HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Mini MBA Programmes and MEAL: design, manage and prove impact

Course handout · Week 12 : Adaptive management, learning and reporting: leading with evidence

A programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours) to design, manage and evaluate humanitarian programmes: needs assessment and severity, results chain and indicators, targeting and cash transfers, planning and budget, MEAL plan and data quality, sampling, analysis, accountability, evaluation, impact measurement, value for money and adaptive management. Corrected numerical exercises, three monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy.

https://humanitairejobs.org/en/academy/mini-mba-programmes-meal/semaine-12/

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Week 12 : Adaptive management, learning and reporting: leading with evidence

Objectives

- Establish adaptive management: regular reviews, decision rules and documented revision of the programme.
- Build an organisational learning system that captures and reuses lessons, beyond reports.
- Write honest and convincing donor reports, and present a complete MEAL package as a final project.

Adaptive management

Humanitarian contexts change faster than logframes. **Adaptive management** consists of deliberately and transparently adjusting activities, methods or targets according to data and context, while keeping the objective. It is not improvisation: it rests on explicit assumptions, monitoring that tests them, and planned decision points.

Its components:

- **Working assumptions** clearly stated in the theory of change ("women will be able to get to the cash-out points").
- **Context and early warning indicators** that test them (reported travel time, security incidents on the roads).
- **Decision rules** written in advance: "if more than 20% of transfers are not collected within 10 days, mobile cash-out points are opened".
- **Regular reviews** (quarterly, or monthly in an acute crisis) with the authority to decide.
- **An agreement with the donor** on what can change without a formal request (activities, methods) and what requires an amendment (objectives, overall budget, areas).

Donors are often more open than people think to well-argued adaptation. What they refuse are unannounced changes discovered in the final report.

> A project that has changed nothing in 18 months in a volatile context has probably not looked at its data, or has not dared to talk about it.

Programme reviews and after action reviews

The **quarterly review** of a programme brings together the programme team, MEAL, logistics, finance and, where possible, representatives of partners and communities. The standard agenda:

- Progress on key indicators against targets and trends.

- Budget execution and burn rate.
- Feedback from people and partners: main themes, responses provided.
- Context and assumptions: what has changed.
- Decisions: what, who, when. And follow-up of decisions from the previous review.

The **after action review**, which originated in the military and was then widely adopted, is a short tool (one to two hours) to be used after a significant event: a distribution, an evacuation, a first wave of response. Four questions: what did we plan? what actually happened? why is there a gap? what will we do differently next time? It works if people talk about facts, without looking for culprits, and if the last question produces actions with a person responsible.

Lessons must be **specific** and **actionable**: "communication needs to be improved" is not a lesson; "announce distribution dates by radio and by voice message at least 5 days in advance, because 40% of households had not received the information" is one.

Organisational learning

Humanitarian organisations produce many reports and learn little: the same mistakes are repeated from one crisis to the next, often because staff turn over quickly and lessons remain in documents that no one reads. An effective learning system:

- **Defines priority learning questions** for the organisation (for example: "how can monitoring quality be maintained when access is intermittent?") and directs the MEAL of several projects towards answering them.
- **Captures** lessons in usable forms: two-page briefs, checklists, document templates, rather than long reports.
- **Circulates** lessons at the right time: at the start of a new project, the lessons from similar projects are read (lessons review at the design stage).
- **Values** the reporting of failures, for example through regular sessions where teams present what did not work and what they learned from it.
- **Shares** with the sector: published evaluations, contributions to cluster working groups, case studies.

The role of the MEAL manager then changes: from a producer of data for donors, they become a **facilitator of reflection** who helps teams ask good questions, read the data and decide.

Writing donor reports

A good-quality **narrative report** follows the donor's structure and meets three requirements: **accuracy** (figures consistent with the financial report and previous reports), **analysis** (not just what was done, but what changed and why) and **honesty** (gaps and difficulties explained).

For each result, a simple structure works: **target, achieved, gap, explanation, consequence, action**. For example: "Target: 3,000 households. Achieved: 2,450 (82%). Gap due to the closure of the road to X for 7 weeks. Consequence: two transfer cycles delayed in 4 villages. Action: mobile payment introduced in May; catch-up planned by August, at no additional cost."

Mistakes to avoid:

- Output figures presented as outcomes ("12,000 people reached by awareness-raising have improved their practices").
- Double counting between activities (the same person counted in each activity); unique beneficiaries must be distinguished from participations.
- Individual success stories presented as representative; a story illustrates, it does not prove.
- No mention of complaints received and responses provided.

> The donor will find out about problems sooner or later. It is better that they hear about them from you, with the analysis and the measures taken, than through an evaluation or an audit.

