

DESIGNING A COMMUNITY-LED MEAL APPROACH

Learning Partner Reflections

Prepared for Oxfam Australia
24 June 2026





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Acknowledgements

The *Designing MEAL for Locally Meaningful Change* guidance note was only possible because of the people who gave their time and thinking to it. Clear Horizon thanks the Australian Government and Oxfam Australia for supporting this initiative through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) funding and giving us the chance to be part of it; The Oxfam in Timor-Leste team and their partners for leading the process and bringing us in as a learning partner; and, above all, the communities who took part, whose openness in sharing what matters to them is what the whole approach rests on.

The *Sistema Inclusivu ba Mudansa* (SIM) demonstrator project is supported by the Australian Government and implemented by Oxfam in Timor Leste and its partners.

Disclaimer

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.



1. Introduction

Clear Horizon was engaged by Oxfam Australia (OAU) as a Learning Partner as part of the community-led MEAL initiative in Timor-Leste. The initiative aimed to design and pilot a process to design and implement project MEAL in a way that is community led, using the *Sistema Inklusivu ba Mudansa* (SIM) project in Timor Leste as the demonstrator project. Clear Horizon's role was to accompany Oxfam in Timor Leste (OiTL) and OAU as a critical friend and co-contributor throughout. This included an initial literature review, co-designing all stages of the community-led monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) approach including participating in piloting the in-country community engagement and documenting the process. The main output of this work is the draft guidance note, *Designing MEAL for Locally Meaningful Change*, which sets out the approach, and an attached sample facilitation guide designed and tested with the OiTL team.

This short reflection piece is a reflection on the process and provides commentary on how the approach might contribute to Oxfam's ambitions for systems-level transformation, strengths and areas of weakness, and our suggestions for next steps. It is written for an internal Oxfam Australia audience with the purpose of reporting back on the ANCP strategic learning funds that made the work possible. This reflection represents the views of Clear Horizon in its role as Learning Partner. Where "we" is used throughout this report, it refers to Clear Horizon rather than the combined OiTL, OAU and Clear Horizon team.

2. Locating this work in existing practice and literature

There is a wider shift in Monitoring, evaluation and Learning (MEL) and development practice towards putting evidence and decision-making in the hands of those closest to the change, so that the people experiencing it are the ones making sense of it and deciding what to do next. This is the logic the community-led MEAL approach is trying to put into practice. The approach piloted draws on a long tradition of participatory design, monitoring and evaluation, most prominent in the 1990s such as Participatory Rural Appraisal¹, and has evolved into Participatory learning and action approaches². These group of approaches set out to put communities in the driving seat of how projects are designed, and how results get defined and judged. More recently, place-based approaches have become popular. These start from a place rather than a program: the people of a particular community or location are supported to define their own priorities, hold their own plan, and lead the work of change themselves, with outside actors sharing decision-making rather than holding it³. The approach also draws from recent work around data sovereignty, articulated most strongly in work being undertaken with indigenous communities. Data sovereignty principles hold

¹ Chambers, R. (1994). The origins and practice of participatory rural appraisal. *World Development*, 22, 953-969.

² <https://www.intrac.org/app/uploads/2017/01/Participatory-learning-and-action.pdf>

³ Dart, J. (2019). Place-based evaluation framework: A guide for evaluation of place-based approaches in Australia, Australia Policy Online, Accessed: <https://apo.org.au/node/246351>



that the people a set of data is about, have the right to govern how it is created, held, interpreted and used.⁴ These principles have been borrowed rather than applied wholesale, but it sits underneath the choice to have communities define, and over time hold, their own data. The above methodological evolutions sit alongside a broader philosophical re-framing which is particularly prevalent at the moment – ‘Decolonial Approaches to MEL’ which seek to make power visible, questioning who MEL is really for, and whose interests it has traditionally served. This is explored more below under contribution to Systems Transformation.

In line with Oxfam’s feminist principles and commitment to decolonial MEAL practice, OAU, OiTL and Clear Horizon set out to design a process that intentionally tries to shift the power of MEAL design and implementation away from sitting purely with project teams, to communities having increasing ownership over their data and project adaptation. The process needed to be feasible for country teams to adopt and sustain on existing project budgets and staffing and be pragmatic enough to align with current donor MEL requirements. The result sits somewhere in between conventional MEL design and implementation, and the intensity of the more ambitious participatory, place based or data sovereignty approaches described above. It is a pragmatic middle ground. The innovation, is less about something wholly new than the *practical adaptation and synthesis (and tested steps)* that makes community-led MEAL workable within real program and donor constraints.

