



Cultivating our MEAL systems:

*Insights from the 2025 Global Holistic MEAL Symposium
Summary for Executives*



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Chiang Mai, Thailand | July 7–9, 2025**

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ISBN: 978-1-946263-35-3



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Cover design by Erica Lauren Calhoun

Cultivating our MEAL systems: Insights from the 2025 Global Holistic MEAL Symposium

In July 2025, thirty attendees including NGO executives, MEAL practitioners, donor representatives, and academic partners gathered in Chiang Mai, Thailand for a symposium convened by ECHO to discuss how Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning practices are moving toward holistic and participatory organizational learning. The accompanying whitepaper draws from case-study exchanges, facilitated discussions, and writeshop charrette to distill actionable guidance for organizations seeking to strengthen their MEAL systems.

This summary for executives presents the symposium's core findings for NGO leadership teams, funding organizations, and MEAL practitioners working to equip their organizations with practices that foster trust, deepen stakeholder relationships, and support evidence-informed decision-making.

Four Thematic Pillars

Integrating MEAL into Organizational DNA

MEAL cannot function as an add-on; it must be woven into organizational structures, budgets, and culture. Symposium participants emphasized moving from compliance-oriented documentation toward learning systems that inform adaptive management. This requires clear role definitions, realistic budget allocations, and strategic partnerships. When specialized capacity needs exceed what organizations can build internally, partnerships with research institutions or technology providers are highly recommended. A learning culture emerges when staff see MEAL as improvement-oriented rather than punitive, when reflection sessions celebrate small wins alongside setbacks, and when leadership demonstrates commitment through multi-year core budgetary funding rather than project-by-project appropriations. Symposium participants advocated for realistic MEAL budget allocations of 5-10 percent of program budgets.

Strengthening Methodological Rigor

Credible MEAL systems balance technical depth with practical feasibility. Participants called for mixed methods approaches that pair quantitative indicators with qualitative storytelling, capturing both measurable change and the lived experiences that statistics alone cannot convey. Simplified metrics reduce field burden without sacrificing validity; for instance, streamlining twelve-parameter poverty indices to six core indicators makes implementation feasible while maintaining analytical integrity. Ethical protocols governing consent, data

anonymization, and AI applications received particular attention, reflecting growing awareness that methodological rigor includes protecting participant agency and community trust.

Deepening Stakeholder-Centric Relationships

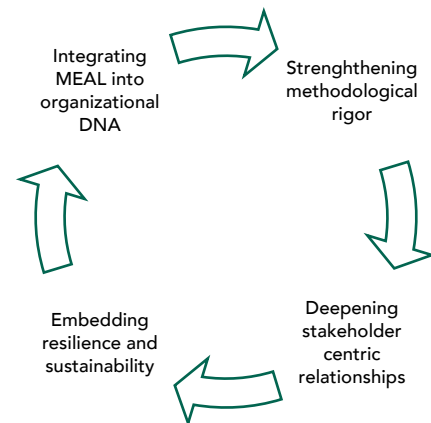
Holistic MEAL repositions communities and donors as active partners rather than passive recipients or distant financiers. Trust-based engagement involves consistently demonstrating how MEAL findings inform program improvements and organizational learning rather than merely fulfilling external reporting requirements. Co-creating indicators with community members ensures that they reflect locally meaningful change rather than imposed benchmarks. Feedback loops must return findings to communities in accessible formats, inviting them into joint interpretation. Similarly, donor engagement should shift from transactional reporting toward sustained dialogue that allows both funding agencies and recipients to contribute to strategic direction. This relational approach surfaces context-specific insights and builds the trust necessary for honest assessment of both successes and challenges.

