

DESIGNING MEAL FOR LOCALLY MEANINGFUL CHANGE



A Guidance Note: Embedding
community-led definitions of
success and impact in project MEAL



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INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Oxfam believes that knowledge is power, and monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) is one of the places where that power is most concentrated and least often questioned. Conventional MEAL within international development has tended to be extractive. Most commonly, data is gathered from communities, but defined, owned, interpreted and used by others – Oxfam, donors, partners, external experts or advisers – far from the people whose lives it describes. Framed as a neutral technical exercise, MEAL has historically helped hold the wider aid and development system in place. With the primary purpose of providing ‘upward’ accountability to donors, and to inform reporting it has quietly reinforced who is accountable to whom and whose knowledge counts. Oxfam and movements to decolonise development and ‘shift the power’ have begun to name this directly, and to ask what it would mean for communities, rather than external actors, to sit at the centre of how change is defined and judged.

This guidance draws on that thinking, as well as borrowing from ideas related to data sovereignty, the principle that communities have the right to govern data about themselves, including how it is created, held, interpreted and used.

Oxfam in Timor Leste and Oxfam Australia wanted to explore ways to shift the existing norm around MEAL and the subsequent power dynamics. The central thesis is simple; when the data is defined by communities, collected by communities, and kept and made sense of by communities, the process in itself can be transformative. We believe it could change how communities understand and respond to their own challenges, building agency rather than dependence. And because the data sits in the hands of communities, it shifts the direction of accountability. Communities are therefore no longer a source of evidence for upward reporting but are equipped to hold themselves and Oxfam and its partners to account for any changes, or the absence of change, in their own communities.

Whilst we aimed to be genuinely community led, we also wanted to ensure that any suggested process was pragmatic, feasible for country teams without significant external support or budget, and enabled project teams to meet donor requirements and expectations.

The resulting approach aims to make MEAL accessible and meaningful for communities, to demystify MEAL, and build MEAL capability and understanding. It does this by guiding communities through a process to identify ‘what success looks like’, as well as identifying ‘signs of change’ (i.e. evidence that the change is happening), for monitoring purposes, with the intention of establishing processes within the project whereby communities take the lead on and monitor their own outcomes and changes. The approach is focussed on learning, and requires curiosity, an open mind and a collaborative mindset. This document provides general methodological guidance but should always be adapted and contextualised to fit your project context.



We all look for and recognise ‘indicators’ of change within our own contexts. In Australia, we know Autumn has come as leaves change colour. In Timor Leste the rains are expected when specific birds are seen more regularly. Indicators in their most day-to-day sense are not a foreign concept. Why do we ignore these local recognitions of change within our project MEAL?



1.2 HOW THE GUIDE WAS DEVELOPED

Oxfam Australia (OAU) and Oxfam in Timor Leste (OiTL) collaboratively developed this approach following a successful proposal by OAU to the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) for resources to explore how project MEAL can be more systems-informed in practice. Engaging Clear Horizon as a learning partner for a demonstration project, they supported and documented the process. Together, the parties developed the steps described in this guidance in early 2026. Stage one (community engagement) was conceived, adapted and piloted with communities in Timor Leste on two separate occasions. Stages Two and Three have not yet been tested and have therefore been written in less detail. The plan is to put these into practice in the second half of 2026, when Oxfam in Timor Leste and partners start to implement the Sistema Inclusivu ba Mudansa project, and to update this guidance note to reflect what is learned.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guidance provides step-by-step instructions for Oxfam project and program staff and partners involved in development projects that work with communities. It is for those who want to genuinely involve communities in designing and/or implementing MEAL through participatory, contextually relevant approaches. The guidance can be used for either purpose. You might draw on it simply to ground the design of your MEAL in community-defined change or go further and use it to also establish community-led implementation, where communities carry out the monitoring themselves. It is relevant for projects that are seeking to support changes within communities, or for designing the MEAL for specific outcomes that intend to do so. If you have outcomes at multiple levels (for example the project is seeking change at community level as well as working on national policy influence), this approach will provide you guidance for the components of your MEAL related to community outcomes only.

This guidance is not intended for projects seeking a fully place-based approach, where each community develops and implements its own bespoke MEAL system tailored to its location. Instead, it offers a middle path; a structured way to hear from communities and draw their voices together into one cohesive, project-level MEAL system grounded in what matters to them, whilst still meeting donor and program standards.



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia

1.4 HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guidance is intended for country teams to use when designing and developing their MEAL system. It sets out a series of guiding steps which each country team can pick up and adapt to suit their own context, rather than apply as a fixed template.

You can choose to do all stages, or just Stages One and Two, which gets you to a designed and approved MEAL Plan. Doing all three stages creates a fully community-led MEAL system, from how success is defined through to how change is monitored and understood over time. If you are using it only to design your MEAL around community-defined change, follow Stages One and Two. Together they produce a MEAL design that is far more grounded in community realities and more meaningful to communities, without going as far as having communities lead the ongoing monitoring and evaluation. If you do want to go further and have communities lead the implementation, continue on to Stage Three. This makes the approach adaptable to your context, your resources, and the appetite and flexibility that exists within your project, your partners and your donor. It is worth being clear from the outset about which stages you are setting out to do.

For the first stage (the community engagement steps), we recommend developing your own detailed and contextually relevant facilitation guide that draws on the steps set out here and translating it into the appropriate local languages. To support this, we have included a sample facilitation guide, developed and used by the Oxfam in Timor-Leste team and their partners while designing and piloting this approach. See Annex 1.



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia

THE APPROACH

2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE APPROACH

This approach is made up of three distinct stages, representing different phases of MEAL. The first grounds the design of your MEAL plan in the realities and priorities of communities. In this stage we conduct activities with communities to identify the basis for indicators or Outcome measures. The second stage then draws these insights together to build the project-level MEAL Plan. The third stage then goes further, establishing communities as active leaders in doing the monitoring itself.

THE STAGES

Stage One: Community Engagement

Stage one outlines a structured and detailed process (including suggested facilitation steps and activities) of consultation and co-design with communities. It is intended to be undertaken by travelling to and engaging with a sample of communities that will partake in the project. The steps outlined below includes preparation (gathering your team, resources, developing your facilitation guide and undertaking training and optional piloting). Through the engagement process we identify common patterns and themes about what meaningful change looks like to the communities we will be working with, and the signs that would tell them it is happening.



Stage Two: Designing your MEAL

Stage Two is about developing a project wide MEAL plan that is genuinely led by, and grounded in, communities. In this step we take the insights gathered from communities and use them to shape the project's indicators, measures and learning cycles. The result is a MEAL system built around what communities themselves value and recognise as success, rather than around categories imposed from outside.



