INVESTING IN MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

ISSUES FOR NGOS TO CONSIDER

Written by ITAD, in association
with nef Consulting, and
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Big Lottery Fund

Big Lottery Fund (BIG) is one of the largest grant making organisations in the UK and is responsible for distributing 40 per cent of all funds raised for good causes by the National Lottery. BIG distributes funds to both UK and International charities, voluntary and community sector organisations.

Bond

As the UK membership body for international development organisations, Bond contributes to ending global poverty by influencing governments and policy-makers, building organisational effectiveness and developing the skills of people, and supporting organisations to connect, collaborate and exchange knowledge and expertise.

Comic Relief

Comic Relief is a major grant making charity based in the UK which gives grants to both UK and International charities, with the aim of bringing an end to global poverty.

DFID

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the ministerial department leading the UK's work to end extreme poverty.

NIDOS

NIDOS is the network in Scotland that unites the international development sector to promote effectiveness and collectively influence the policy agenda.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This study was commissioned by Comic Relief, DFID, Big Lottery Fund, NIDOS and Bond to address the lack of evidence available to support NGOs working in international development in deciding what resources to commit to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). The study focused on understanding the full investment that NGOs are making on MEL, the kinds of MEL systems that NGOs have, and how NGOs use and value their MEL systems. It did not test the quality of data that MEL systems are producing or the appropriateness of any resulting strategic or operational decisions, but relied on the NGO self-reporting on how appropriate, accurate, useful and effective they considered their MEL systems to be. As such, this study should be considered a starting point for a broader discussion between NGOs, donors and funders about the role and costs of MEL at both an organisational and project level.

The study used three sources of data: seven case-studies of NGOs known to have invested in MEL; a survey to which 77 responses from Bond members were received; and, financial analysis of 90 project budgets from three Comic Relief funding cycles.

Summary of findings

We found that many NGOs take MEL very seriously and make considerable investments in it as they see it as a means to improve their work and that of their partners. For most NGOs, their MEL systems are reported to support them in making day-to-day project management decisions with many saying MEL also supports strategic management and learning.

In most cases, existing computer software is used for information management, regardless of the size or kind of NGO. Some NGOs are investing in bespoke systems, which are expensive and take time. Whilst these may be suitable in some situations the study did not show any correlation between bespoke systems and perceived MEL system effectiveness.

The MEL systems that are most useful, according to the NGOs using them, combine long-term relationships with partner NGOs with the ability to do data analysis close to the ground and MEL capacity building of local partners. They also have deep integration of MEL within an NGO head office, ensuring it is perceived as a collective responsibility, and a focus on improving work with beneficiaries and partners, rather than proving effectiveness to donors or external stakeholders.

The study shows that three aspects are important in resourcing and maintaining MEL systems:

1. strategic investment and funding
2. leadership
3. adequate staff capacity

Funding MEL

- The amount NGOs spend on MEL varies enormously; whilst some NGOs report they spend very little, others are spending significant proportions of their overall budgets.
- NGOs fund MEL through project and unrestricted funds on an ongoing basis. MEL activities are normally separated out within project budgets but these budgets frequently do not reflect the full cost of MEL. Indeed NGOs generally spend more on MEL activities than they budget for or report on. In part, this is due to costs normally located in core costs (such as salaries) and overheads (like database maintenance) not being considered valid MEL costs, but it can also be due to the perception that some funders will not accept the full cost of MEL being included in project budgets, or NGOs themselves not realising the extent of the true costs.
- Whilst most donors will fund at least some of the costs of project MEL, finding funds to develop bespoke systems can be challenging. The case study NGOs also reported that it can be hard to raise funds for MEL capacity building for implementing partners, despite MEL capacity of frontline staff being a challenge.

Leadership

- Significant expenditure on MEL requires leadership buy-in and support. Our case-studies suggest that necessary elements are leadership that: is committed to having a MEL system that supports the needs and aims of the organisation and is prepared to make it a strategic priority; has determined what an appropriate MEL system looks like for their NGO; and, is clear why MEL is important for the organisation.

Staff

- In most NGOs, MEL takes up a considerable proportion of staff time at all levels, time that is often under-recognised in project budgets, though it does tend to be clearly articulated either across many job descriptions or within dedicated MEL roles.
- NGOs find it challenging to ensure adequate MEL capacity at the field level.

Key shortcomings

Whilst the study showed a number of examples of good practice, our findings suggest that there are some key shortcomings in the way that many NGOs are approaching MEL:

- Our case-studies indicated that MEL is most effective when NGOs have thought clearly about their position and role in the aid chain, and those of their partners, and used this to inform the design of MEL systems. The study of Comic Relief funding cycles showed that project applications rarely differentiate between different partners' roles and responsibilities in MEL. If NGOs were to link their MEL systems and what they require of them with their position in the aid chain it would support them to think more systematically about the differing roles of NGOs depending on whether they commission other NGOs to carry out projects with beneficiaries, implement projects directly within communities, or do a mix of the two (we termed these commissioning, implementing and intermediary NGO respectively). It would also help them design their MEL system to help them track and learn how effectively they are carrying out their own particular roles.

- MEL data and systems can support NGOs in project management and accountability, learning and communications at many levels and are often expected to meet multiple needs that are not always well articulated or defined. We found insufficient clarity as to what the key purposes of MEL are for particular organisations. Our study suggests that in many cases the focus of MEL for implementing partners is on meeting the conditions of project funding, for instance, it prioritises the needs of accountability towards donors. Our findings also showed that it is still common for analysis of project data to take place away from those who are implementing or benefiting from the projects, suggesting that accountability and communication to, and learning of, those further up the aid chain remains a higher priority than accountability and communication to, and learning of, beneficiaries and local organisations.
- This dynamic is also reflected in capacity building where most intermediate and commissioning NGOs focus on ensuring that their implementing partners are able to collect the project data required for project management and accountability purposes, rather than considering the MEL needs of implementing partners more broadly.
- Whilst many NGOs collect qualitative data, our case-studies showed that storing and using this remains a key challenge. NGOs appear to find it easier to design management information systems and databases to store and analyse quantitative data. Given the complex nature of the environment that NGOs work in, where change is unlikely to be a linear process, this is a key weakness as qualitative data is an important tool for verifying the relevance of projects and identifying unexpected outcomes.
- The study shows that once all associated costs are taken fully into account, then the actual cost of MEL can be a significant proportion of project or organisational budgets yet we are unable to judge with any certainty whether this investment is producing quality data or whether this is money well spent. In particular we did not find any correlation between bespoke systems (which are expensive to set up and maintain) and effectiveness of MEL systems.
- We found that there are two key issues in the way NGOs budget for MEL. The first is perhaps less significant – costs that should be allocated to MEL are sometimes allocated elsewhere in the project budget. The second is more serious - NGOs are not actually aware of the full cost of MEL and are not budgeting sufficient resources within projects to cover their own or their partners' full staff and overhead costs. Costs that are often under allocated or not recognised include the full cost of staff time in collecting, manipulating and analysing data and the full cost of infrastructure such as databases or computers. If NGOs do not allow sufficient resources within project budgets to cover the full costs of MEL, then project MEL will be either under-resourced to collect the data required or will be subsidised by the NGOs' other resources. For NGOs that rely on project funding, this can undermine their long term sustainability as their central functions become weakened and strained over time. Both issues mean that NGOs are not aware of the full costs of collecting, storing and analysing data and are therefore not able to make an informed assessment as to whether their MEL system is value for money or proportionate.