3. Contribution to Systems Transformation

To speak meaningfully about systems transformation, we first need to name the system. The system we have in mind here is the aid and development architecture, and the place MEL holds within it. There is a good body of evidence that MEL is one of the things that keeps the current architecture in place⁵. Specifically, the sector’s practice of accounting upwards to donors, and its reliance on results-based tools like logframes and externally set indicators, tends to favour those operating within Western systems of knowledge and tips accountability towards donors rather than the people development programs are meant to serve. Who sets standards, who defines a ‘good’ indicator, what counts as evidence and who controls and interprets that data, is exactly where power sits, and therefore exactly where it can be shifted.⁶ In recent years, NGOs and others with aid and development sector including Oxfam have responded to this through the concept of ‘Decolonial MEAL’. This initiative falls within that concept, as it tries to shift the power dynamics, yet does so whilst working within the limits of the donor and institutional environment Oxfam works in.

Where this work shifts power within MEAL

As part of the initial literature review, we drew on a comprehensive review and synthesis by INTRAC, which examined 34 blogs, articles, working papers and guidance notes on decolonising

⁴ T. Kukutai and J. Taylor (eds), *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an Agenda* (2016).

⁵ INTRAC (2025), *A review of current thinking around decolonising MEL*, <https://www.intrac.org/current-thinking-decolonising-mel/>

⁶ See above.



MEL. INTRAC identified seven main themes, or elements of MEL, that need to be considered in approaches that seek to decolonise MEL:

- 1) MEL systems and standards;
- 2) The paradigms and philosophies guiding evaluation theory and practice;
- 3) Principles and values;
- 4) The governance of MEL;
- 5) Roles and responsibilities;
- 6) Methods and approaches; and
- 7) The focus of evaluation.

This provides a useful framework for reflecting on where and how the community-led MEAL initiative addresses power within MEL practice. Below we briefly outline the key findings of the review and in the tables, reflect on what extent and how the community-led MEAL approach considered each element.

On **principles and values**, **roles and responsibilities**, and the **focus of evaluation**, the review found a lot of alignment. The literature names the principles it thinks decolonial MEL should rest on, among them inclusivity, co-creation, reciprocity, critical reflexivity, deep listening, collaborative sense-making and respect for self-determination. It calls for evaluation roles to change, with the evaluator moving from technical expert to facilitator, and to co-producer of knowledge rather than its sole author. On the focus of evaluation, it argues for measuring what local actors themselves value, including the intangibles that rarely make it into a logframe, such as dignity, trust and ownership. These three areas are where the Community-Led MEAL concentrated its efforts to shift practice as per the below.

Principles and Values	The proposed approach is explicitly principle-driven. The guidance note we developed names these as: Curiosity and openness, Inclusiveness, Power awareness, do no harm, flexibility and adaptability, humility, and accountability and transparency which these strongly align to what the literature is calling for.
Roles and Responsibilities	The proposed approach changes what communities do in MEAL and what NGOs and partners do alongside them, asking country teams to facilitate the knowledge and judgments of communities, rather than to supply expertise and 'evaluate'.
Focus of Evaluation	It puts the focus of measurement squarely on what communities themselves say is important, framed in their own words, rather than measuring what outside experts identify as important.

On **MEL systems and standards** and the **governance of MEL**, the review found opportunities to transform the 'rules of the game', rethinking whose needs MEL serves and moving the primary line of accountability away from funders and towards communities. The literature appears divided on how far to go: some call for funders and INGOs to relinquish power outright, while others argue that community needs should complement rather than replace those of funders. On governance, the review surfaced calls for communities to take greater ownership of MEL processes and their findings, with some treating this as a fundamental right, and positioning communities as being the primary MEL decision-makers. For both these components, the proposed approach moves closer to these calls than traditional MEL would. Yet by intentionally keeping the approach pragmatic and



feasible to implement for projects within the current system, it aligns more with the modest literature as it does not fundamentally seek to change ‘the rules of the game’. For example:

MEL Systems and Standards	If a project was to adopt the proposed approach, the MEL system (including what is measured and how) shifts at project level, but the overall MEL standards and overarching systems do not, because they are often set by donors.
Governance of MEL	Communities gain increased ownership of MEL processes and of the findings that emerge, but who ultimately makes decisions and governs MEL is unchanged.

