

Learn. Improve. Repeat.

How to maximize your impact through
monitoring, evaluation and learning



UBS Philanthropy Services

Maximize your impact, locally, nationally and globally

Let's get straight to the point. The world's social and environmental problems are too big and complex to tackle alone. Only by working together can we hope to create lasting change.

For over 20 years, UBS Philanthropy Services and its grant-making UBS Optimus Foundation has been helping philanthropists maximize their impact. And we'd love to do the same for you.

What do you say? Maybe it's time we talked. Because together, we'll achieve more than we ever thought possible. To find out more and get in touch, please visit:

ubs.com/philanthropy >

Introduction



Dear reader,

Impact is fundamental to what we do at the UBS Optimus Foundation. This requires an engaged and purposeful approach to grant management – from beginning to end – as well as a mind-set that is open to learning and improving. Flexibility is critical, as we support programs that are in various stages of maturity and organizations with diverse capacity needs. We have seen that there is often a fear of data revealing failures or mistakes. In this paper, we outline key principles of our approach that ensure data is purposeful, and is primarily focused on learning, management and experimentation. It is intended to provide our clients with examples on how this approach is applied within our programs.

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Program Director,
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Oriana leads UBS Optimus Foundation’s education program. For over 10 years, she has worked in research and program implementation for the international development and education sectors. Among her goals is to find the best ways to educate and build capacity in crisis settings – especially for refugees – and to expand those approaches. Oriana also helps development and humanitarian organizations use data to make better decisions.

She has previously worked for Caritas Switzerland, Innovations for Poverty Action, ETH Zurich, the World Bank, and the German Cancer Research Center; and conducted field research in Bangladesh, the West Bank, Mexico and Syria. She holds a Masters in mathematics and philosophy from the University of Heideberg, Germany, and a PhD in economics from ETH Zurich. Oriana is also a lecturer in international development at the ZHAW School of Management and Law; and speaks Italian, English, German and Spanish.



Nalini Tarakeshwar

Head of Programs and Monitoring
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Nalini oversees UBS Optimus Foundation’s programs in health, education, child protection, and climate and the environment, and leads its monitoring and evaluation function. She has almost 20 years’ experience managing and evaluating programs that benefit children and families in the US, India and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Before joining the UBS Optimus Foundation, Nalini was the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation’s executive director in evidence, measurement and evaluation; and Big Win Philanthropy’s strategy and programs leader.

Nalini has a PhD in child psychology, a post-doctoral degree in public health, and a degree in civil engineering. She served as assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Yale University, and worked for the Global Health Institute at Duke University. Nalini has also published close to 50 academic articles and chapters on how families and children cope with medical and psycho-social problems, and has trained and worked as a special education teacher in India.

Getting forensic with philanthropy

Introduction



You wouldn't buy a new home without diving deep into the details. What's the location like? Can you easily travel from the property to places you want to go? Does it tick all your boxes on space? If not, could you extend it? Or will you encroach on someone else's land?

Choose well, and you'll have a home you're happy to live in for years. Rush in blindly, and you'll find yourself in a place you can't wait to leave. It might be too cramped. Too costly to heat. Or too far from where you need to be, causing you to clock up some serious road or air miles. Let's face it, even buying something simple like a luxury watch might take some serious research.

So why wouldn't you give the same forensic attention to something bigger and more life-changingly important, like a philanthropic project?

It doesn't matter whether you're new to the scene or a battle-hardened veteran. To get the best from your efforts, you'll need to check, learn from and fine tune everything you do – over and over again.

In fact, focusing on the fine details of your philanthropy can mean the difference between making a massive impact and wasting precious time, money and resources. Worse still, taking your eye off your ball might do more harm than good.

Table 1. How monitoring and evaluating compare¹

	Monitoring	Evaluation
Timeframe	Ongoing	At certain stages
Type of information provided	<p>Outputs. Are our program’s activities producing the products and services you expect? If not, why?</p> <p>Targeting. Are we reaching our intended participants and meeting their needs?</p> <p>Engagement. How interested and involved are our participants in the program?</p> <p>Financial. What are the main sources of our costs and income? Are we deviating from our plans and, if so, why?</p> <p>Feedback. What do stakeholders think about the quality and relevance of our services?</p>	<p>Strategy. Are we doing the right things?</p> <p>– Rationale for program design</p> <p>– Theory of change</p> <p>Operations. Are we working in the right way?</p> <p>– Efficiency when using resources</p> <p>– Effectiveness of design and implementation</p> <p>Performance. Are we achieving our planned outcomes and impacts?</p> <p>– Links between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts</p>
<div></div>		
Learning: How can we improve?		
Impact on learning	<p>Learning for adjustments</p> <p>How can we change the program to better serve our participants?</p> <p>Are there other ways of doing things that may lead to better results?</p> <p>How can we adjust our program to maximize resources?</p>	<p>Learning for future programs and strategy</p> <p>What lessons can we learn to inform how we design future programs and strategy?</p> <p>Learning for general knowledge</p> <p>How can learning across programs inform better policy?</p> <p>How can we share our learning more widely to help others achieve the same goal?</p>