Implications of the findings

Implications for NGOs

The findings of this study have a number of implications for NGOs to take account of when considering their MEL systems

- **Position in aid chain:** A starting point for designing an efficient and effective MEL system should be to consider the implications of each organisation's role in the aid chain and what this means in terms of what should be measured.
- **Purpose of MEL:** NGOs should be clear when designing MEL systems as to what their main priorities are with regards to the uses of MEL data and at what level, for both themselves and their partners. They then need to ensure that their system works to support these priorities.
- **Budgeting for MEL in joint proposals:** MEL budgets in joint proposals should be clear on which partner will be responsible for what in terms of MEL data collection, storage and analysis and should also consider whether organisations have sufficient capacity to carry out these roles, with any capacity building requirements for either/any party being budgeted for.
- **Understand the full cost of MEL:** NGOs should develop systems that allow them to assess the full cost of MEL so that they can a) judge whether their MEL systems are an optimum and proportionate use of resources given the quality of the data and analysis they are getting out of them and, b) ensure full cost recovery of the projects that they deliver.

Implications for funders

Funders can play their role in supporting effective and efficient MEL by:

- **Being clear on their expectations:** Funders should be clear, and give clear guidance on: What they expect to see in applications with regards to MEL systems for different sizes and kinds of grantee organisations; the kind of costs that should be considered for MEL and the level of detail they want; the level of detail required in applications as to the different roles different partners will play in MEL and how this should be budgeted for; and, the data they require to have reported to them and any expectations they have as to the uses of MEL data for accountability, learning and communication at other levels.
- **Full cost recovery:** Donors should be clear on the cost implications of their expectations for MEL data and be prepared to fund the full costs of this for both UK and overseas partners. This includes taking full account of costs such as staff, capacity building and infrastructure. If they consider these costs to be excessive then they may need to readjust their expectations for MEL data.

Areas for further consideration

This preliminary study has highlighted some areas that merit further consideration either for follow up studies or where it would be worthwhile developing guidance for NGOs:

- **Bespoke systems:** There can be a tendency to consider bespoke MEL systems as better systems. The findings of this study question this assumption. Further work could usefully be carried out to understand under what circumstances bespoke systems are valuable and what is their full cost.
- **Analysing qualitative data:** The study highlighted a large capacity gap in analysing qualitative data despite its wide use for fundraising. Further work could usefully be done to look at simple ways that NGOs can use qualitative data at a more aggregate level.
- **The factors underlying the effectiveness of MEL systems:** This study was only able to take a broad approach to investigating the factors underlying the effectiveness of MEL systems and relied on NGOs self-reporting of how effective and accurate they found their systems to be. A closer look at what factors support MEL systems to be both accurate and useful at different levels of the aid chain could yield some useful insights.
- **Risk in managing data:** The study showed that some NGOs have not fully considered any legal restrictions or data protection issues that there might be on data they collect. Guidance for development NGOs on data management and risk could usefully be developed, drawing on existing guidance from other sectors such as the humanitarian sector.
- **How MEL systems can effectively support learning:** The study of Comic Relief funding cycles found that a common shortcoming was that it was not clear how learning from previous MEL was influencing the design of new projects. How MEL systems can better support learning is a question that is worth investigating further.
- **Data flows:** This study's initial attempts to understand how data flows within MEL systems raise questions that would be useful to examine in more detail to understand their full resource implications.

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS & GLOSSARY OF TERMS

M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
MIS	Management information system
nef	new economics foundation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAM	Project, accountability and monitoring
PICT	Poverty indicators for community transformation
REPSSI	Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative

Case-study NGO: These are the seven NGOs that were reviewed as part of this study. We refer to them as case-study NGOs throughout the report to distinguish them from any other NGO.

Commissioning NGO: These are NGOs that have contracted other NGOs to deliver activities and interventions on the ground on their behalf in a contract or partnership arrangement. Commissioning NGOs may still monitor the activity and provide capacity-building support. A commissioning NGO can receive grants from donors to do this work. A commissioning NGO can be based either in the UK (or anywhere else in the global north) or in the south. In this study, the only commissioning NGOs we have considered as case-study NGOs are based in the UK.

Intermediate NGO: This refers to an NGO based either in the UK (or anywhere in the north) or in the south, that commissions other NGOs to deliver activities on the ground on its behalf in a contract or partnership arrangement, and that also delivers some of its activities directly through its own regional or country offices.

Implementing NGO: This refers to an NGO that implements an activity directly in a community. Implementing NGOs also agree contracts or partnerships with commissioning or intermediate NGOs to deliver work on their behalf. This means the implementing NGO receives support and/or funding and reports back to the commissioning or intermediate NGO on the progress of the activity. Generally, in an international development scenario, an implementing NGO will be based in the south.

MEL system: A monitoring, evaluation and learning system consisting of functional, management and strategic elements that range from data collection tools through to executive management positions and even the board of trustees of an NGO (study team’s own definition).

MIS: A management information system is a system (either paper or electronic) for recording and storing information in a retrievable form. Ideally it should allow for some sort of analysis.