The most system transformational arguments from the review were around the areas of **paradigms and philosophies** and **methods and approaches**. On paradigms and philosophies, the literature calls to question the knowledge bases that conventional MEL is built on, and to centre multiple ways of knowing. On methods and approaches, it sought to go beyond conventional participatory tools, suggesting instead methods which draw on oral traditions and folklore, culturally grounded ways of visualising data, and more flexible alternatives to key performance indicators. These elements are either addressed the least within the proposed approach or are as yet untested as outlined below.

Paradigms and Philosophies	Whilst it draws on communities’ own knowledge and their sense of what matters, the approach intentionally still works within a donor paradigm. It does not fundamentally challenge what counts as knowledge. It does however question whose knowledge is credible, by moving away from the need for an ‘objective’ third party to assess the project. This theme aligns closely with Stage 3 within the guidance note, and the implementation of community monitoring teams (CMTs), which are yet untested. When implemented, we may find that this challenges paradigms more than initially thought.
Methods and Approaches	The approach intentionally relies on indicators to make it more manageable for country teams. While implementation will likely vary from project to project, the proposed approach may give qualitative evidence greater weight and lead to more diverse ways of evidencing those indicators. The overall process could also be adapted to develop rubrics, progress markers or alternative methodologies. However, these remain untested alternatives, leaving open the same question raised elsewhere in this note about how far the approach can move beyond conventional indicator-based MEL.

What does this mean for the aid and development system?

This mapping highlights that the approach proposes a change to the practice of and relationships embedded within MEL but is restricted by the current paradigms of the aid and development system. The approach intentionally works within the existing aid system, instead of radically reforming or changing the paradigm. This is in line with the pragmatic middle-ground approach



described above. The approach is not about communities holding full power, and it is not communities fully in the lead; for example, the final say on indicators, and on what ultimately gets measured, still rests with the project teams. What changes is that those decisions are now genuinely grounded in and reflect conversation with communities about what matters to them. Importantly it also aims to change the information flow, so that communities have more visibility of and ability to make sense of their own data.

Using Donella Meadows 12 levers of systems thinking outlined in the diagram below, it sits squarely in the information/patterns of behaviour bracket. By modelling that a community led approach to MEL is pragmatically possible, the hope is to seed other projects to do the same. If the approach is scaled out and adopted within other projects, it is possible that the projects will collectively apply indirect pressure and/or influence on higher leverage points needed for greater systems transformation, such as in the social/systems structure and mental models' brackets below.