The good news is, there’s a great way to keep everything on track. It’s called “**monitoring, evaluation and learning**” (or “MEL” for short). In a nutshell, a quality MEL system can give you the biggest possible bang for your philanthropic buck, by:

- highlighting what’s going well and what you could do better – so you can keep learning, improving and making a bigger impact
- helping you better implement, deliver and expand your efforts
- ensuring your work is accountable and stands up to public scrutiny, so you can keep progressing with everyone’s support and blessing
- making your project a magnet for donors and investors, because you can prove the good you’re doing
- open the door to financial products that give your project a welcome cash boost.

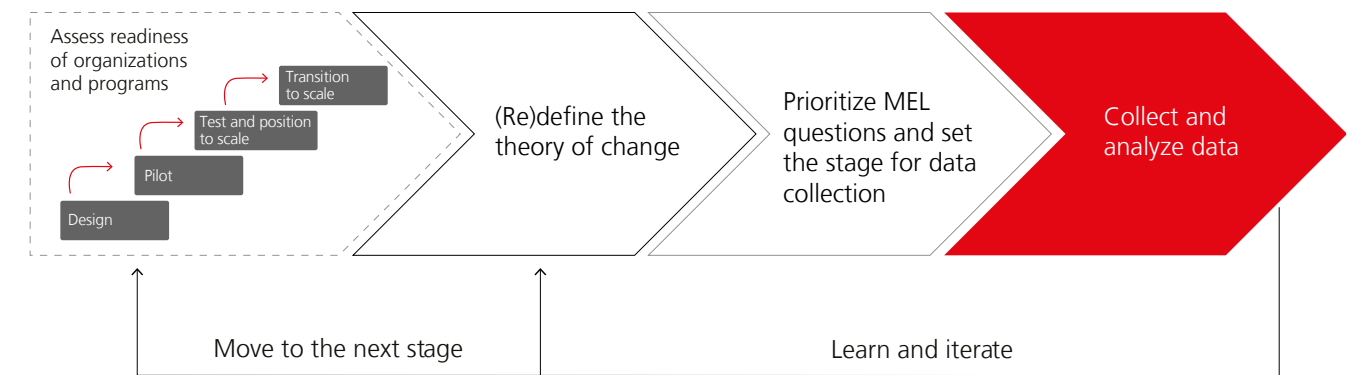
In these pages, you’ll see what’s involved in setting up your own MEL system. But first, what do we mean by monitoring, evaluation and learning in philanthropy?

Monitoring simply means keeping a constant close eye on your data and activities. **Evaluating** involves working out how successful your activities are, and how they might compare to other approaches. Monitoring and evaluating then leads to **learning**: giving you the facts you need to keep improving. It also makes people in your organization accountable for achieving the best results possible.

Getting started

So, what’s the best way to set up your MEL system? There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach. There are many different routes to similar results. But to give you an idea, here are the steps UBS Philanthropy Services takes to help organizations set up their MEL systems.

¹ Adapted from Kusek, J. Z., & Rist, R. C. (2004). Ten steps to a results-based monitoring and evaluation system: a handbook for development practitioners. World Bank Publications. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/638011468766181874/pdf/296720PAPER0100steps.pdf>



Of course, that's just a quick overview. Setting up a quality MEL system takes time, effort and more than a dash of expertise. It won't happen overnight. You'll need to consult with your stakeholders. Get their opinions. Talk to experts. Set up teams to take care of everything. Then when everything's in place, you'll need to check your MEL system again and again to ensure it's still doing the job you want it to do.

But don't let the task overwhelm you. You **can** do it when you break everything into bitesize pieces. So this paper does the same, splitting the work into five steps²:

- 1 Assess your readiness
- 2 Define a theory of change
- 3 Identify questions and data sources
- 4 Collect and analyze data
- 5 Learn. Improve. Repeat.

Ready? Let's get started...