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1. BACKGROUND

When NGOs working in international development decide what resources to commit to MEL, they should base their decisions on evidence that comes from best practice; however there has been a dearth of evidence available to support these decisions. This gap in knowledge was identified by Bond in its work to develop a sector-wide framework of indicators and data collection methods, called the Impact Builder, designed to enable NGOs to demonstrate evidence of their impact more robustly and confidently. The knowledge gap was also clear to Comic Relief, DFID, and the Big Lottery Fund who faced common challenges in understanding and providing guidance on what sort of MEL was appropriate for grantees. The donors perceived that there was a mismatch between what NGOs and donors tell each other and what is potentially possible. Furthermore donors are themselves under pressure to improve the extent to which they are able to report on progress against strategic priorities and, as they rely on grantees to supply the data to do this, they need to know the implications of their reporting expectations.[1]

Bond, Comic Relief, DFID, NIDOS and the Big Lottery Fund therefore jointly commissioned this study in order to gain a better understanding of:

- The key elements of effective and appropriate MEL systems for different types and sizes of UK-based and southern NGOs operating in the international development field
- The costs and challenges associated with developing and maintaining these systems
- The current state of play on these issues for UK-based and southern NGOs

2. METHODOLOGY

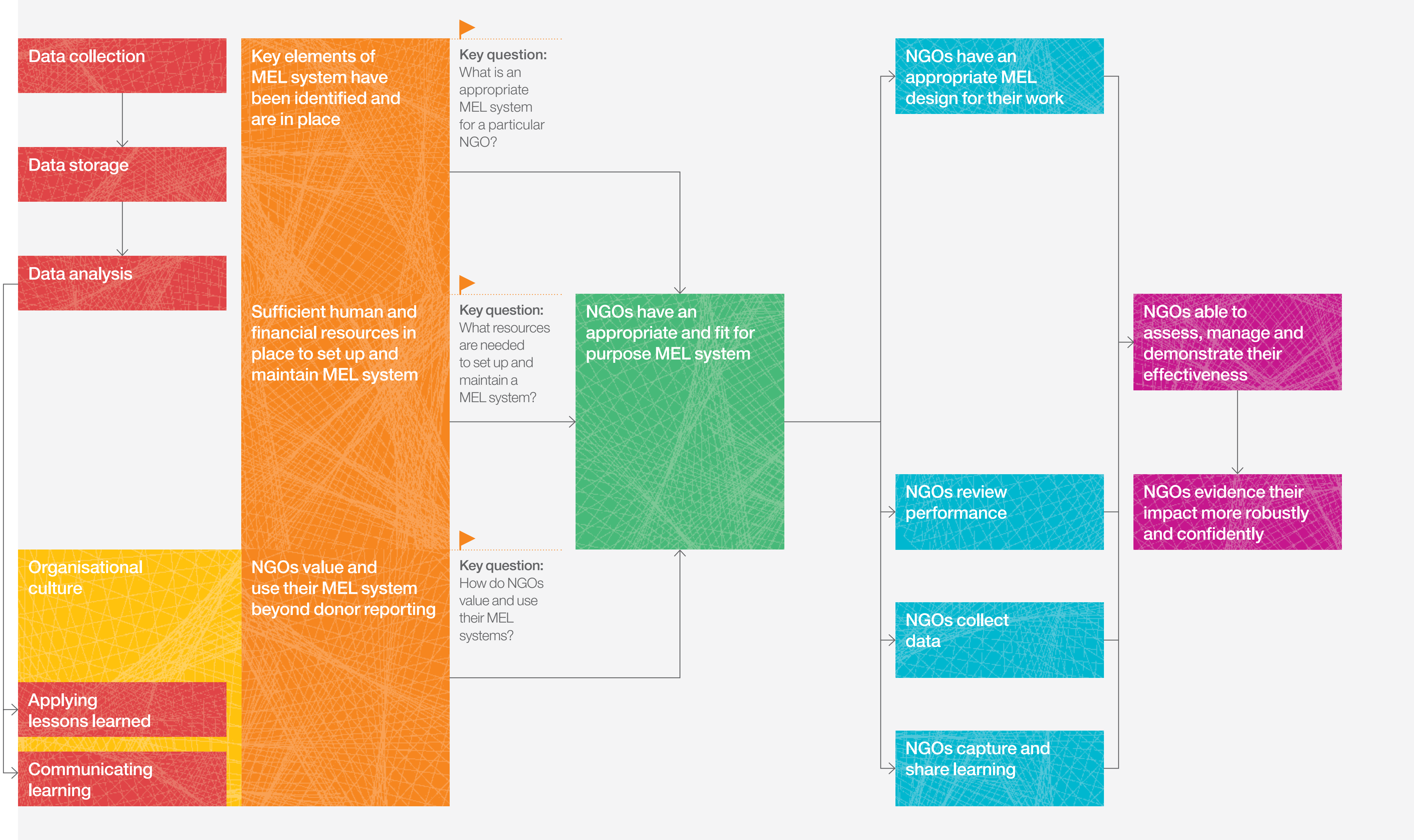
The steering committee, comprising the Big Lottery Fund, Bond, Comic Relief and DFID, commissioned ITAD to undertake this study. Itad put together a team of seven consultants including an economist, a statistician and national consultants in Zambia and Uganda. The study was conducted between September 2012 and January 2013.

2.1. Framework for understanding MEL systems

The study was structured around a framework for understanding MEL systems (see Figure 1) built on the following assumptions:

- An effective and appropriate MEL system requires data to be collected, stored, analysed and used
- Organisational culture will impact on whether NGOs use their MEL system beyond donor reporting
- An effective and appropriate MEL system will allow NGOs to assess, manage and demonstrate their effectiveness

Figure 1: Study framework



Three key questions were derived from this framework that served as a basis for the study:

1. What is an appropriate MEL system for a particular NGO?
2. What resources are needed to set up and maintain a MEL system?
3. How do NGOs value and use their MEL systems?

2.2. Framework for analysing NGOs

For the purpose of this study, NGOs were analysed according to the following as we assumed that each of these would impact on the form an appropriate MEL system would take:

- Size of NGO, with the main focus being on small and medium NGOs as size will impact on the resources available to invest in MEL and influence how complex the MEL system needs to be.
- Their position in the aid chain, in particular their relationship with beneficiaries. Organisations in different positions have different functions and so need MEL systems attuned to assessing their own added value as well as tracking any outcomes or impact of the projects they support.
- How project data is collected as this can affect both how the data and the collection activities are perceived.
- What NGOs want to use data from their MEL system for and at what level as this will also influence MEL design.

