



## MEAL in Action (2026)

Participant Notes



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## MEAL in Action: Introduction

Welcome to this training on MEAL in Action. Through this course, you're going to experience what MEAL actually looks like when plans collide with reality.

You're going to take the role of a MEAL Manager for a women's economic empowerment program in rural Kenya, working with 2,000 women across 15 villages in a 24-month pilot program.

This is a simulation. You'll face real decisions and dilemmas, and you'll see the consequences of those decisions. At key moments, we're going to explore some of the frameworks and principles that matter in practice.

Some of the choices may be difficult or uncomfortable—but that reflects reality, because MEAL in practice can be messy.

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### Your Role

You are the MEAL Manager for a Women's Economic Empowerment Project. The program delivers:

- Skills training: financial literacy, business management, vocational skills like poultry keeping, improved farming techniques for drought-resistant crops, vegetable production, food processing
- Village savings and loan groups
- Market linkage support to sell products—eggs, vegetables, dried goods, poultry, farm produce

**Scale:** 2,000 women participants across 15 villages over 24 months (two full agricultural cycles)

### Target outcomes:

- Increase women's monthly income by 40% by Month 24
- Improve financial decision-making power in households

Your challenge: Design the evaluation approach before Month 1, then use it when reality doesn't go as planned.

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## The Stakes

This is a two-year pilot testing the model before potential scale-up. Your donor is considering: *Should we invest \$20 million to scale this project to 50,000 women nationwide?*

That means your MEAL job isn't just to hit 40%. It's to find out:

- What works and what doesn't?
- Which women succeed and who gets left behind?
- What conditions determine success?
- What needs to change before scaling?

**In a pilot, learning is the product.** The 40% target matters, but understanding *why* you hit or miss it matters more.

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## Designing Your Evaluation

You're about to design an evaluation for this major program. Your donor wants results—but you can't evaluate everything. You need to be strategic.

Before you decide what to measure or how to measure it, you need to ask: **What questions are you actually trying to answer?** This will shape everything else—your indicators, your methods, your data collection.

**Primary questions** (Did it work?):

- Did income actually increase?
- Did decision-making power change within households?

**Secondary questions** (Why or why not?):

- What worked best? Which interventions were most effective?
- What were the barriers to success? What enabled success?
- Who did the program actually work for, and who got left behind?

**Process questions** (How did we learn and adapt?):

- How did implementation work?
  - What adaptations were made along the way?
  - What did we learn?
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## Reflection Questions

1. Think about a program you're currently working on or have worked on. What are your primary, secondary, and process questions? Are they clearly defined—or have you been evaluating without them?
2. If your program is (or was) a pilot, how well did the MEAL design capture learning about *what works where and for whom*—versus just reporting whether targets were hit?
3. What's one question you wish you had asked at the start of a past evaluation that would have changed how you designed it?

# The Sampling Challenge

Now it's time for your first real decision.

You have 2,000 women in the program, spread across 15 villages. How many do you need to sample for a reliable evaluation?

You could use a tool like the **IndiKit Sampling Calculator**—a free tool many of you may know. For a population of 2,000, with 95% confidence and a 5% margin of error, IndiKit calculates you need a minimum of **322 participants**.

## What do those numbers actually mean?

- **95% confidence** means if you did this survey 100 times, 95 of those times your results would be accurate.
- **5% margin of error** means if your result shows a 40% increase, the true number is somewhere between 35% and 45%.

It's good practice to round up to **350**, not just 322. That gives you a buffer for non-response, sampling errors, and dropouts. That's real-world MEAL practice.

**Why does this confidence level matter?** Because donors will ask: "How confident are you in these numbers?" You need to be able to say, "We are 95% confident, plus or minus 5%." That's the difference between credible evaluation and guesswork.

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## Understanding the Context

Now the question is: how do you choose which 350 women will be involved in the evaluation? Before you answer, you need to understand the context.

### Village types:

Type	Villages	Access to Market
Market towns	5	Good road access, 30 minutes or less
Rural/semi-urban	6	Moderate access, 2–3 hours by motorcycle
Remote	4	River crossings, 4+ hours, seasonal road closures

Not all villages are the same. Five are near market towns where women can sell products easily. Six are rural but accessible. Four are remote—dirt roads become mud during the rains, sometimes completely cut off.

This changes everything about your evaluation design.

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## Choosing Your Sampling Strategy

With this context in mind, how should you select your 350 women? What's your sampling strategy?

**Option A: Random sampling** Every woman has an equal chance of being selected—like picking names out of a hat.

**Option B: Stratified sampling** Intentionally sample from different locations and subgroups.

**Option C: Purposive sampling** Handpick women to represent different situations.

Think about it: which approach will show you the full picture of how your project performs across different contexts?

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## Why Stratified Sampling?

It's most likely you would have chosen **stratified sampling**. Here's why the other options fall short:

**Random sampling** sounds mathematically fair in theory. But in the real world, no field team is going to trek to the farthest village just for three or four interviews. They may substitute or skip. Your data ends up weighted towards accessible villages, and remote women almost disappear. Purely random sampling creates a hidden bias.