² Innovations for Poverty Action. Goldilocks Toolkit Resources. <https://www.poverty-action.org/right-fit-evidence/resources/toolkit>; Gugerty, M. K., & Karlan, D. (2018). The Goldilocks challenge: Right-fit evidence for the social sector. Oxford University Press. UK. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.andeglobal.org/resource/collection/604B4247-F983-4FB9-8758-F1D33E0A6CF0/Day_1_-_Goldilocks_Right_Fit_Evidence_Talk_-_D.Karlan.pptx.pdf; USAID. Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research. <https://usaidearninglab.org/monitoring-toolkit>; USAID. Development Innovation Ventures. <https://www.usaid.gov/div>; Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. IDEAS Impact Framework. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/innovation-application/innovation-approach>; Andrews M., Pritchett L., Woolcock M. (2012). Escaping Capability Traps through Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), CID Working Papers 240, Center for International Development at Harvard University; Kusek, J. Z., & Rist, R. C. (2004).

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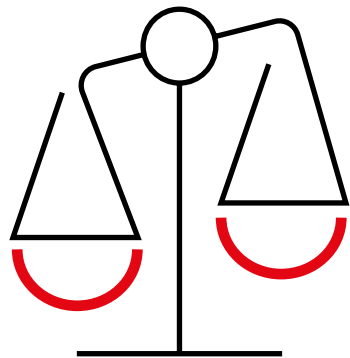
Assess your readiness

So the first thing we do when helping organizations launch MEL systems is assess how ready they are to generate and use evidence.

The MEL system needs to match the stage/maturity of a program, the implementing context and the capabilities of an organization. Different types of evidence will be helpful at different times in a program lifecycle and for different purposes.

Some organizations struggle collecting data. Others wrestle with monitoring it. Some may be poised to conduct an impact evaluation.

UBS Philanthropy supports organizations to understand the right approach for them that best suits their needs and constraints. The questions listed in the table on the next page are some of the questions we ask to understand an organization's readiness to gather evidence – and the type of MEL system that might suit.



Program stage	General guiding questions	Which approach for generating evidence might be a better fit for grantees?	How can UBS support grantees to generate fit for purpose MEL Systems? ²
Design	<p>Needs and/or feasibility of program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has the need for the intervention been tested?• Does the problem affect many with strong potential for impact?• Can the idea be implemented (legally, financially and technically)?• Have the resources needed to implement been mapped?• Are relevant stakeholders involved? <p>Prototype of program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has the design of the intervention been tested for interest and ease-of-adoption by intended program participants?	<p>> If you answered NO to any of these questions (or lack information to answer them) you might consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs assessment and/or a feasibility analysis• Prototypes where you test specific features to get participant feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help grantees to ask meaningful research questions• Promote the development of prototypes to inform better design• Be supportive of changes to the original program design if such changes are informed by program participants' feedback
Pilot	<p>Program design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does the intervention have a solid Theory of Change (ToC)?• Have the key assumptions of the ToC been tested? <p>Pilot deployment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does implementation follow the ToC?• Is there evidence that the program is being adopted?• Is the rationale for the deployment of resources clear and commensurate to what's needed to achieve the stated outcomes? <p>MEL capabilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there a credible data collection system in place?• Is data used systematically to make decisions related to program management, particularly feedback and engagement data?	<p>> If you answered NO to any of these questions you might consider focusing your efforts on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A (re)design of the ToC• Testing and comparing alternatives within the ToC to improve outcomes• Building/ Reinforcing MEL capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage iterative piloting, instead of starting at full scale• Focus on use of lessons learned for design and implementation improvement• Revise KPIs based on lessons learned• Aim to enhance organizations' existing MEL systems, looking for areas of opportunity and strengths• Connect implementing partners that may share similar challenges
Test and position to scale	<p>Feasibility of conducting an impact evaluation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can people be randomly assigned to participate/not participate in the program? Or can a valid comparison group be built?• Has the program changed significantly as a result of organizational learning and improvement?• Does the program scale allow to enough collection of data?• Are there enough resources to conduct an impact evaluation? <p>Value of conducting an impact evaluation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can an impact evaluation provide relevant additional information to existing evidence (i.e. external evidence pertaining to similar programs)?• Does the program have potential for scaling up (in diverse settings and for diverse target groups)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you answered YES to all these questions you might consider an impact evaluation• If not, consider reinforcing monitoring activities or conducting other types of evaluations (e.g., process evaluation, summative evaluation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote the use of existing evidence to assess the potential impact of a program• Encourage impact evaluations for promising programs that do not have a strong global evidence base only once they have been been piloted and refined• Discourage large investment in the measurement of final outcomes without a counterfactual
Transition to scale	<p>Program design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there a thorough understanding of which aspects of the program may be generalized to other contexts?• Are there similarities in factors that influence behavior (societal structures, cultural values) between the implementation context and the new context in which the program is intended to scale? Are these similarities enough for the ToC and its assumptions to hold? <p>Program implementation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there evidence that the implementation of the program can be carried out well in the new context? Are local conditions, like infrastructure and resources, suitable for implementation?• Is there enough buy-in from key local stakeholders?	<p>> If you answered NO to these questions you might consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collecting local descriptive and observational data to better understand local conditions• Study existing evidence that can help to better understand elements that drive success in similar programs <p>> If you answered YES to all questions, the program might be ready to scale. Set up mechanisms to track quality and fidelity of implementation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote the development of knowledge dissemination plans that foster collaborative learning• Connect implementing partners with stakeholders that may support their scaling process• Assess with the partner the feasibility of results-based funding mechanisms