Size of NGO

We have used the Bond criteria of:

Small – annual expenditure less than £500,000

Medium – £500 000-£5 million

Large – above £5 million

Their position in the aid chain

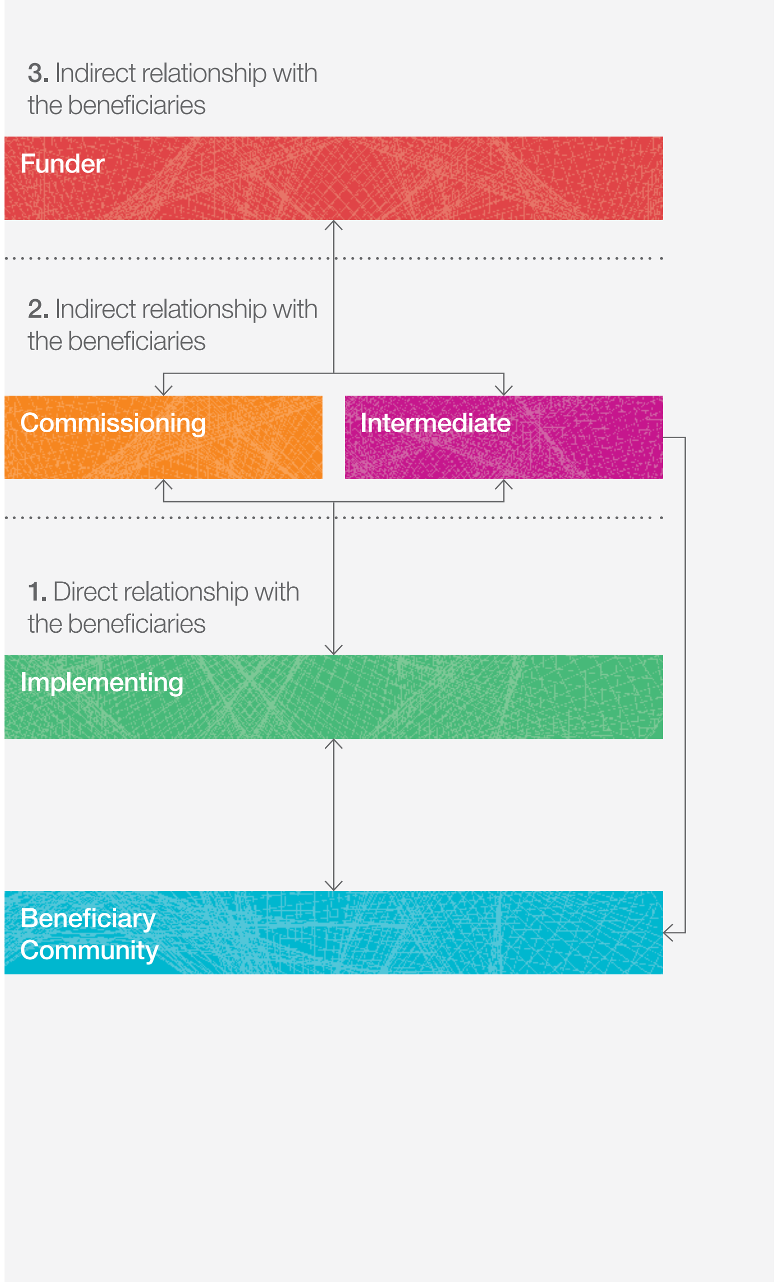
The case-study NGOs were split into the following categories according to their relationship with beneficiaries (see Figure 2)[2]:

Commissioning: an NGO that relies on other NGOs to deliver activities and interventions on the ground on their behalf, whether in a contract or partnership arrangement. Commissioning NGOs monitor the activity and provide capacity building and support to implementing NGOs. A commissioning NGO can receive grants from donors to do this work, and is generally based in the north.

Intermediate: an NGO that commissions other NGOs to deliver activities on the ground on its behalf in a contract or partnership arrangement, but also delivers some of its activities directly through its own regional or country offices. Generally based in the north.

Implementing: an NGO at the grassroots level implementing an activity or project directly in a community. Implementing NGOs may be funded directly or may agree contracts or partnerships with commissioning or intermediate NGOs to deliver work on their behalf, receiving support and/or funding in return and reporting back to that NGO on progress.

Figure 2: Different levels of NGOs and their relationships to beneficiaries



Who collects project data[3]

Project data can be collected directly by an organisation, or it may rely on partners to collect and supply data to it. We differentiate between the following:

Indirect data collection: where the NGO relies on data collected by a partner.

Direct data collection: where the NGO collects the data directly itself.

How data from the MEL system is used

We have split data use into three categories:

Project management and accountability: Project data is collected and shared in order to support the following:

- Day-to-day management of a project
- Monitoring and managing partnerships
- Accountability to beneficiaries and local communities
- Reporting to funders on grant progress and activities according to the original plan

Learning: Project data is used and analysed for learning to feed into strategic development of the organisation's approach including more fundamental changes in a project. Examples would include using data for:

- Learning for project, organisational and/or strategic development
- Identifying changes that projects and interventions have resulted in for learning purposes

Communication: Project data is used for broader purposes that go beyond learning within the organisations that have funded, commissioned or implemented the project. Examples of this would include:

- Demonstrating how the organisation is contributing to change for fundraising purposes
- Sharing information with others for advocacy purposes to achieve wider influence
- Accountability to funders including the public, taxpayers and the government

Accountability, learning and communications can happen at different levels by a range of different people. Thus, MEL can be designed so that the beneficiaries themselves are involved in a way that supports the development of their own critical thinking and learning, and the use of any resulting data for their own advocacy communication purposes. Likewise accountability can be interrogated by the questions: 'Who is accountable? For what? Towards whom?' Answers to these questions can range from accountability of a commissioning NGO towards a donor for implementing the project agreed on, to accountability of an implementing NGO towards the communities it works in, with a whole range of other permutations possible.