Stage Three: Community-Led MEAL Implementation

Stage three is about establishing your project's MEAL to be community-led in practice, not only designed with communities, but carried out by them. This involves setting up Community Monitoring Teams who actively observe, record and make sense of change within their own communities, and who take part in regular cycles of reflection on what is and is not shifting. Here, communities are not only the source of the indicators but the people undertaking the monitoring function itself.



2.2 PRINCIPLES

This is not a fixed recipe. Because the approach is built on genuinely listening to communities and understanding what they think meaningful change looks like, the exact process will shift from one community and one context to the next. What works in one location may need to be done differently in another, and you should expect to adapt as you go.

This is a feature of the approach, not a flaw in it – but it does mean the how cannot be fully scripted in advance.

This is why principles matter. Rather than prescribing the detail of every step, the approach is anchored by a set of principles that hold steady even as the practice flexes. They keep you oriented when you are making judgement calls in the moment, help you stay true to the intent of the approach, and provide a way of checking that adaptation is serving communities and the purpose rather than quietly slipping back into extractive or top-down habits. These principles are strongly aligned with Oxfam's own values and applying them is one of the most practical ways to put those values into practice. We advise approaching this work with curiosity and an open mind and let these principles guide you.



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia



CURIOSITY AND OPENNESS

Come to communities as a learner, not an expert with answers to confirm. The purpose is to understand how people themselves define and recognise change, which means listening actively, sitting with the unexpected, and resisting the urge to steer discussion towards categories you already have in mind. Some of the most important insights will be ones you did not anticipate



INCLUSIVENESS

Continually ask whose voices are the loudest and being easily heard, and whose are missing or quietened? When selecting communities to engage with, think carefully about differences across communities and resist the urge to only engage with communities that are the most accessible. The design choices throughout the facilitation of community engagement sessions (separate women's and men's groups, keeping people in positions of authority out of certain sessions, paying attention to those at the back) all exist to make space for people who are routinely excluded. However, these will not overcome the challenge alone. Inclusion considerations need to be constantly thought through whilst facilitating in the moment, and adaptations may need to be made on the spot to find ways to ensure that you are hearing everyone's voices.



POWER AWARENESS

Throughout all stages, stay alert to the power dynamics at play – between the project team, facilitators and participants, between the project and communities, and within communities themselves – and keep asking how the process can rebalance rather than reinforce them. This applies not only whilst facilitating, but when making decisions on what ultimately ends up in your MEAL plan (Stage 2) or when reflecting with communities on their data during implementation (Stage 3).



Photo: Aderito do R. da Cunha Mambares/Oxfam

DO NO HARM

Participation must never put people at risk. Be trauma-informed in how you plan and facilitate community engagement and during MEAL implementation, ensure participation is voluntary and informed, protect confidentiality, and be ready to respond if discussions surface distress or sensitive concerns. Safety of participants and facilitators alike always takes priority over completing an activity or gathering information.



Photo: Aderito do R. da Cunha Mambares/Oxfam

FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

Hold your plan lightly. Be prepared to change the sequence, adjust an activity, or follow the energy of the group when something matters to them. The step-by-step guidance is a starting point to be adapted to your context, not a script to be delivered. Debriefing after each session and adjusting is part of doing this well.



Photo: Aderito do R. da Cunha Mambares/Oxfam

HUMILITY

Throughout all stages, stay alert to the power dynamics at play – between the project team, facilitators and participants, between the project and communities, and within communities themselves – and keep asking how the process can rebalance rather than reinforce them. This applies not only whilst facilitating, but when making decisions on what ultimately ends up in your MEAL plan (Stage 2) or when reflecting with communities on their data during implementation (Stage 3).



ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Be honest with communities about the purpose of their involvement, what will happen with their contributions, and what will not, including the compromises this approach involves, such as not producing a separate framework for every community. Communities have a right to understand how their insights will be used and how they can raise concerns. If doing all stages, the process intentionally closes the loop with communities on their inputs in Step 16 when setting up community monitoring teams. If you are not proceeding to Stage 3, we recommend building in a process to report back to communities on how their insights informed the MEAL plan. This is part of being accountable to them, not only to donors.

HOW AND WHEN TO USE THIS APPROACH

3.1 AT WHAT STAGE OF MY PROJECT CAN I USE THIS APPROACH?

Design

The community engagement sessions outlined in this guidance are best completed as part of or dovetailed onto project design visits. This sequencing works well as it involves communities identifying what change they want to see (what 'success looks like', or outcomes) and how that change might happen (change pathways), which are key questions in any design process. You can then move directly into communities identifying potential signs that the change is happening (i.e. indicators). This also helps to keep MEAL integrated and focussed at a strategic level, rather than as a separate exercise that happens later in inception or implementation by 'MEAL specialists'.

Whilst this process will add a little more time to community engagement as part of the design process, it is ultimately an efficient approach as it means that you will not need to revisit communities later for a MEAL-specific visit. In addition, identifying the community monitoring teams upfront will save time later on in terms of fewer or shorter monitoring visits.

If you are planning on combining with the design process, it is worth considering if you are already clear which partners you are working with and which communities you are working in. Without this being confirmed, you can undertake Stages 1 and 2 but cannot progress to Stage 3.

Inception

If required, this process can be undertaken during the inception (early implementation phase). It can be used to test and provide more substance to the program logic / Theory of Change (outcomes and expected change pathways), and then to develop the MEAL Plan.

For the Timor Leste demonstrator project, this process was undertaken after design, but before inception/implementation and before project partners and therefor specific communities had been selected. This was possible, but required a staggered approach, as community led design teams could not be immediately established.

Retrofitting

This approach may be used at other times, or to retrofit a MEAL Plan, but this is not ideal as implementation will already have started, and it is much better to gain strategic clarity and a clear MEAL approach upfront.

In all cases, it is important to look at your specific project needs, and choose the best approach that makes sense in your context.

3.2 WHEN THIS APPROACH MAY NOT BE APPROPRIATE

Before you proceed, it is important to ensure that there is broader appetite within the project and management team to undertake community-led MEAL, as well as a context which is appropriate. There are circumstances where designing a project's MEAL with communities will not be appropriate. This guide is not intended to be normative, and should only be applied for appropriate project/outcomes and in conducive settings. If you are working in the following environments, we suggest you consider carefully if community-led MEAL is right for your project:

- Humanitarian settings or projects providing lifesaving assistance
- Projects with a very short duration
- Projects that are solely seeking change at subnational or national level, or that do not have outcomes which represent community level change
- Contexts experiencing active conflict, community distrust or unrest
- Highly rigid donor frameworks with large amounts of standardised or mandatory indicators
- Situations where the project team or management team are prioritising donor accountability

For contexts which have had a history of surveillance, Stage 3 (Community-Led monitoring), may not be appropriate, however, Stages 1 and 2 may still be appropriate.