**Purposive sampling** is where we handpick informative cases. But whose story is the "right" story? The risk is we choose only shining examples—those who live near market centers, those who are better organized or more literate. We call that women's economic empowerment, but that's not evaluation. That's marketing.

**Stratified sampling** deliberately allocates those 350 interviews in proportion to the actual population. Or, if you want to hear the voices of remote women more strongly, you may even slightly over-sample in remote areas.

### Our final allocation:

- 69 from remote villages
- 158 from semi-urban areas
- 123 from market centres

This means every type of reality is forced into your data. You'll see the exact places where the program is failing—and you can fix it before wasting millions scaling up the wrong model.

Stratified sampling isn't just statistically correct here. It's the only way to get the truth when geography shapes opportunity so dramatically.

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## Adding Layers of Stratification

Once we've locked in the 350 women using geographic stratification, we don't stop there. We add a second layer inside those 350 spots, so the sample tells us the full story—not just a success story.

### Stratify by economic activity:

- Farmers
- Poultry keepers
- Traders

For each group, their challenges and results could be completely different. We need all three voices.

### Stratify by age:

- 18–30
- 31–45
- 46+

Younger women often have different levels of access to technology, training, and capital than older women. If we only interview one age band, we miss half the picture.

### Stratify by participation level:

- Active, committed participants
- Women who joined but dropped out early

This is critical. If we only interview women who are still active, we hear nothing but positive reviews: "The training changed my life. My income went up 50%. Everybody is happy."

But the dropouts tell you the real barriers. They'll tell you the meetings were too far away, they couldn't manage childcare, or the loan repayment schedule didn't match their harvest season.

**Early dropouts are your early warning system.** If 30–40% of women in remote villages drop out in the first three months, that's not a small detail. That's the reason your whole model could fail when you try to reach the next 20,000 women.

By building active and dropout into the stratification, you guarantee those uncomfortable truths show up in the data. You can't hide them. You can't average them away. And then you don't scale a fantasy.

The final sample isn't just geographically representative. It's brutally honest. That's how evaluation becomes useful rather than just performative.

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### Reflection Questions

1. Think about your last evaluation sample. Was it genuinely representative of all contexts and participant types—or did it accidentally over-represent the easier-to-reach, more successful cases?
2. Have you ever included dropouts in your evaluation sample? If not, what barriers or uncomfortable truths might you have missed?
3. What stratification layers would be most important for a program you're currently working on? Geography? Gender? Participation level? Something else?

## Data Collection Methods

So, you've decided who to sample—350 women, stratified by geography, age, and economic activity. The next question is: how will you collect data from them?

You're going to need a mix of methods that gives you three things:

1. **Quantitative patterns:** Numbers, trends—how many women are attending, how much is their income
2. **Qualitative depth:** The why, the how, the context, their stories
3. **Multiple perspectives:** Not just the voices of women

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### Methods Available

**Household surveys** Systematic, standardised questions. Great for getting quantitative patterns across large samples and measuring changes over time. Time-efficient in terms of data per person, but they need skilled enumerators to implement.

**In-depth interviews** One-to-one conversations. More time-intensive, but they give you deeper understanding of individual experiences, barriers, and motivations. Interviews can capture nuances that surveys miss.

**Focus group discussions** Bringing 6–15 people together. Very efficient for exploring shared experiences and group dynamics. Can be great for controversial topics—if facilitated well.

**Observation** Watching what actually happens versus what people say happens. Seeing what's really happening in the market, for example. Really good for verifying practices and understanding context.

**Document review** Existing records like savings group ledgers, meeting attendance sheets, market sales data. More objective—no recall bias—but only captures what's actually being documented.

**Key informant interviews** Different from in-depth interviews because here we're selecting key informants: community leaders, husbands, teachers, local officials. This gives us multiple perspectives beyond the beneficiary group itself.

**Most Significant Change** Participants themselves identify and explain their most important change as a result of the program. Can give powerful stories, but harder to draw out common themes or aggregate the data.

**Case studies** Deep dives into a specific individual, savings group, or village. Rich in detail, but hard to generalise from.



## **The Reality**

You have a limited budget. You can't do everything.

Think about which methods you would prioritise for this program—and why.

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## **Reflection Questions**

1. For a program you're working on now, which of these methods are you using? Which are you missing—and what blind spots might that create?
2. Are you capturing multiple perspectives (not just beneficiaries), or is your data mostly one-sided? Who else should you be hearing from?
3. If you had to cut one method from your current evaluation plan due to budget, which would it be? What would you lose by cutting it?

# Evaluation Design

Here we have a combination of methods:

- Household surveys
- In-depth interviews
- Focus groups
- Documentation review of savings groups
- Interviews with husbands and family members
- Key informant interviews

It's a broad range of methods—quite sophisticated. Let's focus on some of the key design choices that will be important later.

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## Household Surveys: Longitudinal Tracking

We have household surveys at **five points**: baseline, Month 6, Month 12, Month 18, and Month 24.

This is longitudinal. It means we can track change across two full agricultural cycles, rather than just getting a before-and-after snapshot. We'll be asking about income, spending, and decision-making—the quantitative patterns.