2.3. Data Collection

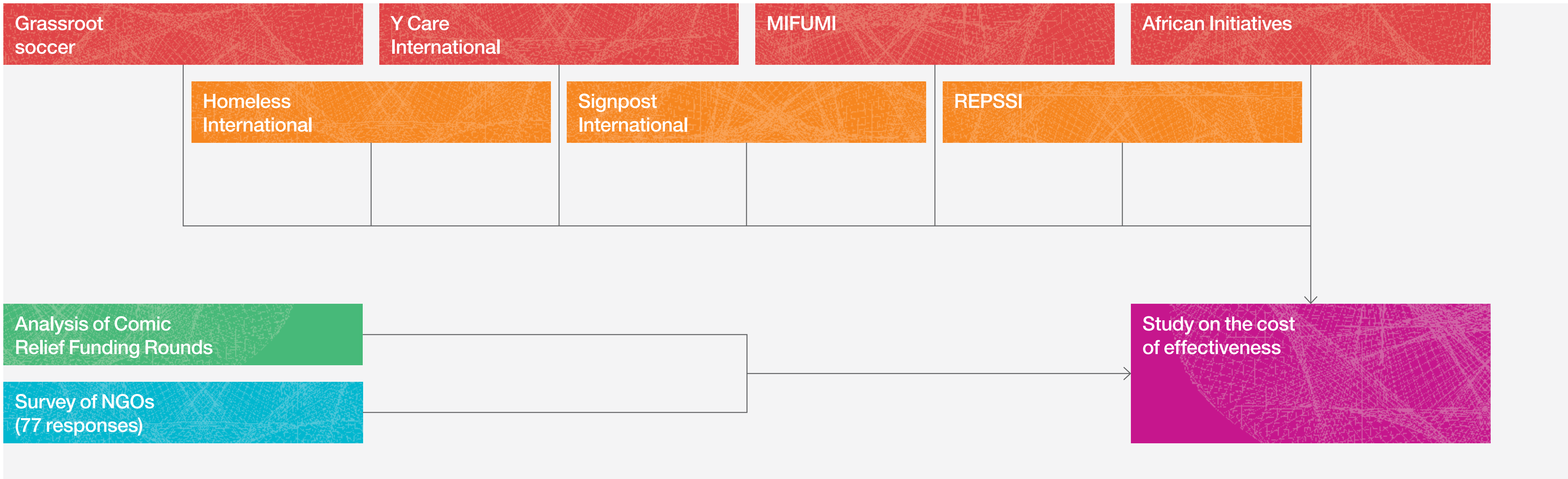
The study used three sources of data to address the key questions (see Figure 3):

Case studies: Four top level case-studies[4] and three detailed case-studies (key informant interviews, financial and organisational analysis) were carried out on small and medium NGOs selected by the steering committee as being known to have invested in MEL. Other criteria included: willingness to be involved; a range of sizes; a range of approaches to data collection; a mix of NGOs with and without in-country presence and working in a range of different thematic areas. As far as possible, NGOs were deliberately selected to work in some of the same countries so that in-country interviews could also be conducted.

A survey: The results of the initial top level case-studies were used to design an online survey that was sent out to a person known to have responsibility for MEL in 129 NGOs identified by Bond. The survey was designed to test what had been found in the case-studies and to determine trends more broadly in how NGOs were budgeting for, designing, using and valuing their MEL systems. There were 77 responses to the survey (response rate 60%). The results of the survey were analysed by the new economics foundation (nef) for statistical significance and trends.

Financial analysis of Comic Relief funding cycles: nef reviewed all 90 project budgets from three Comic Relief funding cycles to understand how NGOs budget for MEL. The applications covered a range of project sizes and areas of work. Each budget was assessed for project-defined MEL activities and related activities budgeted for in 'other' costs.

Figure 3: Sources of data ■ Top level case studies ■ Detailed case studies



2.4. Limitations

This is a preliminary study of an area that has been under-researched and has a number of limitations:

- It did not include a comprehensive literature review but did draw on the researchers' and steering committee members' existing knowledge.
- The study looked at only seven NGOs in some detail. All of these are small to medium-sized organisations selected as being known to have invested in MEL and thus these demonstrate what can be achieved with investment and commitment rather than being illustrative of the sector as a whole. Some of the findings may not be appropriate to larger NGOs.
- The study focused on understanding the full investment that NGOs are making in MEL and the extent to which they value their MEL systems. It did not test the quality of data that MEL systems are producing or the appropriateness of any resulting strategic or operational decisions, but relied on NGOs self-reporting on how appropriate, accurate, useful and effective they considered their MEL systems to be.
- The study did not look into how appropriate MEL systems might differ depending on the kind of work the NGO was involved in but focused on the differing roles of NGOs within the aid chain and the implications of this for the kind of MEL data they require.
- Where this study considered the relationships and partnerships between organisations, it did so through the lens of MEL. It does not attempt to comment on the scale, breadth or nature of relationships and partnerships between organisations, beyond the common use of data within a defined project.
- The study focused on only one aspect of MEL – ie, processes connected with the implementation of specific projects. It did not look in depth at processes such as on-going context and political analysis that should also feed into any analysis, nor did it look in any depth about how MEL is supporting NGOs that work through partners to assess what they are contributing, how they are supporting partners and their own added value.

As a result of these limitations, no firm conclusions on what might make an effective and appropriate MEL system should be drawn from the study. Instead, this study should be considered a starting point for a broader discussion between NGOs, donors and funders about the role and costs of MEL at both an organisational and project level.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. What kind of MEL systems do NGOs have?

To look at the question of what is an appropriate MEL system for a particular NGO we originally split it into two sections:

- What is an appropriate management information system (MIS) ie, a system (either paper or electronic) for recording and storing information in a retrievable form that ideally allows for some sort of analysis?
- What are the appropriate kinds of data and data collection methods for an NGO?

However, we found that whilst the data collected for this study gave us information about what kind of MEL systems NGOs have, it raised questions rather than allowing us to make judgements as to what is most appropriate for particular NGOs. Neither did it allow us to conclude much about the second question, something which would warrant further investigation in the future.

3.1.1. What is an appropriate management information system for a particular NGO?

When considering system design, we asked the case-study NGOs whether, for collecting, storing and analysing data, they used:

- A bespoke (tailored) system designed for them
- Existing software (such as Microsoft (MS) Word or Excel)
- Collected data using formats or systems specified by the donor only

The results are shown in Table 1.

It was notable that none of the case-study NGOs relied on donor specified systems, and none were only collecting data as specified by donors; each organisation had developed a system that they considered appropriate for their own needs.

Four of the case-study NGOs (57%) stated that their management information system (MIS) was fully bespoke and designed specifically for them. However, only 24% (15 out of 63) survey respondents stated that they have a bespoke system. This may be due to a bias in the selection of the case-study NGOs towards ones that were known by the donors to have invested in MEL.