Programme closure and sustainability

Closure is prepared from the design stage (exit strategy) and implemented at least three months before the end. It includes:

- **Informing** communities and authorities about the end date and arrangements, and referral to other services.
- **Transfer** of assets (water points, equipment) according to the donor's rules, with written agreements with the recipients of these assets.
- **Handover** to partners, technical services or committees, with capacity strengthening that is genuinely planned and budgeted.
- **Endline survey** and evaluation, then feedback to communities.
- **Archiving** of data and documents, and secure destruction of personal data in line with the retention policy.

Sustainability is judged by the conditions in place: an institution or community that takes responsibility, resources for operation (public budget, contributions, cost recovery), skills, and genuine demand from users. Without these conditions, it is better to acknowledge it and look for a successor (other funding, other actor) rather than announce a sustainability that will not exist.

Final project: the complete MEAL package

The final project of this Mini MBA consists of presenting a **complete MEAL package** for a real or realistic programme of your choice. It brings together everything you have learned in twelve weeks:

- A two-page **needs analysis note**: sources, severity, priority groups, coverage gaps, response options compared.
- A **theory of change** and a **logframe** with indicators, baselines, calculated targets and assumptions.
- A **targeting strategy** and, where applicable, the calculation of the transfer value.

- A **MEAL plan** with two indicator reference sheets, the sampling plan and the sample size calculation for the baseline survey.
- A **complaints and feedback mechanism**: channels, timeframes, sensitive channel, indicators.
- An **evaluation plan**: type, questions, method for estimating the effect and its validity conditions.
- A **VfM analysis**: 4E indicators and a comparison of options.
- A **review schedule** and three adaptive decision rules.

Quality criteria: consistency between the parts, correct and verifiable calculations, realism (MEAL budget of 3 to 10%), a genuine place given to people, and honesty about limitations. The case studies in the diploma exam draw on exactly these skills.

Exercise: writing a decision rule and a report paragraph

Situation. A cash programme for 4,000 households, mobile payment. In the third month: 18% of transfers are not collected after 10 days (6% in the first month); in 3 villages out of 20, this rate exceeds 50%. Feedback reports agents without cash and a road cut off by armed groups. Target for the quarter: 12,000 transfers collected; achieved: 9,840.

Task. 1) Write an adaptive decision rule for this problem. 2) Write the paragraph of the quarterly report on this result, following the structure target, achieved, gap, explanation, consequence, action.

Answer. Rule: "If more than 15% of a village's transfers are not collected 10 days after sending, the team checks agents' liquidity and access within 72 hours; if the cause is confirmed, a mobile cash-out point or an additional agent is organised before the next cycle, and the donor is informed in the monthly report." Paragraph: "Target: 12,000 transfers collected. Achieved: 9,840 (82%). The gap comes from 3 villages where more than half of the transfers were not collected, because of agents' lack of cash and the closure of the road to Y. Consequence: about 2,160 transfers pending, and a risk of households concerned resorting to debt. Actions: two mobile cash-out points since week 12, agreement with the operator to supply agents with cash, information to households by voice message; the transfers remain available and will be monitored until fully collected."

Key takeaways

- Adaptive management: explicit assumptions, early warning indicators, written decision rules, regular reviews, agreement with the donor.
- After action review: planned, actual, why the gap, what to do differently; without looking for culprits.
- A lesson is specific and actionable; otherwise it is just an impression.
- Report: target, achieved, gap, explanation, consequence, action; unique beneficiaries distinguished from participations.
- Sustainability is judged by the conditions in place (responsible party, resources, skills, demand), not by a statement.

Quiz

1. Which wording is a useful lesson learned?
   A. Coordination must be strengthened
   B. Announce distributions by radio and voice message 5 days in advance, because 40% of households were not informed
   C. We need to communicate better
   D. The project was a success

2. In an after action review, the main rule is to:
   A. Identify the person responsible for the error
   B. Talk about facts without looking for culprits, and end with actions with a person responsible
   C. Write a long report
   D. Invite the donor

3. A report counts 5,000 participants in training and 5,000 in the distribution, i.e. "10,000 beneficiaries". The error is:
   A. Possible double counting: unique beneficiaries must be distinguished from participations
   B. No error
   C. A percentage calculation error
   D. An exchange rate error

4. Which change generally requires a formal amendment with the donor?
   A. Changing the awareness-raising method
   B. Modifying the specific objective or the areas of intervention
   C. Adjusting the schedule of an activity by two weeks
   D. Changing the agenda of a meeting

5. Programme closure is prepared:
   A. In the last month
   B. From the design stage with an exit strategy, and implemented at least three months before the end
   C. After the final report
   D. Only if the donor requests it

Quiz answers : 1. B · 2. B · 3. A · 4. B · 5. B