3.3 RESOURCING AND ROLES

Time Requirements

The time you need will depend on which parts of the approach you are using, and how many communities you are working with.

Stage One (Community Engagement)

This part requires a minimum of 2 days training and one full day with each community you engage to design the MEAL system. Community engagements can be carried out simultaneously. The total time will therefore depend on how many communities you work with. You do not need to visit every community the project works in. See section 4.1 below for guidance on how to choose which communities to engage. Remember to allow time to travel between communities, and to debrief with your team in between each community engagement. Community engagement sessions can be held concurrently if you have a large enough team. Plan to carry out this stage at least two months before your final MEAL plan is due, as you will need time for Stage 2 before you submit your final MEAL plan.

Stage Two (Designing your MEAL Plan)

The time required for this stage depends a bit on the extent to which you wish to validate with communities (Step 14) before you seek final approval, as well as how long approval processes will take in your context (Step 15). As general guidance, we suggest allowing approximately one month.

Stage Three (Community-led MEAL)

The time needed for this part will either be similar to more traditional project MEAL, or less. You will still visit communities to gather information from them. However, because communities carry out most of the monitoring relevant to community level change themselves, the project team only needs to add to this monitoring and meet with communities regularly to hear what they have found, rather than 'do' the bulk of the monitoring themselves.

Budget Considerations

This approach requires more upfront investment in designing your MEAL system than traditional approaches. The main expenses across all stages are staff and partner time, travelling to communities, providing lunch for participants, and, where needed, translation. The exact budget will depend on your context and how many communities you consult.

Skills and Roles

This approach hinges on the strong facilitation skills of local team members and partners. The facilitation skills required for this process are different from the skills to facilitate a structured training. We have suggested a list of specific qualities below. When choosing your team, make sure members have strong community facilitation skills, feel comfortable with the process, and are able to adapt the approach as needed in the moment. To support this, the initial training step is essential, and we recommend ensuring sufficient time for the team to engage with and practice the process. Plan for at least two facilitators for each community session.

This means that designing and implementing the MEAL system may go beyond the MEAL team alone. You may need project managers or other staff with strong facilitation skills to take part in the initial design process, and it's valuable for project staff to take part when the project meets the Community Monitoring Team. You will also need strong MEAL technical expertise to merge what you hear from communities with donor requirements and bring it together into one overall MEAL plan in Stage 2.

You may also require translators. If you do, translators play a key role; their task is to translate as close to word-for-word as possible, not summarising or converting community language into "development speak", so that people's own words and meanings are not lost. As this may differ from the translation they usually do, brief them clearly on the purpose of the activity beforehand

Overall, this approach is more intensive and likely more costly upfront than what we normally invest in designing MEAL systems. However, once the system is up and running, the ongoing intensity and budget will either stay at a similar level to a more traditional approach, or potentially be less, because communities will be doing much of the monitoring themselves.



This approach really relies on a particular type of strong facilitation skills. The facilitation skills we found we needed are not the same as those needed for facilitating a training, its people that can 'read the room', can think on their feet and adjust as needed, and can 'hold the process' so participants feel comfortable, whilst adapting behind the scenes. Although the process provides step-by-step guidance, our experience showed that participants sometimes moved ahead or focused on a particular conversation. The facilitator's role is to manage this effectively, knowing when to let discussions flow and when to gently guide or refocus them.

We also found that facilitators needed to pay close attention to detail, probe whenever necessary, and remain aware of their own biases, while actively listening not only to what participants say, but also to what they do not say, including non-verbal cues.



Esther Nanjovu (Oxfam in Timor Leste MEAL Manager)



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia

PREPARATION

4.1 PLANNING BEFORE YOU START

Before you run any community engagement sessions, you need to plan carefully. Good planning will help the sessions run smoothly and make sure you reach the right people. Be clear about what stage of the project design, the MEAL design is happening and how much engagement has already taken place with this community. This guidance note assumes the MEAL cocreation is being done as a stand-alone exercise and will need adapting if this is not the case.

The planning steps below will help you prepare for facilitating MEAL design in the communities you will be working with.

Plan Your Locations

- Identify how many and which communities you will work with. In the Timor-Leste pilot, this exercise was run with eight community groups across two municipalities, over two iterative piloting sessions.
- The ultimate goal is one combined MEAL framework which will be implemented in all communities. You do not need to facilitate this process in all communities the project will work in, however you are aiming to understand a variety of different understandings of change. You will therefore want to ensure your process includes communities that can 'represent' the variety within your target locations. For example, communities from different districts or municipalities, a variety of more accessible and less accessible communities
- If possible, it is ideal to work with local civil society or partners that have expertise on your projects subject matter and/or know the locations well to understand any specific political, geographic, or cultural differences or nuances that might be present, which you will need to account for.
- Conducting the process with each community group requires at least one full day. Plan your travel schedule accordingly.

Plan Your Groups

- Schedule women's groups and men's groups separately. Do not mix them in the same session.
- Keep group size to no more than 12 participants per session.
- Plan ahead for what you will do if more or less people arrive than expected (See Section 5.1 – General Facilitation Tips, for more guidance).
- Invite 'the right people'. At a minimum this will be communities where the project is planning to work, but it is worth thinking through other considerations for your context.. For Timor Leste, as specific communities were not yet selected, it meant working with groups already engaged in other Oxfam programs as there was already trust.
- These sessions work best when participants feel free to speak openly. Consider how demographics like age may impact power dynamics.
- We recommend having a separate session with community leaders. Their presence can affect what others feel comfortable saying in the community sessions. If there is a large enough group of community leaders, this guidance could be replicated with them. However if there are only a few, we suggest conducting a focus group discussion. When we did this in Timor Leste, we found drawing on the visioning exercise and keeping the session creative produced the most insights. Remember to keep the principles of "The Approach" (Section 2.2) in mind as you design engagement with community leaders.

Plan Your Team

- Identify your team. For each session, you need at least two facilitators per group; one lead facilitator and one co-facilitator.
- We recommend having a mix of MEAL and program staff involved. Strong facilitation skills are critical for this process, so this is also an important consideration.
- Facilitators must speak the local language, or work with a skilled translator. If you are using a translator, include them in your facilitation team and in the training from the start. They are part of the team, not just a language tool. It is recommended to have at least one team member who speaks the local language and knows the area well.
- Have at least one person assigned to take notes at every step. This will generally be the co-facilitator. The facilitator and the co-facilitator can swap session to session, or as needed.