The four case-study NGOs who had bespoke systems considered that this was appropriate for their needs because it enabled them to collect, store and analyse data according to their exact requirements and under their specific restrictions. For example, Y Care International uses an MIS called the Project Accountability and Monitoring system, or PAM. This system was designed by an external consultant to ensure consistent and easy data collection and to allow partners to engage with data dynamically. Y Care International considers this makes it more relevant to their day-to-day project management needs. Using PAM, according to Y Care International, means their partners are able to undertake analysis of data and receive immediate feedback in real-time because the partner's component of the database is stored in their own systems. They are proud of the innovation as they consider it enables strong MEL data collection, storage and analysis for all partners and for the organisation itself.

Table 1: Case-study NGO responses on system specifications

	Size of NGO	Type of NGO	System for collecting MEL data	System for Storing MEL data	System for Analysing MEL data
Grassroot Soccer	Medium	Intermediate	Bespoke	Bespoke	Bespoke
Mifumi	Medium	Implementing	Bespoke	Bespoke	Bespoke
Y Care International	Medium	Commissioning	Bespoke	Bespoke	Bespoke
Signpost International	Small	Commissioning[5]	Bespoke	Bespoke	Bespoke
REPSSI	Medium	Intermediate	Existing software	Bespoke / Existing software	Bespoke
Homeless International	Medium	Commissioning	Existing software	Bespoke / Existing software	Existing software
African Initiatives	Small	Intermediate	Existing software	Existing software	Existing software

Box 1: System development in Y Care International

Y Care International

In 2010, Y Care invested in the development of a bespoke project data storage, analysis and management system. The system has two key elements:

- **The Project Accountability and Monitoring system (PAM) is an overall system that allows each project to have its own database set up within it to record information on beneficiaries and activities.**
- **An MIS aggregates information from different projects in PAM, allowing cross-project analysis, tracking of progress towards key strategic objectives and MDGs and an overview of funding, reporting etc. Staff will have access to different levels of data depending on their role.**

The PAM database was developed to meet the challenge of a lack of consistency on how MEL data was being collected and analysed by partners. The software was developed in MS Access, as Y Care International did not want to use an internet-based system due to unreliable connections and the costs of access. The first iteration of PAM was strong on data collection and storage, but they found running queries on Access was too difficult for partners. Y Care needed the system to be really simple for partners, so they re-approached the system design from the point of view of the end-user. This allowed the development of a simple platform that, according to Y-Care International, lets end-users perform simple analysis and get immediate feedback.

Grassroot Soccer uses a bespoke system housed on Salesforce.com, a cloud-computing system more commonly used by private sector companies. It is also used by other NGOs mainly for fundraising and donor management. Grassroot Soccer has adapted the system to handle large amounts of data collected on a regular basis across a number of remote sites. They call their system the "SKILLZ Scoreboard." All Grassroot Soccer's project sites record data off-line and then send this to the Cape Town office, where the data is uploaded onto Salesforce, analysed and sent back. According to Grassroot Soccer a crucial element is that it can operate off-line in the field, where access to electricity and the internet may be poor or sporadic[6].

However, bespoke MIS can be costly to set up and even more costly to maintain[7]. According to the analysis of Comic Relief funding cycles, costs allocated for MIS, or databases and their maintenance are often 'hidden' within other budget lines rather than explicitly being associated with MEL so the full investment required to set up such systems is not always appreciated. Bespoke systems also require an excellent understanding of the NGO's MEL requirements and how any systems will be used in practice which may take some trials to develop, thus adding to the costs of development, which may end up more expensive than originally anticipated[8].

Furthermore, if an intermediate or commissioning NGO has a bespoke system, it can mean that implementing partners have to collect data in different forms for different funding partners. This can both increase their workload, and make it less likely that the implementing organisation is able to use all the data it collects for its own overall strategic analysis. So, whilst a bespoke MIS has advantages for some NGOs, it is not the most appropriate system for all NGOs.

Rather than develop a new MIS from scratch, some NGOs find that it is a better strategic or financial decision, or more relevant to their needs, to use existing software. Indeed, 68% (43 out of 63) of survey respondents stated that they use existing software such as MS Office for at least some of their MIS[9]. Using existing software avoids the cost and challenges of developing a bespoke MIS and avoids the potential pitfall of different systems not speaking to each other or being fully integrated. Homeless International has taken the decision not to invest in a bespoke system as its partners are very diverse and it does not want to dictate the MIS that each of them use. Instead, it uses a MS Access-based MIS, whilst its partners use various different systems. Integrating systems is one of Homeless International's challenges and a key MEL priority is to work with and improve what it already has. It considers that fully integrating information from partners would make analysis much easier and attribution clearer.

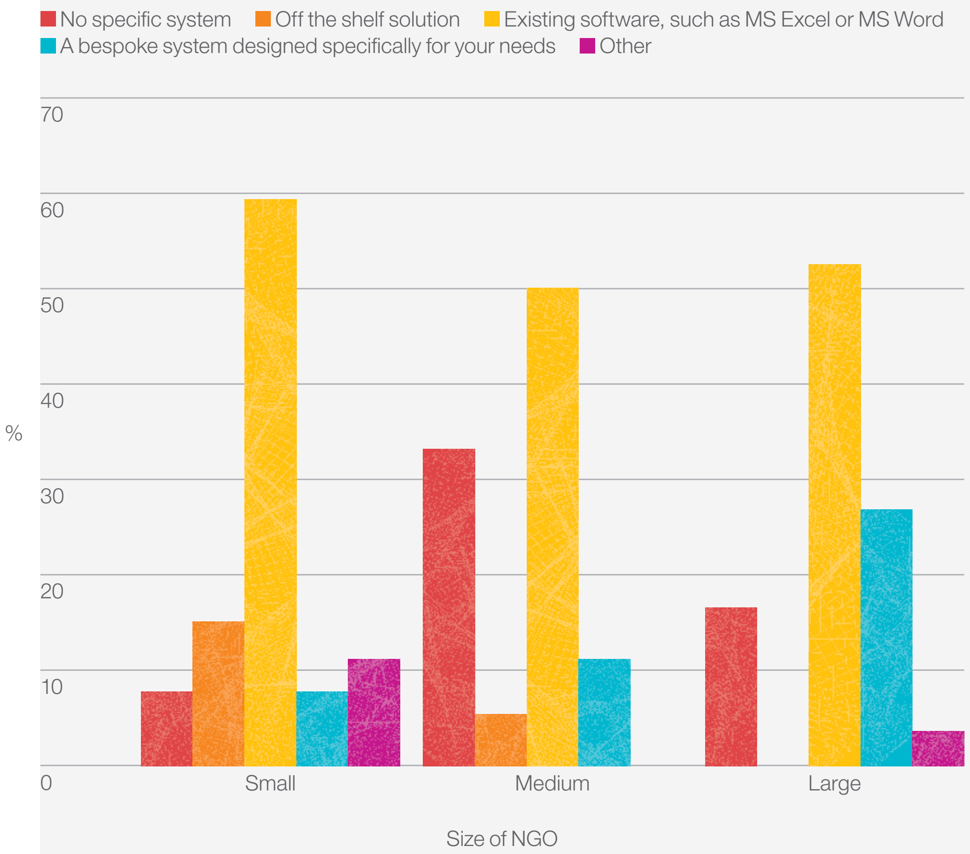
We examined whether the NGO's size or way of working might influence its MIS preference. Graph 1 shows that according to the survey all sizes of NGO are most likely to use existing software for at least part of their MIS. However, bespoke systems do appear to be relatively more common and off the shelf solutions less common with the larger NGOs surveyed.

