenting findings and lessons learned at conferences. But with the advent of the Internet, organizations are sharing learning primarily through a variety of digital platforms, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and open learning platforms; social media, and online communities.

## **How to Plan for Learning**

Organizations that plan for learning retain sufficient flexibility to pursue a deeper understanding of the unexpected consequences that project implementation may generate.

### **The Planning**

As you begin planning for learning within your project cycle, remember to include investments and activities related to these four areas: the culture of learning, which fosters an environment that encourages open and honest relationships and a commitment to continuous improvement. You will need to create a safe space to constructively challenge assumptions, encouraging participation in M.E.A.L. processes by critical thinkers, in a continuous learning perspective. Incorporate learning processes by including "learning and reflection" as an agenda item for all M.E.A.L. and project-related team meetings.

Your M.E.A.L. tools are a good starting point for these discussions. Then consider the learning capacity of staff and partners by identifying specific training activities for staff and all stakeholders on the basic principles and practices of adaptive learning and management. Also, ensure that staff are sufficiently trained to facilitate group learning processes. Finally, consider that learning will need to be shared. Plan sharing activities by providing for extensive communication, so that learning is included in meetings and conferences. You can do this by publishing reports or creating specific information-sharing tools that are appropriate for your context.

### **Practicing Adaptive Management with LADs**

One way to practice adaptive management and plan for learning is to include learning-to-action discussions (LADs) as part of project activities. LADs are discussions that bring staff together to reflect on data and understand project progress. They take place throughout the data collection journey and are explicitly built into the M.E.A.L. system. Then, with your project team you can proactively use M.E.A.L. data to understand how your project is progressing and identify factors that enable or inhibit progress and to inform decisions about future direction. It can sometimes be difficult to introduce an adaptive management culture into projects, especially when project funding and the donor environment inhibit the kind of flexibility that would be needed. But don't be discouraged, even when it can be challenging to negotiate changes to project outcomes, indicators, approaches, and logic models.

### **Documenting Your Learning Plan**

Documenting your learning plan is critical to making sure learning happens. In fact, documentation helps you turn good intentions into practical action. Of course, the tool you use may vary depending on the context, but no matter which one you choose, your learning plan should include: a brief description of the specific activity or process; the roles and responsibilities of the staff

members responsible for leading the activity; the outcomes you anticipate for each element of the action that involves change; a timeline with milestones and deadlines for the activity, which must be linked to the project's implementation schedules; the resources needed to implement the action; and finally, to complete this planning, you will need to coordinate it with the overall project planning to ensure that the resources needed for these specific activities are available.

## **Accountability through Reporting**

To close this series on the use of data in the M.E.A.L. system, a final aspect to consider concerns the quality of the reports you provide to stakeholders (donors, partners, etc.). Remember that it is critical to creating high-quality, transparent reports that are aligned with your donor's requirements or the needs of all stakeholders, internal and external.

A report is considered good quality when it can capture and explain project successes and challenges, bringing out evidence of sound critical thinking in the search for solutions. In general, reporting and communication are considered the culmination of the data analysis process, and choosing the ways you operate to include information in your reports is the final stage of interpretation.

### **How to create a report**

To create a report start by consulting your project communication plan and data flow map. Through these tools, you will be able to identify which project audiences need to receive the report, and you will also be able to identify the purpose and timing of these reports. Then develop a report template: sometimes organizations already have a standardized one that you can use, other times it is the donor who provides you with a template and report schedule that you will need to follow. If you don't track down any pre-existing reporting templates, you can ask your colleagues or stakeholders if they have any template examples they can provide that you can adapt for your purpose. After finding your template, identify the donor's required reporting requirements (if they have any). Donors often specify what their reporting requirements and timetable are; if this is the case with you, make sure all reports are in line with the donor's requirements. This is also important in the long run because it denotes reliability on your part and could help you build trust and collaboration over time with the donor. Also, because of the importance of reports, many donors and organizations have created detailed guidance on how to create them.

We have reached the end of our journey and, starting from design to final reporting, we've seen all the tools we need to understand how the M.E.A.L. system works. From now on, you'll know how to recognize and interpret these tools to make your projects more accountable and sustainable over time.

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](mailto: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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