Plan Your Training

- We recommend two to three full days together with the team to train on the approach.
- During this training you will need to develop your own contextual facilitation guide, and identify your image cards (see below). Ensure sufficient time between the training and when you need to travel to communities to do so.
- It is ideal to pilot test the process with a community nearby. If you are going to do this, you will need to add an additional day of training. We recommend 1 day training, 1 day pilot testing, and then 1 day back together to adapt and practice further.

Plan Your Materials

Prepare your materials well in advance of the training. Depending on your exact activities, you will likely need:

- Flipchart paper and stands / blu-tak
- Coloured pens or markers
- Sticky dots for voting (three to five per participant) or other culturally appropriate alternative. In some contexts, you might choose to use stones, or leaves.
- A set of image cards with symbols or pictures that represent the types of changes the project wants to monitor. We recommend 30-40 cards per group of 12 people. These will be used in step 4 of community engagement.
- Printed translated facilitation guide
- Notebooks and pens for notes



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia



Photo: Matthew Campbell/Oxfam Australia

The image cards are one of the most important materials. The cards should reflect what matters for your specific project. For example, in the Timor-Leste demonstrator project, cards included images representing things like women's empowerment, such as a woman speaking in a group, or a woman making decisions at home, and the inclusion of people with a disability in community life. Your cards should be designed or selected to fit your project's focus areas and be contextually relevant.

- Print image cards in colour if possible; colour makes them easier to read and more engaging.
- Cut them up so each picture is on a different card
- If feasible, you could also consider laminating the cards so they can be reused.
- Prepare blank cards so participants can draw their own symbols if none of the prepared cards fit.

If the guide has not already been translated, do this before training begins. Find the right local words for each concept, do not just translate word for word. Make sure the meaning is clear in the local language. During training you will collectively discuss and agree on if there are different words that would be more appropriate.

Examples of Image Cards used in Timor Leste



4.2 TRAINING

Before you run any community sessions, your facilitation team must complete induction and training together. Allow at least two full days. Use this time to make sure everyone on the team knows each other, understands the approach, knows their role, and feels confident to facilitate. We suggest the following approach to training:

Day One: Understanding the Approach and materials

- If the team do not regularly work together, run activities to build team cohesion and trust. The facilitation team needs to work well together before they can facilitate for others.
- Introduce the purpose, principles and mindset of this approach. Make sure everyone understands why this process works the way it does – not just what to do, but why. It can be useful to reassure the team that this process is intended to be a learning experience, there is not 'perfect' process.

- Go through this guide together, step by step. Discuss each step as a team and identify the best way to facilitate it in your context. Develop or adapt the sample facilitation guide to your specific context. Are there any steps, examples or words that need to be adjusted for your context? Make these changes to the guide together.
- Find a contextually relevant example for Step 8 – identifying signs of change. A story about planting or agriculture often works well. Include this example in the facilitation guide.
- For Step 2, identify a locally appropriate scenario where storytelling takes place within this context to support your introduction.
- Once you have a completed facilitation guide, go through it again as a group. Ask questions. Make sure everyone understands not just what needs to be done in each step but what the objective is for each step, and how each step builds on each other.
- Discuss how you will build trust before you begin. If this is your first time working with this community, you could consider warm-up or ice-breaker activities that are relevant for the local context. These help participants feel comfortable in the space and with each other. Use activities that participants can relate to and that feel natural in the local context. If you do choose to include these, ensure everyone understands which activities to use and include them in your facilitation guide.
- Discuss your proposed image cards as a team. Are they appropriate for your context? Do they represent the right themes? Make any changes.
- Clarify each team member's role and responsibilities for each step in the process (who is the facilitator and who is the co-facilitator). Everyone should know exactly what they are doing and when.

Day One: Understanding the Approach and materials

Pilot test session before the first real community session. This will help you identify anything that needs to change.

Day Two/Three: Practising Facilitation

- Build facilitation skills, through basic facilitation training exercises. Focus on: how to ask questions without leading people to a particular answer; how to manage group dynamics; know when and how to probe; how to support quieter participants to speak; and how to handle difficult situations.
- Practise facilitating the process through role play. One team member plays the facilitator, others play community participants. This helps you feel ready for real sessions.



TIPS!

- Make sure the whole team, including translators, participates fully in both days of training. Translators need to understand the purpose and method, not just the words.
- Use role-play to practise difficult situations; What to do if a leader joins? If more people arrive than expected? or if participants are reluctant to share. Share tips within the team.
- By the end of the trainings, every team member should feel confident in their role. If they do not, consider an additional practice session before going into communities.

STAGE 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNITY LEVEL

This section outlines a suggested 'Agenda' or step by step guide to use when facilitating community engagement sessions. Steps 1- 11 provide an overview of a suggested flow for the day. These would need to be repeated within each community you engage with. We suggest these steps are used as guidance to develop a context specific facilitation guide. See Annex 1 for a sample facilitation guide used by Timor Leste.

STEP 1 : WELCOME

Introducing Purpose and Project

What it's for: To open the session, make participants feel welcome, and establish a shared understanding of why you are there. This is where we convey the scope of the project and that this session is about understanding and measuring change, not designing a project or activities.

How you might run it: Introduce yourself and the team and explain the purpose in plain, everyday language; That you want to understand what success looks like from the community's point of view, how they would know change is happening, and who might help watch for it. Give a short overview of the project's objectives (not activities) and who it is for, explain what you will do with what you hear, and leave space for questions. Keep the framing relevant to people's lives, and convey clearly that the community's perspective, not the project team's, is what matters here.

Some suggestions:

- Open with a locally appropriate ritual, a song, prayer or customary greeting chosen with local staff, if this is how gatherings normally begin, so the session feels like the community's space.
- Have a trusted local partner or respected community member open the session, drawing on existing relationships rather than entering as outsiders (Caution: If it is a community leader, you may then need to plan a specific interview for them at the same time so they do not participate).



TIPS!

- Make the purpose of the project very clear. This will impact the scope and direction of participants inputs throughout. Do not purely read out official project outcomes, but explain what the project is focusing on, what change it seeks and who it is for. Participants should know how this project relates to their community.
- Keep the framing simple and relevant to people's lives. Be clear that you are interested in changes connected to the project's themes, not change in general, and that the community's perspective, not the project teams, is what matters here.
- Whilst the introductory framing is important, try to keep it short and interactive. This framing sets the tone for the session. Getting people engages experientially and early is important.
- Be explicit about the reason for the session. Participants need to understand that this session is about MEASURING change – NOT about designing a project or deciding project activities.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

STEP 2

Storytelling Circle

What it's for: This step is a warmup, providing each participant a chance to get comfortable speaking in the group but on a subject matter that is easy for them to speak about. It also acts to begin to surface local ideas of strength, dignity and capability in the community's own terms, in a safe way and easy way that is not immediately referencing the participant themselves or their own community. It grounds everything that follows in concepts that already mean something to participants.