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## In-Depth Interviews: Strategic Depth

The in-depth interviews come at key moments: Month 6, 12, 18, and 24.

This is where we want to understand **why** the numbers are changing. We don't have an interview at baseline because there's no change yet to explore. We're interviewing 30 women per round—a deep dive into barriers and changes. This gives us the qualitative depth.

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## Focus Groups: Learning from Failure

The focus groups, especially with dropouts, allow us to **learn from failure**.

It's not just for the women who stayed. This is for the women who left—so they can tell us what's not working, or what's needed to bring them back. These happen at Month 6, 12, and 18.

The real focus for the focus groups is those who have dropped out.

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### **Savings Records: Catching Problems Early**

We have ongoing monitoring of savings records, reviewed monthly where savings groups exist. We're not waiting until the end to see if women are actually saving—we can catch problems early.

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### **Husband and Family Interviews: Waiting for Real Change**

When it comes to husbands and family interviews, we're delaying until **Month 12**.

We want to wait until there's actual household change to be discussed. So that's Month 12, 18, and 24. We've identified 20 households, and those 20 will be stratified geographically and by participant type—we want all levels of perspective.

Why not baseline? At baseline, all we can ask is "How do you feel about your wife's participation?" The husband may say, "I guess I'm fine with it." But at Month 12, we can say: "Your wife is now earning 6,000 Kenyan shillings more per month. How has that changed things in your household?"

That's where we get the real stories. **We don't interview about change before it happens—we wait until there's something real to discuss.**

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### **Key Informant Interviews: Community Perspective**

Village leaders are interviewed four times throughout—Month 6, 12, 18, and 24. Their view on community-level effects matters. Not just midpoint and end.

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### **The Difference**

That's the difference between a **checkbox evaluation** and a **learning system**.

Every method has a purpose. Every timing is strategic. Every sample size is deliberate.

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### **Tying Methods to Questions**

We know who we're sampling (350 women, stratified by geography). We know how we're collecting data (surveys, interviews, focus groups, record review). Now the critical question: what exactly should we measure?

Let's go back to the evaluation questions—this is what we'll be looking for:

**Did income increase?** Measure monthly income levels. Track at baseline, Month 6, 12, 18, 24. Watch the trend.

### Other data points we're tracking:

- Decision-making power (through interviews and husband's perspective)
- Savings amounts (through secondary data/records)
- Barriers faced (from focus groups and interviews)
- Business activities (from documentation, records, and household surveys)

All of the methods tie back to the original questions.

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### The Complete Design

- **Stratified sampling** to catch geographic patterns: accessible, moderate, remote
  - **Mixed methods:** surveys for numbers; interviews and focus groups for the "why"; records review for triangulation
  - **Data points that answer your questions:** income and decision-making for primary questions; business activities, time use, and barriers for understanding what works for whom and why
  - **Regular touchpoints:** we're not waiting until Month 24 to discover problems
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### Reflection Questions

1. Look at your current evaluation timeline. Are you collecting data at strategic moments when change has actually happened—or just at convenient intervals?
2. Does your evaluation design include a method specifically for learning from dropouts or non-participants? If not, what uncomfortable truths might you be missing?
3. How many of your methods tie directly back to your evaluation questions? Are there any methods you're using out of habit rather than purpose?

# Adaptive Management in Practice

## Month 6: Reality Hits

It's now six months into the program, and reality hits.

The field coordinator sends you this email:

"Attendance is all over the place. In some villages, it's 75–80%—that's great. But in others, it's more like 30–45%—that's concerning. Dropouts are increasing, and we're starting to hear complaints about husband resistance: 'Why do you need this? You belong at home. Who is going to take care of the children if you are at these meetings?'"

As the MEAL manager, this is your program to evaluate—and also to adapt. The field coordinator is waiting for your guidance.

**So what's your first move? What's one action you would take or prioritise immediately?**

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### Investigating the Patterns

You decide to investigate patterns, talk to dropouts, and disaggregate by village type. Here's what you discover:

#### Attendance by village type:

- Market-accessible villages: 78% — that's strong
  - Moderate access villages: 68% — acceptable
  - Remote villages: 42% — that's a crisis
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### Why Are They Dropping Out?

**Time commitment (almost half):** One woman tells you: "I wake up at 5am to fetch water, get the children ready for school, do farm work until noon. Right now the maize needs weeding or we'll lose the harvest. Then there's cooking, cleaning, and a sick relative. I can't give three hours twice a week. It's impossible."

**Husband resistance (around one third):** One woman says her husband asked her, "Why do you need this? You belong at home with the children." She couldn't find an answer to satisfy him.

**Illness or family emergency (some):** A sick child, death in the family, or personal illness.

**Not seeing benefits (8%):** "We're learning about budgets, but we still can't pay our school fees."

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## The Hard Part of Adaptive Management

Now you have limited resources. You can't solve everything at once.

This is one of the hardest parts of adaptive management. You can see multiple problems clearly, but you can't fix all of them at the same time.