Before collecting evidence, it's important to start with strong foundations. For example, if you're thinking about conducting an impact evaluation, it pays to plan, cost, design and implement it properly. You'll also need to make sure it's the best approach, compared to other alternatives. Because a bad impact evaluation is worse than not having one at all. Get it wrong, and you'll probably invest your time, effort and money in the wrong places.

There are many ways your evidence collecting can go off track. You might gather the wrong kind of data, or not enough of it. Or you could collect it in a way that doesn't reveal whether your program played a part in the results. So those impressive figures might soon become meaningless digits on a page.

Monitoring systems – gearing up for success

Gathering evidence is **essential**. But what good is that evidence if you can't learn from it? That's why monitoring systems are vital – especially those that help your organization learn how to better manage its work and improve outcomes.

For example, your monitoring system might identify risks holding your program back. So you can act quickly, resolve the risks and rapidly get back on track. Your system might also help you launch programs that can access funding from “social finance” (investments that aim to do good in the world while providing financial returns for investors). Before giving your capital, such funding sources require evidence that you can reach target outcomes – and that's where your MEL system will prove its worth.

Lessons learned

Quality Education India Development Impact Bond's monitoring system tracked how schools were using its “EdTech” software in real time. The system identified schools rarely using the software, so the team could get straight to work engaging with and supporting the teaching staff.³

² Adapted from Kusek, J. Z., & Rist, R. C. (2004); Nesta and Alliance for Useful Evidence. (2016). Using research evidence: a practice guide. https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Using_Research_Evidence_for_Success_-_A_Practice_Guide.pdf; Bates, M. A., & Glennerster, R. (2017). The generalizability puzzle. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Link; Gugerty, M.K., & Karlan, D. (2018). Ten Reasons Not to Measure Impact – and What to Do Instead. Stanford Social Innovation Review. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/ten_reasons_not_to_measure_impact_and_what_to_do_instead

³ Nanda, Davar & Wouters. (2021). Improving the Outcomes-Readiness of Implementors – A Key Step Towards Scaling Results-Based Financing. Next Billion. <https://nextbillion.net/improving-outcomes-readiness-scaling-results-based-financing>

2

Define a theory of change

A “theory of change” is a visual map that clearly shows your project’s resources, activities and goals.

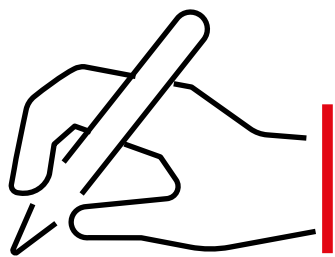
It’s a crucial ingredient in creating the best-possible MEL system for your organization. Why? Because it will:

- guide you on the kind of data you need to collect
- clearly communicate to everyone inside and outside your organization what you’re trying to achieve and how you’ll get there
- help you measure and assess data more accurately, by separating outputs, early outcomes and outcomes.

On the next page you will find an example of a **theory of change**.

It shows:

- what goes into your program (inputs)
- what your program does (activities)
- the products or services that result from your activities (outputs)
- the short-term effects of the outputs on program participants (early outcomes)
- long-term changes that result from early outcomes (outcomes).