Embedding Resilience and Sustainability

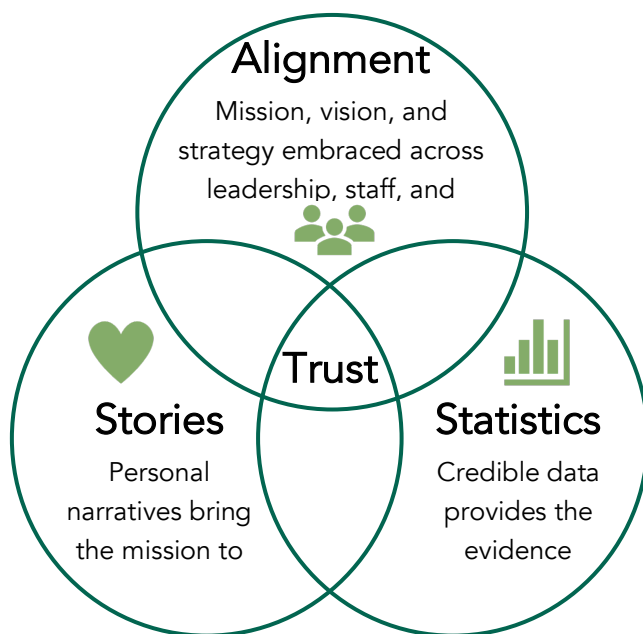
MEAL systems face constant challenge from staff turnover, funding volatility, and external crises. Resilient systems require succession planning that preserves institutional memory when key personnel depart, centralized data management that prevents tool fragmentation, and cross-sector collaboration that enables knowledge sharing without redundant indicator development. Participants emphasized that crisis-resilient funding structures allow organizations to maintain core monitoring functions during disruptions when adaptation becomes most critical. Sustainability depends on building organizational architecture that can withstand shocks without losing data integrity or learning momentum.

Strategic Outcomes and Visual Frameworks

Holistic MEAL systems are built on four interconnected outcomes: strengthened learning culture throughout organizations, deeper engagement with both communities and donors, robust internal monitoring that informs real-time adaptation, and enhanced external reporting that meets accountability requirements without consuming disproportionate resources.



Building Trust Through Alignment, Storytelling, and Evidence



The symposium identified a three-pillar model for understanding how trust emerges through MEAL practice. Organizational alignment ensures coherence between mission, vision, and strategy, creating an authentic foundation for both community and donor engagement. Personal narratives honor community agency while making abstract impact tangible through compelling stories that transform statistics into human experience. Credible statistics provide the methodological rigor necessary to validate programmatic effectiveness and enable evidence-based decision-making. Holistic MEAL data tell the story that is relevant, robust, and honoring to all

stakeholders. When these three elements function synergistically, they build trust essential for sustained partnerships and meaningful accountability.

Moving Forward

Organizations approaching MEAL transformation will find in the full whitepaper case study lessons illustrating how practitioners have navigated the tension between standardized indicators and contextual adaptation, implemented participatory ranking tools across literacy levels, and balanced donor demands for rigorous evidence with community preferences for relational engagement. The document also provides a curated inventory of validated measurement tools spanning poverty assessment frameworks, agricultural sustainability indices, participatory methodologies, and holistic flourishing measures that organizations can adapt to their contexts.

The guidance presented here reflects a collaborative commitment among global development partners to shift MEAL from isolated compliance functions toward integrated systems that serve organizational learning, honor community knowledge, demonstrate impact through both credible evidence and authentic storytelling, and improve organizational efficacy, thereby serving beneficiaries with greater efficacy and efficiency. Organizations at any stage of MEAL maturity can draw from these pillars to initiate dialogue with leadership, staff, and stakeholders about what holistic measurement could look like within their specific operational contexts and mission commitments.

Participants also appreciated the use of charrettes to facilitate the symposium. The use of charrettes offers a valuable approach to furthering dialogue of MEAL development and implementation. The whitepaper includes an overview of the charrette process.

This whitepaper emerges from practitioners working across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America who recognize that sustainable impact requires cultivating MEAL systems that are robust, adaptive, and relationship-centered.