

LESSON 17:

STRENGTHEN MONITORING, EVALUATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING (MEAL) AND DATA SYSTEMS

Embed MEAL systems that are inclusive and locally led, and implement data management systems that generate timely, disaggregated, actionable insights.

Evidence from drought responses consistently highlights the importance of robust MEAL systems to inform timely decision-making and improve programme quality. In slow-onset crises such as drought, the ability to track changing conditions, household outcomes and emerging risks over time is particularly critical. Evaluations show that weak or under-resourced MEAL systems limit learning, reduce accountability to populations affected by drought and constrain actors' ability to adapt interventions as conditions evolve.

Data gaps and fragmentation remain significant challenges in drought contexts. Evidence highlights inconsistencies in indicators, methodologies and data-sharing practices across organisations and sectors, making it difficult to compare findings or build a coherent picture of needs and outcomes. Local and national data systems are often underutilised or bypassed, despite their potential to support contextually relevant analysis and ownership. Where data collection places excessive burden on communities affected by drought, it can undermine trust and participation.

Accountability to populations affected by drought is a central component of effective MEAL systems. Evaluations show that feedback and complaints mechanisms can improve programme relevance and protection outcomes when they are accessible, trusted and linked to decision-making. However, these mechanisms are often poorly resourced, inaccessible to marginalised groups or disconnected from programme adaptation. Learning processes are similarly constrained when findings are not shared across teams, sectors or institutions. Strengthening MEAL in drought responses requires sustained investment, coordination and a culture of learning. Evidence suggests that integrating qualitative and quantitative data, including community-generated information, improves understanding of drought impacts and response effectiveness. Linking MEAL systems to early warning, anticipatory action and resilience frameworks can further enhance their relevance and usefulness over time.

Number of documents contributing to the lessons: 26

Average evidence scores of all documents contributing to the lessons: 4.2

Median evidence strength of documents contributing to the lessons: 80%

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Humanitarian and development actors should institutionalise inclusive, outcome and impact focused MEAL systems that systematically capture disaggregated and longitudinal data. This should include disaggregated data, for example for children, adolescents and marginalised groups.
- Governments, and humanitarian and development actors should invest in harmonised systems for risk data, early warning and evaluation, including comprehensive shocks data and clear crisis modifier guidance.
- Humanitarian and development actors should institutionalise quality assurance and learning systems, including clear quality assurance responsibilities, context-driven analysis, contribution analysis and documentation of decisions, to ensure collective accountability and avoid repeating past mistakes.
- Humanitarian and development actors should capture both intended and unintended impacts in MEAL data. This should include less tangible outcomes such as community trust, perceptions of fairness or conflict risks. Weak documentation and reporting often undermines fundraising and timely adjustments in operations. Embedding adaptive learning loops ensures interventions remain relevant and accountable.