The most common type of MIS used by all three of the NGO categories (whether implementing, commissioning or intermediary) was one that drew on existing software; there was no distinct pattern to be discerned beyond this (Graph 2)[10].

The results of the survey clearly indicated the dominance of existing software such as MS Office programme like Word or Excel as a basis for MIS regardless of the size or way of working of an NGO.

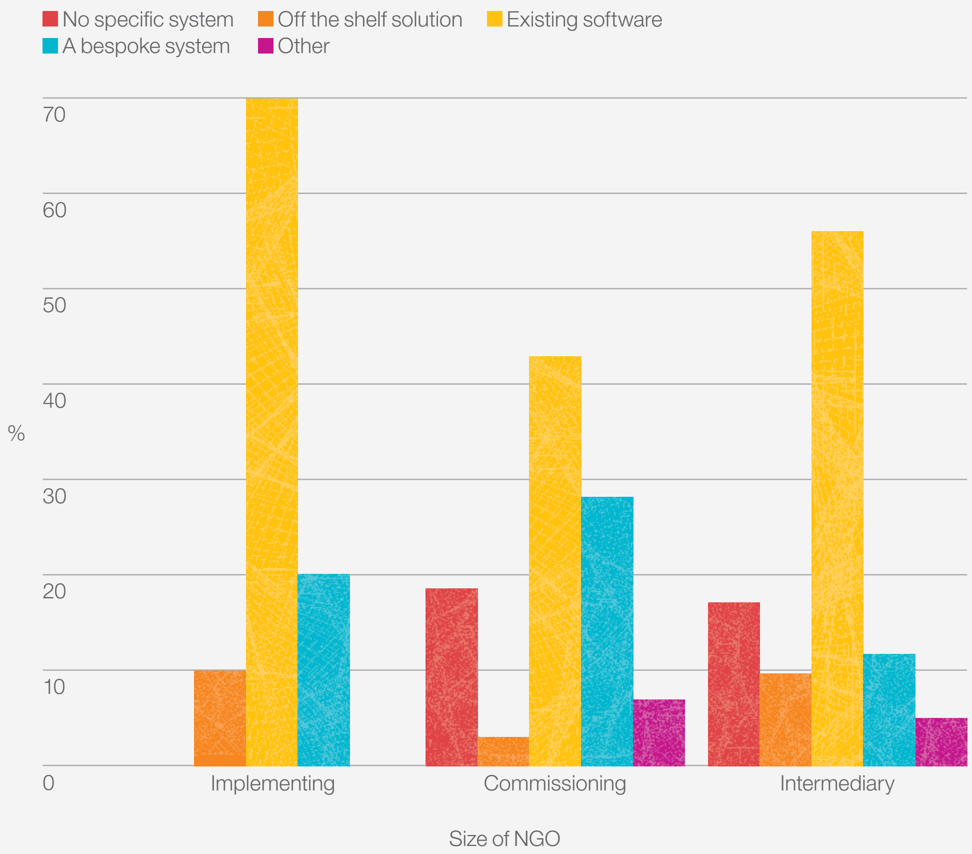
Graph 1: Types of MEL systems used by different size of NGOs surveyed

Across your projects, what type of system do you have for MEL (ie. storing, analysing, applying lessons learnt and communicating learning data)? (Can choose more than one option)



Graph 2: Types of MEL systems used by NGOs working in different ways

Across your projects, what kind of system do you have for MEL? (Can choose more than one option)



3.1.2. What data is collected

Qualitative and quantitative data

Almost two-thirds of survey respondents (66% or 44 out of 67) stated that they collect an equal amount of qualitative and quantitative data. However, 12% (8) stated that they mostly collect qualitative data and 22% (15) that they collect mostly quantitative data. Two of the five top level case-study NGOs mentioned that they find qualitative data collection more of a challenge because their MEL systems were more tailored towards quantitative data, as this is easier to collect and sometimes preferred in donor reporting.

What was absent from all the case-study NGOs that we reviewed was the ability to analyse qualitative data such as case-studies, most significant change stories, focus group discussions, etc. Databases are designed to be about quantity, and quantity is how NGOs have determined their impact for a long time. However NGOs are collecting large amounts of qualitative data that is often used for fundraising and reports to donors, but cannot be easily analysed.

Overall the data suggests that NGOs may find quantitative data collection either easier or more appropriate to their needs than qualitative data collection. However, on its own quantitative data has limitations as to what it can tell us, particularly with regards to the unexpected. Getting the balance right between both types of data is important, and can be a challenge for some NGOs.

Data and position in aid chain

What data to collect should be informed by an organisation's position in the aid chain. All the case-study NGOs have long-term, collaborative relationships with their partners. For the intermediate and commissioning case-study NGOs that worked with multiple partners, a broader view of MEL was evident that focused on helping partners to improve their work locally, rather than simply to prove their effectiveness.

For Homeless International there is a clear goal of building partners' capacity to be independent, self-sufficient and sustainable. To this end, Homeless International encourages its local partners to take responsibility for MEL and invest in their own MEL systems and this forms a key part of work on monitoring, evaluation and learning. As part of this Homeless International encourages data analysis to be undertaken, and the results used, at the community level rather than seeing MEL solely as a process that provides Homeless International with reporting data.