You are forced to choose:

- Which barrier matters most?
- Which adaptation will have the biggest impact?
- Which problem, if left unsolved, could derail the entire program?

There's no universally correct answer, but some choices can save the program and some could quietly kill it.

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## What Should You Prioritise?

- Adjusting the training schedule to reduce time burden?
  - Adding male engagement to address husband resistance?
  - Adding mobile training in remote areas to improve access?
  - Improving communication about early benefits?
  - Or do nothing—wait and see?
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## Your Adaptation Decision

You prioritise and pilot three things:

### 1. Flexible scheduling

- 7am sessions for women who need to finish farm work before the heat
- 2pm sessions for mothers after school drop-off
- 90 minutes instead of three hours—shorter but more frequent, so women can still get home to take care of other responsibilities

### 2. Childcare support

In three pilot villages, either have women watch each other's children, or use a small budget to hire a local grandmother. It's within your flexibility.

### 3. Male engagement

In villages where women are already succeeding, start bringing husbands together. Let them hear from other men: "My wife bought a goat with her savings." "We're sending our daughter to school." "This money helps with the school fees."

Start this in market-accessible villages where you have the highest likelihood of success and lowest risk—just to see what works in engaging men.

**Notice what you didn't do:** You didn't try to solve everything everywhere at once. You're piloting. And you're starting the male engagement where you already have momentum.

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### **Adaptive Management: The Principle**

Before we look at Month 12 results, let's talk about adaptive management—because this is what MEAL makes possible.

The traditional approach says: create a plan, implement the plan, and wait until the end to evaluate. The problem is that reality never matches the plan.

**Adaptive management says:** Create a plan with the best available evidence, then monitor continuously during implementation. Document your adaptations and your rationale for why you adapted.

As a MEAL practice, what we've just done:

- **Monitor:** We captured attendance dropping in remote villages
- **Evaluate:** We investigated why through focus groups
- **Adapt:** Based on evidence—flexible scheduling, childcare support, male engagement
- **Learn:** Document what worked, what didn't, and why

**The key principle:** Your plan is your hypothesis. Monitoring tests that hypothesis. You need to be willing to adapt when evidence says your hypothesis was wrong.

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### **Month 9 Results**

After the adaptations:

- Market-accessible villages: 78% → 82%
- Moderate access villages: 68% → 71%
- Remote villages: 42% → 58%

That's significant improvement. The adaptations are working. Male engagement is starting to show results.

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### Reflection Questions

1. Think about a time when monitoring data showed your program wasn't working as planned. Did you adapt based on evidence—or push harder with the original approach?
2. When you face multiple problems at once, how do you decide which to prioritise? Do you have a framework, or does it happen ad hoc?
3. Is your current program designed to catch problems at Month 6—or would you only discover them at endline when it's too late to respond?

# Data Quality & Triangulation

## Month 9: Data Quality Crisis

It's Month 9, and there's a data quality crisis.

Your data analyst has reviewed the Month 6 data, and there are some problems.

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### Problem 1: Inconsistent Baseline Reporting

Some women are now saying they had a higher baseline than they reported at the beginning. For example, a woman said 6,000 per month at baseline, but now—6 months later—she's saying it was actually 22,000.

#### Why does this happen?

- Women interviewed in front of their husbands may report a different baseline than they would privately
  - Seasonal income confusion
  - Not wanting to look like a failure to program staff
  - Recall bias or poor memory—not remembering whether something was 3,000 a week or 3,000 a month
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### Problem 2: Implausible Increases

Some increases seem much too high. One woman says she had a 300% increase in income in 6 months. What's happening there?

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### Problem 3: Inconsistent Reporting Units

One woman says she earns 3,000 per week. Another says 12,000 per month. Another says 50,000 per harvest season. Your enumerators wrote all of these down, and now you can't compare them.

This threatens your entire evaluation.

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### The Pressure

As the MEAL manager, your data analyst is waiting for your decision. The donor needs your Month 6 report in 10 days. You can't just report questionable numbers, and you can't throw out 6 months of data collection.

#### What would you do?

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## Response 1: Triangulation

Do quick cross-checks using other data sources.

**Check savings group records:** If women say income increased 50%, their monthly savings deposits should show some increase too. A quick scan of ledgers can take an afternoon, not weeks.

**Spot-check with husbands:** Not all 350 women—pick 15–20 households where the survey data looks suspicious. Ask whether their wife's income has changed. Get some corroboration.

We're not doing a full secondary study. We're just checking if the survey data smells right before we rely on it for decisions.

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## What Triangulation Revealed

### The savings records tell the real story:

- Women claiming 300% increase: savings deposits actually show 15–20% growth
- Women saying "no change": savings actually increased by around 10%

The directional trend is real—income is increasing. But the self-reported survey numbers are inflated and noisy. **The direction is reliable, but the exact percentage is not yet trustworthy.**

### Interviews with outliers explained the confusion:

- "I thought you meant how much I earned this week"—and it was a seasonal peak
- The enumerator wrote down "per month" when she said 3,000 per week
- "My mother-in-law was listening—I didn't want to sound too big-headed"

**The conclusion:** The programme is delivering income growth, roughly 15–25% so far. But the self-reported survey numbers are inflated and noisy.