How you might run it: Introduce the activity by linking it to a familiar local form of storytelling. Invite each person to think of a person whom they deeply admire, and to reflect on why. Selected people could be from media, politics, sports stars, or closer to home, family or a respected person within the community. Have facilitators model this first with their own example, then give participants time to think of someone, and have each one share the person and why they admire them to the larger group. Gentle prompts help those who are unsure, such as 'what does the person do', 'how do others treat them', 'how do they take part in community and family life'.

Some suggestions:

- Open with a locally appropriate ritual, a song, prayer or customary greeting chosen with local staff, if this is how gatherings normally begin, so the session feels like the community's space.
- Have a trusted local partner or respected community member open the session, drawing on existing relationships rather than entering as outsiders (Caution: If it is a community leader, you may then need to plan a specific interview for them at the same time so they do not participate).



TIPS!

- Find a locally known example or situation where storytelling takes place to use in your explanation - link it to a familiar local practice or idea.
- Before you begin the story telling circle, model the activity. Show participants what a storytelling circle looks like.

STEP 3

Visioning

What it's for: To help people imagine and describe what life would look like for them if the project was successful, set in the future rather than the present. This vision becomes the foundation from which indicators are later drawn.

How you might run it: Run this as a quiet, individual reflection. Using a calm, slow voice, guide participants to picture their community several years from now if the project ambitions had come to fruition. If relevant to the project's objectives you could highlight the qualities or behaviours just discussed, and ask people to imagine that these are widespread in their community, noticing what feels different from today. Participants can sit comfortably with eyes closed or gaze lowered if they are comfortable.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

Other activity options:

- Appreciative Inquiry "dream" exercise: explicitly invite people to picture their community as if its best moments were the everyday norm. The dream phase asks participants to develop a bold, inspiring vision of what might be, grounded in the strengths already identified.
- Draw your community in x years: participants draw the future they imagine at the end of the project, then bring the drawings together. This could be useful where verbal articulation is harder or literacy varies.
- "River of life" / journey line: draw the community's path from past to imagined future, marking hopes along the way.



TIPS!

- Emphasise to participants that closing their eyes is optional and intended to support focus. Reassure participants that it is equally acceptable to keep their eyes open or look down if that feels more comfortable.
- Be mindful of the timing of the exercise to ensure it remains engaging and purposeful. Avoid allowing the activity to run longer than necessary.
- Use guiding questions intermittently, delivered in a calm and gentle tone. Maintain a balance between guidance and silence - giving participants space to think while keeping them gently oriented toward the exercise.

STEP 4

Card Selection

What it's for: To help participants express the future they imagined in a concrete, shareable form using images rather than words, making the vision easier to discuss

How you might run it: Lay out your set of pre-prepared image cards reflecting the project's themes. Ask each person to choose a small number (around two) that best represent their vision. Where no card fits, they draw their own on a blank card. Blank cards ensure people are not limited to the options you provide.



TIPS!

- Make sure you have a diversity of images, as well as duplicates.
- Think carefully about how many cards to offer. Too many options can be confusing. Too few may not capture what matters to participants.
- Tell participants before this step that they will share their chosen card with the full group. This gives them time to think about what they will say.
- Include "negative" representations of positive changes in your card set (i.e., images that show what things look like when the change is NOT happening). Some participants may choose these - and that is useful information.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

STEP 5

Big Group Sharing and Discussion

What it's for: To hear what each person's chosen images mean to them, and to begin noticing the common threads across the group – in the community's own words.

How you might run it: Bring everyone into one circle and invite people to share, one at a time, which cards they chose and why. Look for where reasons overlap and gently invite anyone whose choice represents something different. The co-facilitator (and other team members) captures what is said by each participant in their own notebook.

Other activity options:

- Small group then plenary: share first in small groups, then bring common points to the whole group. This can be gentler for quieter participants, but more difficult to ensure the facilitators hear everything.
- Light clustering as you go: begin grouping similar cards during the sharing itself, so themes start to emerge visibly.



TIPS!

- Make sure every participant has a chance to speak.
- Remind participants that what matters most is the unique perspective and meaning each person attaches to their chosen image. Encourage them to focus on explaining their own vision and interpretation, even if others have selected a similar symbol.
- If someone has dominated the conversation so far, the lead facilitator should manage this carefully, tactfully, and respectfully. I.e. leave the person who is dominant to the end for the sharing.
- Ask follow-up questions to clarify but be aware that the community members are standing up on their own, this can be quite vulnerable, so do not probe too much.
- If participant's sharing starts to venture too far away from the project topic, gentle questions can help steer participants back to discussions that are within the projects aims
- Capture what people actually say, in their own language, rather than translating it into development terminology. Make sure everyone has a turn before moving on.
- At this stage, things that emerged may feel more like indicators themselves, rather than changes – that is completely fine. Just note them down, so you can bring them into Step 9.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

STEP 6

Identifying Patterns (Facilitators Only)

What it's for: For the facilitation team to step back and identify a manageable set of key themes that are reemerging in what the community is describing, or to identify any pertinent points that are particularly relevant to the project.

How you might run it: Use a natural break or lunch for the lead facilitator, co-facilitator and interpreter to review the notes together and agree on the most common themes, aiming for no more than eight. Check these connect to the project's intended outcome areas. When themes have been decided, represent each theme with an image card or written word, labelled in the most appropriate local language, ready to present back to the group.

Some suggestions:

- **Affinity clustering:** group the cards that the community have picked and described into clusters of similar meaning, then name each in local language.
- **Card sorting against project outcomes:** sort themes in relation to intended outcome areas, checking coverage without forcing fit.



TIPS!

- Some themes may not on the surface feel like they relate, for example, women being able to send their children to school. Whilst this could easily be discarded as an education outcome, and therefore not related, the way it emerged in our pilot was that this signalled economic empowerment and decision making.

STEP 7

Co-Facilitator Shares Back Common Themes

What it's for: To check the team has heard the community and identified common themes correctly, and to give the group a clear opportunity to correct or add to the themes. This validation point deliberately places power with the community.

How you might run it: Lay out the theme cards you prepared in Step 6, explain what each represents, and invite questions. Then ask whether anything important is missing or whether these themes capture their vision, adding cards where the group identifies something new.

Some suggestions:

- **Member-checking round:** go theme by theme and ask the group to confirm, adjust or rename each in their own words.

COMMUNITY LEVEL



TIPS!

- When reporting back, you could frame this as the community 'checking that you were listening', that puts them in a position of power to correct the facilitator.
- Keep your remaining card deck or blank cards on hand so the group can physically add anything missing.