MEL questions	Is the training being delivered as planned? If not, what are barriers? Are nurses participating in the training? Is there increase in knowledge among nurses?				
	Are nurses applying the training correctly? Are there other factors influencing application of techniques?		Is there an improvement in patient health due to the training? Are there some patients that benefit more than others? Why?		
Example	Input	Activities	Outputs	Early outcomes	Outcomes
	Resources for training and materials	Design and run a nursing training program	Trained nurses	Nurses apply improved techniques	Improved health in patients
Assumption and Risk	Assumption that time is made available to nurses for participating; Risk that a pandemic or doctor's strike may disrupt nurses' availability			Assumption that opportunity and necessary infrastructure is available to nurses to apply training; Risk that reduced funding due to a pandemic will affect infrastructure availability	

Note: We need to be sure that the nurses are applying the techniques before conducting an evaluation of the outcomes. If not, the ToC needs to be reviewed, along with the assumptions, to understand what is preventing the application and make appropriate course corrections.

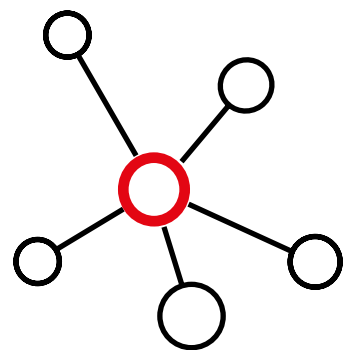
The “assumption” area refers to things that must happen for your program to work properly. For example, if you’re running a training program for nurses, you’ll assume that the nurses have time to attend.

A theory of change can also highlight risks. These are factors you can’t control that might harm your program’s success. For example, a doctors’ strike or pandemic might prevent nurses from attending courses, and drain away the funds you need to set up the training.



3

Identify questions and data sources



At this stage, you should better understand the kind of data you need to collect. You'll need to work out where you'll get that data – and the questions to ask to get the best evidence.

Most importantly, you should be clear about the kind of insights you're looking for. Once you've defined this, you can then:

- pick the right questions to gather those insights
- consider the type of data you need, for example, qualitative data (descriptive and often in narrative form) and quantitative data (dealing in quantities, amounts or ranges)
- select the best method for collecting that data, for example, through questionnaires, digital applications, focus groups and observation; or from third parties
- set up data-collection procedures – preferably as a low-cost and continuous process within your current operations.

Facts and figures

MEL systems work best with two kinds of data: **quantitative** (numerical in nature) and **qualitative** (more descriptive). Together, both types will help you understand your program and make better decisions. For example, collecting quantitative data on attendance will highlight people's interest in your services at particular points in time. But qualitative data in narrative form that is obtained via interviews or observations will help you understand exactly why people are using your services, and how they perceive them.

Photo from Educate Girls case study
“Identifying program participants” >



Impact evaluations – particularly randomized controlled trials – are rigorous quantitative methods that help you identify links between your program and its intended outcomes. They reveal what works (See appendix >) and how you might extend your program into other areas. They can also provide data and insights that support other aspects of your work, like policy advocacy and network building.⁴

While impact evaluations are important, they shouldn't be your sole focus. You'll also need to pay close attention to data arising from your monitoring and other methods like “participatory process evaluation” (an approach where stakeholders participate in the evaluation process). Only by considering data gained from various methods will you fully understand how to better manage and improve your program.

That's why, at UBS, we focus on learning rather than specific methods. We ask, what does the data teach us – and how can we translate this knowledge into better practice? We also like working with data-focused organizations that share what they've learned, what they've achieved – and the mistakes they've made.

What will it cost?

Working out budgets for collecting data is tricky. There are no handy rules-of-thumb for predicting the money you'll need to set aside. For example, collecting data for evaluation usually involves structured formats like formal surveys.⁵ And the costs of these depend on lots of variables, like how many people you're interviewing; how long it will take you to reach them; the length of the survey; the response rate you want; how you'll analyze the data; and the technologies you might need to gather data and communicate the results.

⁴ Cousins, J. B., & Whitmore, E. (2014). Framing evaluation: The State of Network Evaluation. Center for Evaluation Innovation. USA. <http://www.networkimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/NetworkEvalGuidePt1and2Rev.pdf>

⁵ World Bank. (2004). Monitoring and Evaluation: Some tools methods and approaches. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23975/246140UPDATED01s1methods1approaches.pdf>

Photo from AfriScout case study
“Changing lives on land” >



Putting technology to work

Digital applications can provide a fast and comparatively low-cost way to gather, monitor and evaluate data. They typically handle tasks that would be impossible even for teams of thousands, such as continuously tracking people’s usage of your services.