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## Response 2: Standardisation

The problem: One woman says 3,000 a week, one says 12,000 a month, one says 50,000 per harvest season. Your enumerators are writing all of these down and you can't compare them.

### Create a laminated visual aid chart:

- If you earn per week, multiply by 4
- If you earn per harvest, divide by 3

Enumerators can show women how to convert everything to monthly.

### Change the question:

From: "What is your income?"

To: "Thinking about the last 30 days, approximately how much did you earn?"

Now everyone is answering about the same time frame.

### From Month 12 onward, add proxy questions:

- "How much did you add to your savings last month?"
- "How much did you spend on key items such as rice, cooking oil, education?"

These give you proxy indicators that are much harder to exaggerate.

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## Understanding Data Quality Problems

### Three common data quality problems:

**Recall bias:** People don't remember income accurately, especially over 6 or more months. Memory is unreliable for financial details.

**Social desirability bias:** Participants tell you what they think you want to hear—often something positive about the programme, perhaps because they're afraid support might stop. They may claim successes that don't exist.

The mirror of this: when others are present, she may inflate numbers to look good in front of peers, or deflate numbers in front of her husband—to not threaten him, or even to protect her savings.

**Measurement error:** Inconsistent definitions. One enumerator defines income differently to another. One records weekly, one records monthly.

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## Triangulation as the Solution

We don't rely on a single data source or single method.

### Cross-check:

- Surveys with administrative records
- Self-reporting with third-party observations
- Quantitative data with qualitative insights

**When multiple sources point to the same conclusion:** confidence increases.

**When sources diverge:** that's your signal to investigate.

In this case, the survey data was questionable, the savings records were reliable, and these validated the trend.

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## The Key Principle

"One data source is a claim. Two sources of data are evidence. Three sources of data are confidence."

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## Reflection Questions

1. Think about income or outcome data you've collected recently. How confident are you that it's accurate? What would happen if you triangulated it against another source?
2. Are your data collection tools standardised enough that different enumerators would record the same answer the same way? Have you tested this?
3. When have you reported numbers that you suspected were inflated or unreliable? What would have changed if you had triangulated before reporting?

## Mid-Term Evaluation

It's Month 12. Mid-term evaluation.

You've been monitoring continuously, adapting, fixing data quality. Now it's time to step back at this midpoint and assess.

You analyse your 350-woman stratified sample. Remember, we sampled proportionally from accessible, moderate, and remote villages.

What we find changes everything.

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### Disaggregation Reveals Astonishing Differences

**Market-accessible villages (within 30 minutes of market):** Women are actually exceeding the target pace. They are doing enormously well.

Women who were earning 18,000 shillings per month are now earning almost 25,000. That's the difference between sending one child to secondary school and sending all your children.

Between one meal a day and two. Between affording medication when children get sick and watching them suffer.

**Moderate access villages (urban-adjacent areas):** Acceptable progress. Women who were earning 20,000 are now earning almost 24,000. It's not dramatic, but it's enough to buy school uniforms without borrowing, enough to fix a leaking roof. They look on track to hit target by Month 24.

**Remote villages:** Crisis. They are being left behind.

An increase of 8%—from 15,000 to around 16,000 shillings—barely covers inflation. These women are working just as hard, but geography is defeating them.

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## Why Stratified Sampling Matters

Remember earlier when we chose stratified sampling? This is why.

If we'd used random sampling, we might have gotten 217 women from accessible villages, 105 from moderate, and maybe only 28 from remote—just by chance.

We'd have seen 20% overall progress and thought: "We're a bit behind, but we're doing okay. We're on track to meet the target by Month 24."

We could have published a report with zero idea that remote women were being left behind.

**With stratified sampling, we see the pattern:** 35%, 18%, and then—in the distance—8%.

Now you know. You have a remote village crisis that is pulling down your average.

The problem isn't the program. We're seeing that it works. **The problem is geography.**

Sampling isn't academic. It's the difference between seeing patterns and missing them entirely.

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## The Women's Words Confirm the Numbers

In remote villages, they're telling you loud and clear:

"I want this training, but the transport costs eat up two days' profit."

"I sell my vegetables 15 kilometres away because the local market is too small and prices are too low."

These aren't excuses. These are the exact geographic and social barriers that your stratified data has exposed.

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## The Strategic Decision

So the question is: what are you going to do about it?

You're at a crossroads. You have evidence of profound inequality—some women succeeding wildly, while others are barely making any progress.

As the MEAL manager, this isn't just a measurement question anymore. It's a strategic program decision.

- Do you revise your targets to reflect reality?
- Do you shift resources towards equity over efficiency?
- Do you double down on what's working?
- Or do you rescue what's struggling?

This is the moment where MEAL data forces uncomfortable conversations about program theory, donor expectations, and what success actually means.