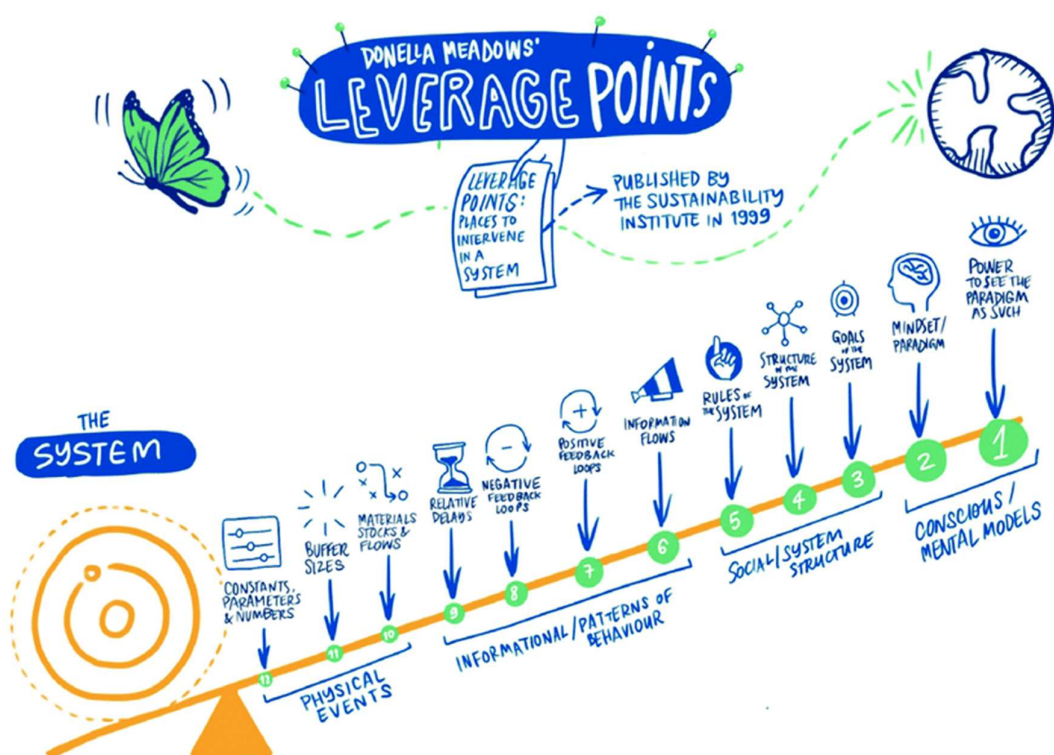


Figure 1: Donella Meadows' leverage points (Source: based on Meadows, 1999; credit: UNDP/Carlotta Cataldi)

For a discretionary fund aimed at innovative, systems-level work, this initiative has contributed by delivering workable and pragmatic, evidence-informed guidance that supports other Oxfam programs to ensure their MEAL is as closely aligned to communities' own knowledge and experience as possible. That is a feasible and admirable step toward repositioning the role of MEAL within a colonial aid architecture. It is a pragmatic attempt to move communities closer to the driver's seat at the point where movement is actually possible today, rather than striving for or waiting for a fundamental system reset.



4. Our reflections

It is important to highlight the developmental approach taken to this work. By design, this initiative was set up to be a learning process and involved multiple adaptations even throughout the two pilots that were undertaken for Stage 1. As Stages 2 and 3 have not as yet been carried out, the guidance is preliminary by necessity. It will need to be tested across more than one implementation before we can be too categorical about where it holds up and where it doesn't. However, in the nature of learning, we have reflected on some initial strengths as well as challenges, risks and other considerations below:

Strengths

- **Feasibility:** Country teams can take it on within their existing budgets and resourcing, whatever their project is setting out to achieve, and without having to run a full participatory design or go all the way to a place-based approach. Keeping it realistic to adopt and scale across other Oxfam projects was a principle we held to throughout, and much of its value is that it brings community-led preferences together with the donor requirements and structures projects already have to work within, rather than treating the two as competing.
- **Adaptability:** We wrote the guidance to be pragmatic rather than conceptual. It steps the process out so country teams have real scaffolding to work from, not just high-level principles, but it stops short of being a template. Teams are expected to contextualise it, take ownership of it and make it fit their own setting. It can also be adopted in whatever a project is setting out to achieve, and whatever stage its design is at, since it does not depend on the project having been designed in a fully participatory way.
- **Setting projects up to be more responsive:** Even though the final decisions still sit with project teams, what gets measured is now shaped by real conversations with communities about what matters to them. That is a meaningful change from indicators set entirely from the outside. This sets projects up to be more responsive to communities throughout the life of the project.
- **Drawing on strengths:** Our experience suggests that country teams often have real facilitation skills that go under-used, partly because local forms of facilitation are sometimes not viewed as 'professional' in the way the aid and development system sometimes expects. This process seeks to give local team members permission and practice to draw on community-level facilitation strengths they often already hold.
- **Demystifies and widens who gets to 'do MEL':** Involving and upskilling program staff who may not see themselves as 'MEL people' is a powerful way to demystify MEL and widen who participates in it, which we believe leads to greater buy-in to MEL throughout the life of the project. Whilst this was not a stated objective, it is arguably a positive unintended outcome of the pilot.
- **A potential avenue for communities to hold Oxfam and partners to account:** Because communities define what success looks like and set the measures the project is judged against, this process *may* provide a basis on which to hold Oxfam, partners and other stakeholders to account for whether that change actually happens. The community monitoring teams are meant to carry this through, checking progress against community-defined outcomes and feeding it back. That turns the usual direction of accountability around: rather



than being a source of evidence for upward reporting, communities are positioned to be the owners of their own data, allowing communities to make sense of it themselves, decide which actions they want to take and potentially hold the project to account for the change they said mattered. Whilst this is an exciting strength, it is yet to be tested and will depend on the individual monitoring teams.