For example, digital applications can enable you to create standard formats quickly and easily for collecting information. They can also store that information in one accessible place, where it’s readily available to help you make better decisions.⁶

It’s also a good idea to use digital technologies that can extend your reach and impact. Look for applications that connect and combine with local and national systems, while allowing you to build on your current systems.

Digital data collection >

Empowering health workers >



Photo from MircaleFeet case study
“Digital data collection” >

MiracleFeet improves access to treatment for children born with clubfoot in low and middle-income countries. The organization’s mobile data collection app – “CAST” – tracks how patients are progressing within its growing global network of clinics and providers. CAST is optimized for mobile devices, and can run offline when internet access is unreliable.

The app has improved treatment outcomes, for example, by tracking key indicators like tenotomy rates (cutting or removing tendon tissue). This minor surgical procedure is a key clubfoot treatment, but sometimes overlooked because not all providers are trained in the technique. CAST highlights where tenotomy rates are low, so MiracleFeet can intervene with training and campaigns.

Living Goods developed a “Smart Health” app that helps community health workers diagnose common childhood diseases like malaria and diarrhea. The organization tests the app in the field, enabling Living Goods to spot new needs, deliver solutions and continually improve the solution. And because the app’s “open” technology links direct to government health databases, workers get the latest and most accurate information on people’s health.

⁶ Acumen. (2015). Lean Data Field Guide. <https://acumen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lean-Data-Field-Guide.pdf>

Giving children
a safe and
permanent
family life >

Miracle Foundation uses Thrive Scale™ – a digital application that allows the organization to measure children’s safety and progress, especially when they leave orphanages for a family environment. The app collects, aggregates and analyzes data, giving a full picture on who the children are, where they’re coming from, and the challenges and risks they might face. These insights enable Miracle Foundation to overcome problems, provide support and ensure children enjoy a safe and permanent family life.

Letting children
set the pace
of learning >

Imagine Worldwide provides software that lets children learn straight from their tablets and at their own pace. The organization wanted to run an impact evaluation to check the curriculum was improving learning. But first, Imagine Worldwide decided to check it could implement the program effectively – and to make sure it had the right data to run the impact evaluation.

To do this, the organization piloted the program and conducted a process evaluation. This gave customers the opportunity to understand what an impact evaluation is and does. The approach also helped Imagine Worldwide set up a “control group” of children who will only receive the software once the organization has proved its benefits.

Many hands make light work

Running a **successful MEL system** is often only half the story. Like so many things in life, you can achieve much more when you collaborate. For example, you might share data and reporting tasks with other donors. And it can be wise to call on external MEL experts and consultants for:

- help answering high-stakes questions, such as whether you should change your goals and strategies
- insights into whether you should dedicate staff to MEL tasks or hire an external team
- access to evidence from sources perceived as authoritative and credible
- help overcoming risks that might jeopardize delivering outcomes (this is particularly relevant if your organization receives outcomes-based funding).



Photo from Imagine Worldwide case study
“Letting children set the pace of learning” >



Photo from Living Goods case study
“Empowering health workers” >

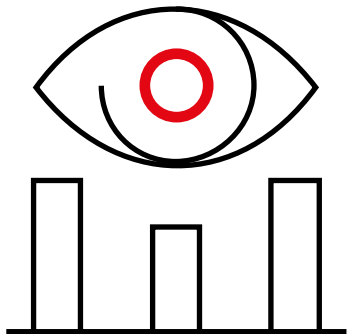
4

Collect and analyze data

Let's get back to basics. What are you collecting data for? Simple. To better understand what works, who it works for, why it works – and, ultimately, to improve the work you do.

This means you'll need to focus on these areas:

- **Within your program** – understanding how your program works for different groups of participants. It's great knowing your program increased learning outcomes for 60% of participants. But you'll also need to know what factors led to this result – and impeded the progress of the remaining 40%. For example, at UBS, we know that family reintegration programs work for most children, and that children with disabilities are often the last to leave residential care settings.
- **At the portfolio level** – understanding the factors that help or hinder your impact in various contexts and for different types of people. To create quality programs, you'll need to collect data on factors such as gender, age, place of residence and ethnicity.
- **At higher levels** – using evidence to prioritize where resources need to be allocated and influencing partners and stakeholders to fund what is most needed and shown to be effective.



Why reinvent the wheel?⁷

The data you need isn’t always waiting to be discovered out in the field. Valuable sources of information are often sitting right under your nose:

- **Existing studies** can give you insights into whether an intervention or program might work. If others have already done the groundwork, why waste time, money and effort repeating it?
- **Administrative data**, such as school attendance and hospital records, can be a low-cost and accurate source of information. Such data is updated and collected regularly, saving you time and money on gathering it yourself.
- **Secondary data** from external organizations, like censuses, surveys and national statistics, can be a reliable and cost-efficient source of information.