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## Your Options

1. **Revise down the 40% target**—say it was too ambitious
  2. **Add targeted intervention for remote villages only**
  3. **Shift resources** away from urban areas and focus on remote areas
  4. **Continue as planned**—either it's too early or too late to change
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## Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever reported an "average" result that hid significant variation between groups? What might you have discovered if you had disaggregated?
2. When your data reveals inequality—some groups succeeding while others are left behind—how do you decide whether to double down on what's working or rescue what's struggling? What factors inform that decision?
3. Think about a current or recent program. If you disaggregated results by geography, gender, age, or another factor, what patterns might emerge that you're currently not seeing?

# Disaggregating Data to Inform Targeted Adjustments

## Your Month 12 Decisions

Here are your decisions:

### 1. Revise the target down from 40% to 35%

It may be a hard sell for donors, but you have the evidence to explain why 40% may not be achievable in the next 12 months.

This is not because you are failing. Evidence shows that market access is a structural constraint that you cannot realistically eliminate in the remaining 12 months.

### 2. Targeted interventions for remote villages

- Mobile markets: Bring buyers directly to remote villages so women don't have to travel 4 hours each way
- Transport vouchers: Motorcycle vouchers so women can get their eggs to market before they spoil in the heat

### 3. Keep the momentum in accessible villages

Don't take resources away from villages that are succeeding. The success in accessible villages proves that the model works—so we learn from them.

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## Understanding Disaggregation

Disaggregation means breaking down your data by meaningful subgroups instead of just reporting averages.

Without disaggregation, you report an overall average and problems of equity are invisible.

With disaggregation, you see the pattern—35%, 18%, 8% by location. It becomes obvious where you need to intervene, and you can report more honestly on equity.

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## What to Disaggregate By

**Geography:** Urban, urban-adjacent, and remote areas. Consider factors like market access.

**Demographics:** Gender, age, education, disability.

**Identity:** Ethnicity, indigenous status, refugee versus host community, and so on.

Most development programs will disaggregate at least by gender. But **best practice is to disaggregate by factors that might create different experiences or outcomes.**

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## **The Key Principle**

Averages hide inequity. Always disaggregate.

### **A tip for reporting to donors:**

When you report an overall average—such as "35% overall"—disaggregate to show:

- Who benefited most
- Who was left behind
- What you are doing about it

Donors respect honest assessment much more than inflated numbers that hide problems.

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## **Month 14 Progress Check**

In the remote villages, the targeted interventions are working. Mobile markets and transport vouchers have doubled their progress—from 8% up to 14%.

You're now on track to hit the revised 35% target.

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## **Reflection Questions**

1. When you report results to donors, do you disaggregate to show who benefited most and who was left behind? Or do you rely on averages that might hide inequality?
2. What factors create different experiences or outcomes in your current program? Are you disaggregating by those factors—or only by the standard categories like gender?
3. Have you ever had to revise a target based on evidence? How did you present that to donors—as failure, or as honest learning about structural constraints?

# Crisis Management & Unintended Consequences

## Month 14: Cultural Crisis

It's Month 14, and now we're facing a cultural crisis.

A field officer calls from Village 7. A group of husbands and male elders have showed up at a training. They're not aggressive, but they are firm. They're saying they need to discuss concerns.

### What they're saying:

"We respect the development and the program, but not at the expense of our families."

"Women are coming home with new ideas, questioning everything."

One elder says:

"My daughter-in-law asked me about the household budget. She wanted to know how much we spend on school fees and on food. This has never happened before. It's disrespectful."

Another says:

"Who decided that women should spend three hours away from home twice a week? The evening meal is late. The children are asking where is their mother?"

Two women have already withdrawn from the training. Others appear scared.

This is a delicate situation.

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### What Makes This Complicated

Development programs often disrupt existing power structures. Women gain economic independence and household dynamics shift. Sometimes that shift is liberating. Sometimes it creates genuine conflict.

You're not just facing a program management problem. You're navigating competing values:

- Women's agency versus family harmony
- Program goals versus community acceptance
- Individual rights versus collective culture

**And here is the MEAL challenge:** How do you even evaluate this?

Is household tension a negative unintended consequence—or a necessary part of transformation? Whose perspective counts?

There is no easy answer, but you do have to respond.

## Your Response Options

1. **Continue the program as designed**—change is necessary and change is hard
2. **Pause the program in that village** until tensions calm
3. **Investigate deeper** before deciding
4. **Engage male leaders** in a dialogue about the benefits
5. **Scale back** women's involvement—training hours and session timing—to a level husbands approve of

Whatever you choose, you need information fast.

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### Investigation: Separate Conversations

We don't react immediately. We investigate.

Begin with separate conversations: women alone, men separately, village leaders, the women who dropped out.

#### Multiple perspectives to understand:

- What do women actually want?
- What are men really afraid of?
- Is this about household duties or power?