STEP 8

Prioritising Themes and Areas of Change

What it's for: To understand which themes matter most to the community right now, so Step 9 focuses on what they care about most.

How you might run it: With the theme cards laid out, confirm everyone understands what each represents, then run a simple voting process, each person places handed out sticky dots on the themes that matter most. Once voting is complete, rank the themes from most to least votes, and allow brief discussion to confirm the order. Locally appropriate materials such as stones, leaves or beans work as well as dots and, in some contexts, may feel more natural.

STEP 9

Identify Observable Signs and Who Would Know

What it's for: To translate the priority themes into observable "signs of change" - the real-life things people would see, hear or feel if change were happening (the basis for indicators), and to identify who is best placed to notice each.

How you might run it: In a plenary unstructured conversation, first explain the idea of "signs of change" using the familiar local day to day analogy (a seasonal or planting analogy often helps) that you pre-prepared in your training, and check people understand it. Then take each theme in turn, starting with the highest-ranked, and ask how they would know it was happening; what they would see, hear or feel. Once signs have been identified for each, explore who would be best placed to notice (who is present in the homes, meetings or markets where the change would show), and whether anything would make it difficult or unsafe for that person to do so. The co-facilitator captures the signs for each theme and who would notice them in their notebook.



Example: The theme of increased income, or 'economic empowerment' may not be locally measured by physical money or bank balances, but by having enough money to help support others or offer my neighbour food, or by being able to provide the family a certain type of meat each week.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

Other activity options:

- **Small groups:** Splitting the group into two groups, with one facilitator each and work through the themes within each group. This can be less intimidating for people to speak up.
- **Progress-marker framing** (from Outcome Mapping): describe signs as what you would expect to see, like to see, and love to see as change deepens – giving a graduated set rather than a single yes/no.



TIPS!

- This step requires very strong and adaptive facilitation. We recommend it is conducted by the strongest facilitator.
- Pay attention to people sitting at the back of the group. Call on them and encourage them to contribute.
- Be flexible. If participants start talking about the next card or move ahead in the discussion, it is okay to adapt, and jump to a card later in the ranking, and then come back.
- Try to get through as many cards as you can in the time available. If you don't get through them all that is fine, as you have started from the changes the community felt were the most important.
- If signs of change have already been spoken about in Step 5, you can bring these in, and use them as a prompt to start conversation.

STEP 10

Understanding How Community Monitoring Might Work

This step is only required if you are planning on continuing to Stage 3, implementing community led monitoring

What it's for: To introduce the idea of Community-Led MEAL, and co-design, with the community, how monitoring will work in practice, building on the people identified in Step 9, including who monitors, how they share what they notice, how the community reflects on it, and how the team is sustained.

How you might run it: Run this as a flowing group conversation, building on the people identified as well placed to notice change. Introduce the idea of community led monitoring and community monitoring teams. Seek any initial thoughts on the community leading the MEAL themselves. Once everyone is clear on the intention, cover four broad areas: Who would be part of the CMT? How the team would work, reflect on their own data and report this to Oxfam or appropriate implementing partner? What should happen if the hoped-for changes are not seen? and What would help people stay in the role over the life of the project? The co-facilitator documents the conversation.

COMMUNITY LEVEL



TIPS!

- This is a conversation, not a checklist. You do not need to cover every question, let the group's energy guide you. Some communities will have strong views on accountability, others will focus on the practical. Follow what matters to them.
- This conversation will also require strong facilitation. If the previous facilitator is tired, it can be useful to swap facilitators for this step to inject new energy.
- The co-facilitator should take careful notes throughout, including any specific concerns that emerge.
- The questions about accountability may feel uncomfortable to ask, facilitators sometimes shy away from it. Do not. Communities have a right to know how they can raise concerns.
- When asking about motivation, be genuinely curious, not leading. Do not assume that payment is the main motivator. Recognition, training, or simply being asked and valued can matter more.
- Be aware of power dynamics throughout this step. Quieter participants may have the most important things to say, make sure they have space to speak.

STEP 11

Co-Facilitator Reflects Back and Closes the Session

What it's for: To close the session well, summarising what the group produced, making sure people leave knowing their contribution matters, and being clear about what happens next.

How you might run it: The co-facilitator gives a short summary of the signs and ideas the group identified. If not done so throughout the session, capture all outputs before anything is moved, photographing the cards, ranking and notes ensures nothing is lost. Then restate the project's purpose and the group's role in it, explain clearly what will happen with their input and when the project team will be back to help 'close the loop'; help form the CMT follow up, and thank the community. Leave space for any final questions.

Some suggestions:

Appreciation round: a brief closing circle where participants and facilitators each name one thing they valued.

STAGE 2: DESIGNING YOUR MEAL SYSTEM

PROJECT LEVEL

This section outlines the steps for bringing together what you have heard across the multiple communities you have engaged with, and turning it into a project-wide MEAL framework or MEAL plan. In this guide we refer to the documentation of the MEAL system as a MEAL plan, with the framework an annex with detailed indicators, however the exact requirements and title will depend on your context. Where Stage 1 takes place within each community, the steps under Stage 2 happen at the project level, making sense of the inputs from across communities, finding patterns and commonalities, weaving these together with any organisational or donor requirements, and developing an integrated MEAL Plan for the project as a whole. We recommend these steps are carried out collectively by the MEAL team and the relevant Program Team.

STEP 12

Deciding on Measures or Indicators

What it's for: To synthesise what you have heard across communities and identify common patterns. You will then determine, from the potential measures associated with common themes, drawn from the community consultations, which measures will be included in the project-level MEAL Plan. This requires a level of judgement, to ensure your choices reflect the communities' preferences and insights, while acknowledging that you cannot develop a MEAL Plan for each community, so some decisions or compromises will need to be made.

What you do: Using the photographs captured throughout Stage 1, lay out thematic cards from the different community engagement sessions, that represent the theme ranking undertaken by each community in Step 8, from highest ranked to lowest ranked. Look for commonalities across the highest-ranking themes from each community to inform your selection of the key areas of change that communities would like to see. Once these have been selected, refer to your notes for the potential corresponding observable signs / indicators / measures for each theme, one at a time. Consider all the potential measures. Ask yourself:

- Where are there commonalities?
- Which ones would be most feasible (ie not too difficult to track/observe)?
- Which ones would provide a good indication that the change is happening across most or several communities?

You will likely need to take the community input and craft it into an indicator or measure of change. Aim for a small number of measures/indicators per theme / identified change that communities want to see.



TIPS!

- We are aiming for a plain-language set of measures. Measures have to be collectable for both insiders and outsiders.
- Not all communities need to contribute to each outcome area or use each measure. You can consider having a 'menu' approach where CMTs select the measures most relevant for them (providing several communities use each measure).