Changing lives on land >

AfriScout is a mobile grazing app that helps pastoralists make better grazing decisions. Impact data on pasture management also highlighted the app’s potential for restoring rangelands and mitigating climate change. The project didn’t originally focus on these areas. However, armed with these insights, the organization decided to improve the technology to further these efforts.

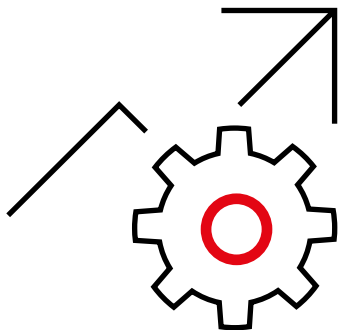
Photo from AfriScout case study
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⁷ Bates, M. A., & Glennerster, R. (2017).; Innovations for Poverty Action. (2016). Goldilocks Deep Dive: Using Administrative Data for Monitoring and Evaluation. https://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/publications/Goldilocks-Deep-Dive-Using-Administrative-Data-for-Monitoring-and-Evaluation_1.pdf

5

Learn. Improve. Repeat.



A quality MEL system is home to a wealth of knowledge that's essential for improving outcomes. But to get the best from that knowledge, you first need to manage it in the right way.

This means capturing the findings, organizing continual streams of information, disseminating insights across your organization, creating guidelines on how to use the data, and promoting a culture of learning and accountability.⁸

It's also important to see learning as more than the result of monitoring and evaluating. Learning should occur at every step of the MEL process, for example, through *"rapid feedback loops"*. Rapid feedback loops involve identifying and implementing improvements at every step when planning projects. Moving to the next step then includes and builds on the previous lessons and improvements in a *"try, learn, adapt"* fashion.⁹

"Rapid-fire testing" (also known as *"A/B testing"*) involves splitting participants randomly into different groups and exposing them to variations in your program's design or messages. This testing works best when the changes can be observed within a short period of time, such as improving participation in a training program. It's also ideal when you're designing or piloting a program, or expanding it into new areas.

⁸ Kusek, J. Z., & Rist, R. C. (2004)

⁹ Andrews M., Pritchett L., Woolcock M. (2012)



Photo from Educate Girls case study
“Identifying program participants” >



Photo from Educate! Uganda case study
“Lessons on reaching young people” >

Lessons on reaching young people >

Educate! tackles youth unemployment in Africa by partnering with schools and governments to provide education solutions that equip young people with 21st century skills. The organization regularly tests different program components, then adapts its activities in line with lessons learned.

For example, Educate! designed an outreach strategy for a distance learning program in Uganda, encouraging parents to urge their children to enroll during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educate! randomly assigned parents to receive calls. Participation among those whose parents received calls increased by 29%. This led to Educate! including the approach in its strategy. Further experiments also showed that tailoring information to address specific parental concerns increased participation.

Adapting to the new normal >

The San Diego Trafficking Prevention Collective seeks to prevent human trafficking by educating young people in schools. The collective guides schools on reporting protocols; runs an afterschool mentoring program; and uses role play and multimedia to highlight how traffickers recruit and sell people for sex.

Following findings from an external evaluation, and challenges emerging from COVID-19, the organization revised its original KPIs and programs. For example, the organization revised KPIs on the number of schools and students reached to reflect reduced access to schools. The organization established two new approaches: an integrated and streamlined eight-week virtual program; and a traditional approach combined with online training.

Keeping track with key performance indicators (KPIs), while remaining flexible

When you’re aiming high, it’s important to know where you’ve been and where you’re going. Did you start your journey heading in the right direction? Are you still on course to reach your destination? And how does your progress compare to others travelling similar paths?

Let KPIs be your guide, flagging up where you’re doing well – and where you might be going wrong. Using KPIs in your data collection tools will ensure your findings are accurate, comparable, and valuable for learning and improving.

It’s good practice to choose and agree on the right KPIs when implementing your project – but also to remember that you might need to tweak them as your project progresses. For example, COVID-19 forced many education-based organizations to shift from in-school approaches to remote learning. As their focus changed, so did the KPIs that tracked and informed their progress.