#### Assess the scope:

- Is this isolated to this village?
  - Are there early signs elsewhere?
  - What differentiates villages with tensions from those without?
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## **What You Learn**

### **From women:**

- Most want to continue
- Some feel genuinely pressured
- Some are using their husbands as an excuse because the training is hard
- Some are afraid of social isolation
- Some want male support and engagement, but are afraid to ask directly

### **From men:**

- Real concerns about household management—not just about control
- Some are curious after seeing benefits in neighbours' households, but defensive about admitting it
- Most are open to dialogue—as long as they feel respected rather than lectured

### **From local leaders:**

- They see the economic benefits but worry about social stability
- They don't want to oppose progress
- They want solutions that honour tradition while allowing space for growth and change

**This isn't about good guys versus bad guys. It's about social change colliding with cultural norms.**

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## Your Adaptation: Three Approaches

**1. Community dialogues** Joint sessions facilitated by local leaders. Focus on shared goals: family wellbeing, children's education. Acknowledge concerns respectfully.

### 2. Practical accommodations

- Flexible scheduling that respects household responsibilities
- Couple-based financial planning
- Success testimonials from men whose families have benefited
- Reframe the project: not just "women's economic empowerment" but "family economic empowerment"

**3. Safe exit** Don't be hard-headed, insisting everybody has to participate no matter what. Women can leave without shame or embarrassment. The door stays open if they want to come back. We don't force participation.

**This is not compromise. This is cultural competence.**

We are doing a difficult balancing act: promoting change while still respecting the pace that communities can handle.

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## Understanding Unintended Consequences

An NGO in Nepal installed water pumps to save women the three or four hours a day they spent fetching water. They succeeded—they freed up women's time. But this had various unintended consequences:

**Positive unintended consequence:** Women started using the extra time for small income-generating activities. Incomes went up by 25%. This wasn't in the logframe, wasn't planned—but it was a positive benefit.

**Neutral unintended consequence:** Women didn't have to fetch water early in the morning anymore. It became more common to collect water in the evening instead.

**Negative unintended consequence:** Loss of a safe space where women could talk freely. The water collection point was where they shared domestic troubles, arranged marriages, sought advice about struggles or even domestic abuse. It was their space—and suddenly it was gone. Women became more isolated and lost a valuable support network.

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## How to Catch Unintended Consequences

**Expand your evaluation questions:** Ask things like "What else has changed in your life?"

**Talk to others beyond direct beneficiaries:** Not just women, but men, elders, children. In economic empowerment programs: husbands and village leaders.

**Look beyond your indicators:** Create spaces for honest and open feedback.

**Report the full picture:** Good and bad.

"If you only measure what you planned, you can miss what actually happened."

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## Reflection Questions

1. Think about a program you've worked on. Were there unintended consequences—positive, neutral, or negative—that you only discovered late, or never captured at all? How might you have caught them earlier?
2. When your program creates cultural tension or resistance, how do you decide whether to push through, adapt, or pause? What information do you need to make that decision?
3. Who are you NOT talking to in your current evaluation? Whose perspective might reveal something important that you're missing?

## Capturing & Learning from Success Stories

In Month 16, a success story emerges from the Mbale cluster.

You receive a message from your field coordinator about an unexpected success in Village 3, where women organised themselves.

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### How It Happened

It started with three women sharing a motorcycle taxi to market one Thursday.

One suggested: "What if we all go on the same day and split costs?"

This evolved into: "What if we put our money together and buy chicken feed in bulk?"

Then it became: "What if we take turns going to market and one person sells for the group?"

**Now there are 12 women in the cooperative.** They have rotating market duty. They're bulk buying feed. And when 12 women show up saying "We need 200 kilograms of chicken feed," the suppliers drop the price by 15%.

Each woman saves 2,000 shillings per month on transport alone.

**Result: 52% income increase for this cooperative.**

We didn't plan this cooperative model. We didn't train them on it. They created it themselves.

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### What Made It Work?

**Pre-existing trust:** The 12 women were already neighbours. They fetched water together. Their kids played together. The trust was already established.

**Cultural memory:** One woman remembered watching her mother do something similar 30 years ago. She said, "My mother's group saved enough to send three girls to school." She knew it could work.

**Community support:** Their village elder supported it. He said in a community meeting: "When women help each other, the whole village benefits."

**Geography:** Being close to market helped—30 minutes by motorcycle.

**The real breakthrough:** deciding to do it together.

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### Learning and Replication

As the MEAL manager, you document this and share it with other villages.

We're not going to force it. But if we share it, we see that some villages adopt variations—whether that's bulk buying, rotating who goes to market, or sharing transport.

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## Unplanned Ripple Effects

Something else started happening quietly. Nothing you trained for. Nothing in the logframe or the MEAL plan.

**Girls' education:** Mothers who suddenly had an extra 2,000 or 4,000 shillings a month looked at their daughters and said: "If I can learn at 35, she's finishing secondary school."

School fees got paid. Uniforms got bought.

By Month 20, you were seeing girls who would have dropped out at Class 7 now sitting for their Form 4 exams. In one village, three girls are already preparing for university.

**Village leadership:** Seven of the women you trained are now elected committee members. You never trained them for that—they just stepped up.

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## The Key Learning

The most powerful changes weren't in your logframe. They emerged from participants themselves when you gave them skills, resources, and space to innovate.

**Document these. Share these. Learn from these.**

Sometimes the best outcomes are the ones you didn't plan for.