PROJECT LEVEL

STEP 13

Weaving indicators into a MEAL plan tapestry

What it's for: To map the priority themes and the measures that have emerged from the community engagement process onto the project's theory of change or program logic. In this step we then bring together the indicators identified by the community with the donor/funder MEAL requirements and any other MEAL requirements, into a single integrated MEAL Plan.

What you do: First, look closely at program Theory of Change/Program Logic and identify if and how your selected indicators from the previous steps can be organised against the project's outcomes. Then identify which other frameworks or requirement you may need to align too. This is likely to be donor/funder requirements, but may also require Oxfam global indicators or any indicators in your country strategy or framework. Identify if within these, there are specific mandatory indicators or purely MEAL guidance you need to align to. Working through the requirements one by one, think through how the community identified measures can be used to meet these requirements. Be aware there may be additional indicators, requirements or specific processes (such as evaluations) that need to be added, that did not come up in community discussions. For example, relating to cross-cutting themes (e.g. climate change, locally-led development, value for money), or specific indicators (e.g. DFAT's compulsory Tier 2 indicators or indicators relevant to changes that may happen 'above' country level, for example policy changes, or changes we seek at a district/municipality level). As a general rule, indicators should be kept to a minimum, ideally 1–2 per outcome area.

Once you have brought all inputs together into a draft MEAL Plan, refer to your notes from Step 10 (if carried out) and outline your approach to MEAL at the community level and at the project level, and how these fit together to form an integrated MEAL approach. Again, as communities may have had divergent views, you may need to look for the most common approach and apply your judgement to make some decisions on how it can work and be described at a project level. You need to consider:

- **Community-level MEAL:** the MEAL that is happening in each community, including Community Monitoring Teams, and short-cycle reflections in each community (see Step 17 below).
- **Project-level MEAL:** the MEAL that is happening across the project, including the role of the project MEAL team in collecting the monitoring data and insights from each community, and validating these.

A MEAL Plan could include:

- Purpose/s of MEAL
- Audience/s for MEAL for the project, and uses of MEAL information
- Overarching MEAL approach (including Community-led MEAL elements)
- Program Logic or Theory of Change
- Monitoring / measurement approach (including link to the MEAL Framework annex) at the community level and at the project level

PROJECT LEVEL

- Evaluation approach: This is usually at the project level only, and can be for validation purposes, or to investigate specific issues or themes arising during implementation
- Learning and Adaptation approach: at the community and the project level. This includes reflection and learning processes, as well as learning briefs etc.
- Resourcing for the MEAL Plan, including roles and responsibilities
- Annual MEAL Schedule/cycle (this can be in the form of a diagram or Gantt Chart)
- Annexes: MEAL Framework and relevant Tools and Templates

Write this up into a simple MEAL Plan, including a MEAL Framework (a table or spreadsheet with the selected indicators) as an annex.

STEP 14

Validating Select Measures

This step is optional. It is to be carried out with the same communities visited in Stage 1 (as part of 'closing the loop') or a new sample of communities participating in the project (in order to assess broader applicability).

What it's for: To check that the measures and indicators included in your MEAL Plan have not lost the original community meaning and hold true more widely, before the MEAL Plan is finalised.

What you do: Before you seek approval of your MEAL Plan, you will ideally test the proposed measures and indicators with communities participating in the project. This can either be the same communities visited in Stage 1, or different communities that have not yet been engaged in the community-led MEAL process. This step provides the opportunity to revise the MEAL Plan if required. It is important to remember that not all communities need to track every indicator – you can use a menu approach if there is variety across communities or locations.

STEP 15

MEAL Plan Approval

What it's for: To secure approval of the MEAL Plan

What you do: Once the MEAL Plan has been drafted, you will need to seek required and relevant approvals for your context.. You should seek a meeting with whoever is approving the Plan to explain the community-led MEAL approach that underpins the MEAL Plan, the reasons for this, and how the proposed MEAL approach meets the donor's requirements and information needs, as well as those of the project and the communities themselves.

STAGE 3: COMMUNITY LED MEAL IMPLEMENTATION

This section moves from designing the MEAL system to putting it into practice; establishing community-led monitoring and bringing it to life over the course of the project. Where the earlier sections were largely one-off design activities, these steps describe an ongoing cycle of setting up the Community Monitoring Teams, supporting communities to monitor and reflect on the changes they are seeing (short-cycle reflections at the community level), making sense of what is emerging across the whole project, adapting as you go, and feeding this through into reporting. The steps move between the community level and the project level and are designed to repeat at regular intervals throughout implementation rather than happen only once.

STEP 16

Setting Up the Community Monitoring Teams

What it's for: To move into implementation by establishing the Community Monitoring Teams (CMTs), starting small in a few communities to test the approach and inform learning, adaptation and roll-out elsewhere.

What you do:

- Return to each community where you plan to test the CMT approach. Using your notes from the engagement with that community (Stage One) and ask the individual stakeholders if they would be willing to join the CMT.
- Refer back to the notes from the consultations with communities when structuring the CMTs, in order to manage any potential risks upfront. This includes:
 - Ensuring a small team (3–4 people) that is relatively diverse and representative of the community (eg women, men, different ages, including PWD, etc.)
 - Being mindful of political dynamics
 - Being mindful of availability, and compensating for their time/any incentives you have decided upon.
- Once CMTs have been selected, we recommend an in-person training session within each participating community, drawing on your MEAL plan to familiarise them with:
 - Their role in the MEAL system
 - The change they will be looking for, and the signs of change (indicators)
 - How they will notice and record changes that they see
 - Their role in and the frequency of community-level reflection and learning processes (short-cycle reflection)

STEP 17

Individual communities Implement their MEAL

What it's for: Once the CMTs are in place and trained, they begin monitoring for the changes they see. This process will look different within each project and depends on how you have designed your MEAL. One important element is holding regular community-level reflection. The purpose of these reflection workshops is to:

- Present back to the community the changes they have seen and the evidence for these changes

- Test / validate the observed changes with other community members
- Discuss where change is being seen, or not seen, and why, as well as whether there is anything the community should be doing differently to help bring about the changes they want to see.

What you do: Once the CMTs are in place and have received training, they can start monitoring for any changes they see. We recommend a community-level reflection and learning workshop is held every 4–6 months, depending on what works in your context. These workshops could be in the form of a community meeting of about 1–2 hours. They would be attended by the project MEAL team, who will take the key messages from these meetings back to the project-level reflection workshop. Whilst the community is getting comfortable with this process, the Project MEAL team may want to support in facilitation for the first couple of workshops, but ultimately these will be led by the community themselves, the project team there purely as listeners and to capture the key changes. It is important to nominate a notetaker to ensure the evidence and key messages are recorded, so that they can be incorporated into the project-level reflection and learning processes.