Challenges, considerations and risks

- **It leans heavily on facilitation:** The whole approach depends on how well the local team facilitates. Where that facilitation isn't strong, the risk is that community engagement turns into a way of confirming what the team already thinks. Communities get steered towards a predetermined answer, and that answer ends up with a false stamp of credibility.⁷
- **It can tip into tokenism:** Communities don't make the final call on what goes into the MEAL plan, so there is an ever-present risk the process drifts back into ordinary consultation. We have tried to hold against this by building the guidance around principles, but it stays a live risk worth watching. We need to be careful about being up front with communities about where decisions are, and aren't, theirs to make, so the process doesn't raise expectations it can't meet.
- **The community-led monitoring teams are untested:** We haven't trialled this part yet. We think the idea is promising and is worth testing, but it isn't risk-free. In some settings it could come across as asking community members to monitor, or even spy on, one another, which could cause harm or friction and may put individuals in a difficult position. None of that means it shouldn't be tried. It means it has to be done carefully, with do-no-harm kept front and centre.
- **It front-loads the MEAL investment:** Whilst this process has been designed to be intentionally feasible for country programs, it does shift more of the MEAL effort to the design phase than teams are used to. Running the community engagement well takes more budget and resources up front than MEAL design is usually given. That cost may even out over the life of the program, since less may be needed later if the community-led implementation takes hold, but the heavier spend lands early. Getting it right therefore depends on buy-in and ownership from the project manager and/or the country program leadership, who need to be willing to commit the time and resources to the process up front.
- **Focus on indicators.** Throughout the pilot we assumed that project's MEAL plans would be indicator based, as this seemed the most straightforward framing for the team. It was felt that introducing an alternative approach to MEAL, such as an outcome mapping approach (identifying progress markers) at the same time to altering the way that we design and implement MEAL, may have been too much change simultaneously. However, there is an open question on whether indicators are the correct approach. If we were opening up to alternative approaches, communities could instead define together what success looks like and then judge progress through a rubric-style, reflection-based process, rather than fixing on indicators or signals up front at community level. This could go to the heart of how far the

⁷These are the same cautions the literature review flags: participation that is limited to data collection, and pre-set indicators dressed up as co-creation.



approach can push against the conventional MEL that donors expect, and it would be a productive thing to explore in future pilots.

- **It applies to community-level objectives, not the whole project.** Many project designs have multiple objectives. Some seek change within communities, while others aim at subnational or national levels, such as policy or administrative systems. For example, the demonstrator project includes outcomes focused on community behaviour change and others focused on policy influencing. This proposed approach is only applicable to the objectives where the change being sought sits at community level. This is not really a weakness, more a consideration of where the approach fits.

Our role and positionality

This was an OiTL-led process, set up to design a community-led approach, and we were very aware the whole way through that we, as Clear Horizon, came into it as outsiders. We don't speak Tetun and we don't carry much cultural context, and yet the point of the project was to unsettle the usual way MEL is done and the power that sits behind it. That was an awkward place to be. Rather than smooth the awkwardness away, we tried to lean into the principles and work with it: focusing our role on facilitation of process, rather than expertise, figuring out where we could add something, stepping back where the OiTL team were better placed to lead, and holding to the locally led intent of the work.

5. Recommended next steps

The steps below set out the recommended next steps for this project:

- **Update guidance:** The immediate step is to receive feedback from the full design team - the OiTL team, the partner MEAL staff who took part, and OAU, and to adjust and update the guidance.
- **Develop the project MEAL framework:** With the updated guidance, the OiTL team applies the approach to build the MEAL framework for the SIM project. We will have then tested Stages 1 and 2. Update guidance according to any learning.
- **Have the guidance professionally designed in Oxfam style:** We recommend the guidance will go to a graphic designer to be laid out in Oxfam's house style, so it sits alongside other Oxfam guidance notes.
- **Share it within Oxfam and consider publishing:** At this stage we feel the guidance could be shared within Oxfam for other country teams to be able to use. The original plan was broader publication, perhaps on policy and practice. We could consider webinars or other ways to communicate it within Oxfam and, potentially, the wider sector. Clear Horizon would be glad to stay involved in the publication and sector engagement and as agreed during inception, if the guidance is co-branded would contribute time free of charge.
- **OiTL trials the community-led monitoring teams, carefully:** Once the project moves into implementation, test Stage 3 on a small scale, with do-no-harm safeguards designed in from the start and real attention paid to the position it puts individuals in.
- **After 12 months, reflect and update the guidance again.**