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## Reflection Questions

1. Has your program ever produced unexpected positive outcomes that weren't in the logframe? Did you capture and document them—or did they go unreported?
2. When participants innovate beyond your program design, how do you respond? Do you try to systematise it, share it with others, or just observe?
3. Are you creating space in your evaluation for participants to tell you about changes you didn't ask about? How might you do this more intentionally?

## Final Evaluation

It is now final evaluation time.

You have lived through 24 months of reality:

- Geographic inequality that you did not anticipate
- Data quality problems that you had to solve urgently
- Cultural tensions that weren't in your theory of change
- Organic innovation that exceeded your planned interventions

**If you could go back to Month 0 and redesign your evaluation approach, knowing everything you now know, what would you do differently?**

Perhaps:

- More flexibility to capture unintended effects
- More emphasis on multi-stakeholder perspectives
- More frequent adaptation checkpoints—so we're not reacting to crisis, but tracking the project as it unfolds and catching things early

At Month 0, some people might have planned for a baseline survey, Month 24 endline, compare income. Now we know that's not enough.

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## What Matters Now?

### Sustainability:

- Will those savings groups continue?
- Will cooperatives last?
- Does income persist after support ends?

### Context:

- What worked, where, and why?
- Can we replicate those success factors?

### Unintended effects:

- Positive (girls' education)
- Negative (tensions we managed in Village 7)

### Process learning:

- What adaptations worked and why?
  - What does that mean for scaling?
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## Final Results at Month 24

### Overall income increase: 34%

We did not hit 40%. We didn't even hit 35%, the revised target. We got 34%.

### By geography:

- Market-accessible villages: More than half of women exceeded the target
- Moderate access villages: A little behind
- Remote villages: Still quite a way to go

**Financial decision-making:** 68% of women participants now making joint decisions with their husbands about major expenses—up from 35%. Here, we exceeded the target.

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## What Worked

**Skills training** was effective everywhere, in all locations.

**Savings groups** were sustainable—88% still active at program end.

**Mobile markets** added 12 percentage points in remote areas.

**Cooperatives** that formed organically saw up to 52% income increase in some villages.

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## What Didn't Work

**Market access** remained the primary barrier in remote areas.

**Time burdens** for women increased—suggests they need better household support.

**Cultural tensions** didn't disappear—they need ongoing dialogue.

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## Unintended Positive Consequences

- **Girls' school enrollment up 18%**—mothers using extra income specifically for school fees
  - 47 girls who would have stayed home are now in school
  - In one village, three girls are in their final year preparing for university
  - **7 women elected to village leadership**
  - **Peer learning networks** forming beyond program design
  - **Men's engagement groups** continuing independently in three villages
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## Unintended Negative Consequences (Managed)

- Household conflict around the program was reduced by the end through targeted dialogue
  - However, social pressure in more traditional communities does persist
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## **The Complete Story**

We didn't hit 40%. We hit 34%.

But what we have is a complete story of what worked, what didn't, and why.

**We don't say to our donor:** "Sorry, we missed our target."

**We say:** "Here's what we achieved. Here's what we learned. Here's what it means for future programming."

**That's MEAL in practice done right.**

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## **Reflection Questions**

1. If you could redesign your current or most recent evaluation knowing what you know now, what would you do differently? What did you learn too late?
2. When you report to donors, do you present a complete story—what worked, what didn't, and why—or just the headline numbers? How might a fuller narrative change the conversation?
3. What unintended consequences—positive or negative—has your program produced that you only discovered at the end? How might you have caught them earlier?

## Review & Reflection

We've just been through 24 months of project experience.

**Month 0:** Stratified sampling gave us an insurance policy against missing patterns.

**Month 6:** We caught the attendance crisis early and adapted based on evidence.

**Month 9:** We validated through triangulation, saving the credibility of the project.

**Month 12:** The disaggregated results of the mid-term evaluation revealed patterns, allowing for more strategic adaptation and more targeted intervention.

**Month 14:** We saw a cultural crisis, which we navigated through multi-stakeholder investigation and a nuanced response.

**Month 16:** We captured an organic innovation that wasn't even in the original plan.

**Month 24:** A comprehensive evaluation captured the complete story—the outcomes, the context, the unintended effects, and the lessons learned.

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### What Made the Difference?

You used MEAL as a tool for **adaptive management**, not just donor reporting.

It was **practical, not performative**.

We collected data and **used it to make real-time decisions**.

In every case, we **investigated before responding**, rather than reacting.

And we **communicated complexity honestly**, instead of oversimplifying.

**That's MEAL in practice.**

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### Your Commitment

Hopefully, you will apply everything you learned in this training over time.

But right now, commit to taking **one thing** that you learned in this training and actually using it this month.

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Thank you for joining this course, for engaging with the challenges, and for caring about getting MEAL right.

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### Final Reflection Questions

1. Looking back at the full journey—from sampling design through final evaluation—which moment or decision point was most relevant to challenges you face in your own work?
2. What is the **one thing** from this course you will commit to implementing this month? Be specific: what will you do differently on Monday?
3. How will you know if your MEAL practice has shifted from "performative" to "practical"? What would be different in how you collect data, make decisions, or communicate with stakeholders?