STEP 18

Project level Sensemaking and Adaptation

What it's for: To make sense of the data across the whole project and decide on any adaptations, looking at progress against each indicator, variations across communities, and the extent of progress towards outcomes.

What you do: Once the reflection workshops have taken place in each community, the project MEAL team will schedule a project-level reflection workshop. In preparation all available data from communities and other sources (as per the MEAL Plan) needs to be synthesised.

The project-level reflection follows a similar approach to the community-level reflection, but looks at the project as a whole rather than a single community, and happens less often (six-monthly or annually). It should be facilitated by the MEAL and/or management team, with the project team and, optionally, a representative from each CMT. Identify a notetaker, ideally whoever will write up the report.

The project-level workshop brings together the collated and analysed data and insights from across the project's MEAL system, drawing on what has come up through the community-level reflections. These findings are presented back to the group and tested and validated with them, before moving into a discussion of where change is being seen, or not seen, and why, paying particular attention to variations across different project locations.

From there, the workshop turns to judgement and direction, making an assessment of progress towards outcomes, and discussing whether there is anything the project should be doing differently. This is where learnings, adaptations and management actions are identified. Finally, the workshop draws out the key messages to carry into the report.



TIPS!

- Leave enough time for summing up at the end of each part of the workshop, and do not move on until you have clear key messages!

STEP 19**Reporting**

What it's for: To write the project report, drawing on the high-level key messages from the reflection workshop.

What you do: Once the project-level workshop has taken place, you are ready to write the project report. The report should include the high-level key messages from the reflection workshop. The format and requirements will vary from project to project, but usually it will focus on presenting the evidence around progress towards outcomes, how cross-cutting issues are being considered, as well as key risks, lessons, opportunities and management actions. The timing of the community-level workshops and project-level workshop should be timed so that they feed directly into reporting (and work-planning).

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT FROM DESIGNING COMMUNITY LED MEAL IN TIMOR LESTE

*[Insert Example/case study from TL of about 1 page explaining what we did and how we felt about it, why we are excited about this approach (including quotes, photographs or potentially embedded videos on Tetum with translation for staff involved)]. *

5.1 FACILITATION TIPS FOR STAGE ONE

Whilst designing and piloting this approach the Timor Leste Team learnt many valuable lessons along the way. The following tips emerged from this process. They may be useful to keep in mind as you plan your community engagement (Stage 1).

Before the session

- Apply safety and do-no-harm principles at all times. Be trauma-informed in how you plan and facilitate.
- Take time to build trust and establish ways of working with the facilitation team before starting the community engagement process.
- Build trust with communities before you begin this process. If this is your first time working with this community, plan warm-up or ice-breaker activities that can be adapted to the local context. These help participants feel comfortable in the space and with each other. Use activities that participants can relate to and that feel natural in the local context.
- Make sure you understand the community context before you arrive. If possible, learn about existing relationships between participants, for example, whether mothers and daughters-in-law are likely to be in the same group, as this can affect participation.
- Be considerate of community time. Start and finish when you said you would.

During the session

- If a community leader joins the group, do not ask them to leave directly. Manage the group dynamics carefully. Check in with quieter participants and make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
- If more people arrive than expected (more than 12), discuss with your team how to manage this - you may need to split into two groups.

- Use humour and playfulness where appropriate. Creativity helps people engage.
- Encourage curiosity and a learning approach. Remind yourself and your team that this is a learning process for everyone - including the facilitators. Be ready to adapt if needed, and support each other in this process.
- Pay attention to power dynamics. Make sure quieter participants have space to speak, and that more vocal participants do not dominate.

After the session

- Debrief and reflect with your team after every session. Discuss What worked well? What would you do differently? Use what you learn to improve the next session.

5.2 POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Here are some of the challenges that we anticipate, noting that the approach in full has not been implemented for Oxfam projects yet. Please let us know any challenges you are facing so that we can find solutions together and add lessons to this list for other projects.

Donor rigidity: Donors are sometimes prescriptive about the way MEAL is done. It is worth understanding upfront how much appetite there is to do things differently and to actively involve communities in design and MEAL. Where donors are very rigid, this approach may not be suitable. Where there is openness but some hesitation, you can draw on the reasons set out at the start of this guidance note to make the case and adapt the approach to their needs, provided you stay true to the principles of community-led MEAL.

Indicators too vague or too complex: It is important to develop indicators at the right level, but it can be hard to land on ones that are 'just right'. Community-defined signs of change are often expressed in rich, descriptive language, which can pull in two directions. Stay too close to it and indicators can end up vague or hard to track consistently across communities. Tidy it up too much and you risk stripping out the specific, observable detail that made the community's insight valuable in the first place. Aim for the middle - indicators that are concrete and observable enough to monitor, while still recognisable to the community as their own. A good test is whether someone in the community would know it when they saw it, and whether different people would interpret it in broadly the same way.

Managing expectations: We have developed this approach to genuinely engage communities in design and MEAL, while also ensuring that we meet expectations and requirements of the project and of donors. This means that it includes some compromises. For example, this approach does not take a 'place-based approach' to develop measures of success for each community; rather it draws on community contributions to develop MEAL for the project. Likewise, some donors who are used to more traditional forms of MEAL may expect to see different types of measures or methods. This approach has been designed to meet MEAL standards while also being community-led, but expectations need to be managed upfront on both sides so everyone agrees with the approach. This includes being clear with communities about the purpose of the engagement and how their insights will be used (or not used) and being clear on the approach and rationale in the project MEAL Plan for the benefit of donors/funders.

Inclusion challenges: This approach is designed to be participatory and inclusive, but there are always inherent power dynamics in communities or any groups which can negatively affect participation and inclusion. To mitigate this, it is important that there is someone in the community facilitation team who understands the community dynamics, as well having strategies to address these. It can be useful to discuss these strategies as a team, as part of broader efforts to promote equity and inclusion, and to work politically.

Tokenism: There is a risk that this process becomes tokenistic, if it is called community-led MEAL but in reality is just about consulting with communities as per standard practices. To avoid this, it is important to regularly revisit and reflect on the sections on why we do community-led MEAL and the principles underpinning this approach, on pp.6-8

Overburdening Communities: There is a risk that this approach relies on an unrealistic time commitment from communities or overburdens them with additional project-related responsibilities. For this reason, we suggest starting with communities that are enthusiastic about this approach, especially while it remains new and is being tested and refined. Program staff who know the community members well can advise on and help manage this potential issue.



Photo: Nelia Menezes/Kdadalak Sulimutuk Institute

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