For early-stage programs, it’s often wise to give yourself some time before committing to KPIs. For example, you might wait until you’ve finished a pilot before settling on KPIs. This will ensure you don’t box yourself into unattainable targets, and can stay focused on your priorities.

Where next?

The future of MEL



Photo from Educate Girls case study
“Identifying program participants” >

In this paper, we’ve touched on the traditional and digital approaches to monitoring, evaluating and learning from data.

We believe one of the future trends will be the role of technology in facilitating the use of data and its analysis. For example, let’s take artificial intelligence (AI).

As the following examples show, AI and machine learning is already streamlining the once-arduous process of collecting and analyzing data within philanthropic organizations. And we strongly suspect AI will soon become the sharpest tool around for identifying successful programs, overcoming barriers, improving outcomes and maximizing impact.

That’s a future we can all get behind.

Identifying
program
participants >

Educate Girls uses machine learning to locate out-of-school girls and enroll them in school. Previously, Educate Girls located girls by conducting door-to-door censuses in thousands of villages. However, the program’s reach outgrew this time-consuming approach. Today, machine learning models predict areas with high concentrations of out-of-school girls, and identifies remote villages to approach.

[Read about it here! >](#)

Campaigning
for change >

To create an effective air-pollution campaign in India, Quilt.AI analyzed more than 12,000 tweets and posts from 63 campaigns and organizations over the course of two years. Using a curated list of 150 search terms in English and Hindi, Quilt.AI extracted over 21 million data points to identify digital search behavior and popular narratives.



Photo from MircaleFeet case study
“Digital data collection” >

Just keep going

Conclusion

So you’ve set up your MEL system. Job done.
Not so fast.

Ultimately, any solution for MEL should be guided by the question “Is our MEL system helping us manage and steer the project to learn, refine and deliver better programs?” If it is, great. If it isn’t, you’ll need to keep learning, honing and improving. Only then will you have an MEL that continually helps you improve outcomes and change the world for good. Sometimes a more sophisticated technology may not be the right one. It may be as simple as sending a text message.

Example: Young 1ove, one of UBS’ COVID Prize winners, was able to increase students’ abilities in numeracy in rural Botswana by sending text messages and phone calls to parents to guide learning at home.

This is just the start. Because for as long as your organization is engaged in philanthropy, there will be the need to know whether your resources are having the intended impact. If not, how can you learn from your mistakes? This can all seem like a lot of work, you’re right - it is. But it can be a dynamic and creative journey.

UBS Philanthropy Services is here to help.

Whether you’re thinking about setting up an MEL system, or looking for help putting one in place, please contact your UBS client advisor or the UBS Philanthropy Services team at ubs.com/global/en/ubs-society/philanthropy/contact >

Appendix

Types of evaluations

1. **Process Evaluation:** an evaluation strategy that assesses implementation, including costs; time requirements; staff capacity and capability; the availability of required financial resources, facilities, and staff; political support; and unanticipated outcomes.
2. **Impact Evaluation:** an evaluation that uses a counterfactual to identify the effects – positive or negative, intended or not – on individual households, institutions, and the environment caused by a program.
3. **Cost- Effectiveness Analysis:** compares the relative costs to the outcomes (effects) of two or more courses of action. Estimates inputs in monetary terms and outcomes in non-monetary quantitative terms.
4. **Summative evaluation:** A study conducted at the end of an intervention (or a phase of that intervention) to determine the extent to which anticipated outcomes were produced. It is intended to provide information about the worth of the program
5. **Meta-evaluation:** an evaluation that seeks to find trends and extract learnings across multiple evaluations. Meta-evaluations require the establishment of criteria and procedures for systematically looking across existing evaluations.

Methodologies

- **Qualitative methods:** methods that focus on obtaining non-numerical data, generally used for gaining insights into context and better understanding of the motives behing human behaviors.
- **Participatory methods:** methods that provide active involvement in decision-making for those with a stake in a program, seeking to generate a sense of ownership in results and recommendations.
- **Experimental methods:** Random assignment determines who may participate in a program (creating program and control groups) so that those assigned to participate in the program have, on average, the same characteristics as those who are not. Also known as randomized evaluations or randomized controlled trials (RCTs).
- **Quasi-experimental methods:** When randomization is not possible, a control group is selected which matches the characteristics of the project group as closely as possible. Methodologies in this group include statistical matching, difference in differences, regression discontinuity design and instrumental variables.

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Source: Adapted from “Monitoring and Evaluation: Some tools, methods and approaches ”; “Ten steps to a results-based monitoring and evaluation system”; “Impact Evaluation Methods”