This has meant that Homeless International has reconsidered the kind of data that it requires from its partners and now looks for data that supports it to make strategic decisions about its own role. As a result it is less concerned with volumes of quantitative data, though partners may still collect this for their own use.

As donors have their own requirements for data supplied by grantees, these requirements impact on the data they need grantees to collect. For example DFID uses data from individual projects or programmes to compile reports on how its policy priorities are being met to the International Development Select Committee, which regularly reviews the department's resources, accounts and business plan. Comic Relief and BIG use grantees' data to report on their own impact, inform future funding decisions, and in the case of Comic Relief, to encourage further donations.

3.1.3. Summary of findings: What is an appropriate MEL system for a particular NGO?

The study wasn't able to answer the question of appropriateness for a particular NGO. What we did find was:

- NGOs put in place MEL systems that they consider appropriate to their own needs but have not always fully considered the MEL implications of their position in the aid chain. In our view, NGOs' data needs should be different depending on whether they have commissioning, intermediate or implementing functions. This in turn should inform what kind of data collection and analysis they engage in and for what they use the results.
- In most cases, existing computer software (such as MS Office) is used for information management, regardless of the size of NGO or whether an NGO is implementing, intermediate or commissioning. Some NGOs are investing in bespoke systems, which are expensive and take time. Whilst these may be suitable in some situations, the study did not show any correlation between bespoke systems and perceived MEL system effectiveness.
- NGOs use a range of both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools and methods in their work that they consider appropriate to their needs, but find it more challenging to store and analyse qualitative data. How to do this effectively is a gap that may need further research.

3.2. What resources are needed to set up and maintain a MEL system?

This section considers the evidence on how NGOs are allocating human and financial resources in terms of designing, developing and maintaining their MEL systems. We were particularly interested in whether NGOs were fully accounting for all the costs that could be associated with MEL systems and processes, as well as what they understood to be the resource needs of their MEL system.

3.2.1. Human resources

All the case-study NGOs had identified human resources for MEL activities. In the intermediate or commissioning NGOs MEL appears to be seen as a collective responsibility across the organisation. Most have dedicated MEL staff or officers at head office and these roles usually include building the MEL capacity of partners. They are also responsible for managing data flows from the field to the programme teams and senior management, as well as feeding back to the field. These roles interact with all departments and functions, from fundraising to marketing, to programmes and finance. In smaller NGOs, these responsibilities are integrated within the job descriptions of the programme team.

The MEL responsibilities of staff in implementing NGOs differ from the responsibilities of staff in commissioning or intermediate NGOs. This can sometimes be reflected in their MEL system needs, which can have a different focus and therefore different staffing requirements. For example Homeless International, a commissioning NGO, sees MEL in terms of its primary function, which is to support and manage implementing partners (see below).

At Homeless International, MEL is as much about the management of partners as it is about measuring impact, and it is something that they "do" every day, rather than budget for separately as a contained activity. This is reflected in the fact that there are no dedicated MEL staff and that everyone within the International Team has MEL responsibilities integrated into their job description. Part of this role includes activities such as assessing the potential risks associated with a project, including risks that may impact on the ability of partners to collect MEL data. Whilst Homeless International does not employ MEL specialists it does ensure that capacity is maintained through external and internal training on MEL frameworks, techniques and so on.

In contrast MIFUMI, an implementing NGO, expects all its offices to have the same MEL system in order to manage both data quality and reporting upwards, which means that some staff roles are very similar across different offices (see below).

MIFUMI, a Ugandan implementing NGO working in remote communities, has been working to improve its MEL system over the last five years and uses a bespoke MEL system designed internally. MEL data is stored on-line and can therefore be logged into anywhere in the world. The system comprises of three databases that have some analytical ability beyond just storing data. Data from approximately 105 community centres across five Ugandan districts is entered onto the system each month, tracking service users and their care / intervention needs. This data is used to generate both management and service reports. Each centre has a documentation officer who is the focal point for MEL activities at a local level. At an organisational level, the deputy executive director is responsible for MEL and has a small team at the MIFUMI office. MFUMI finds that having the same roles duplicated in centres across the districts makes it easier to identify individuals to liaise with to collect data on a regular basis.

The trend in the sector, particularly in larger NGOs, is to retain staff with specialist MEL skills. However, smaller NGOs such as Signpost International, a commissioning NGO that collects monitoring data indirectly, cannot afford this and has integrated MEL into existing roles.

African Initiatives realised that relying on its partners to undertake data collection meant they needed to provide support through capacity building and noted that the logistics of data collection were challenging due to the large geographic areas over which projects they support are delivered. Grassroot Soccer had experienced that different sites and partners had different levels of capacity in data collection that could result in uneven data collection, while REPSSI noted that the overall quality of its data collection could be improved. The case-study NGOs reported these challenges to us as current issues they were aware of but had not yet resolved. Grassroot Soccer had already identified that additional training would increase data collection capacity.

The most popular response of organisations to the survey was that their staff would devote between 0 and 10% of their time to MEL at both head office and field office level (see Table 2). However half (50%) suggested that their field office staff would allocate over 20% of their time to MEL and 42% suggested the same for their head office staff.

When we asked survey respondents how much total staff time was spent on MEL activities at organisational level over the course of a year, the most frequent response was 11-20% (see Table 3), with 41% estimating that this would take more than 20% of staff time.

Table 2: Survey response on estimates for percentage of staff time allocated to a particular project, devoted to MEL at Head Office and Field levels

For an average project, what % of total staff time allocated to this project would you estimate is devoted to MEL?		
% of total staff time devoted to MEL	**At head office**	**At field office**
	% (Number) of organisations choosing this option	
0-10%	34% (21)	26% (16)
11-20%	24% (15)	24% (15)
21-30%	26% (16)	19% (12)
31-40%	6% (4)	13% (8)
41-50%	5% (3)	2% (1)
51-60%	3% (2)	8% (5)
Over 61%	2% (1)	8% (5)

Table 3: Survey responses on estimates of percentage of staff time spent on MEL activities at organisational level

Over the course of an average year, what % of total staff time is spent on MEL activities at an organisational level?	
% of total staff time spent on MEL activities	**% (Number) of organisations choosing this option**
	% (Number) of organisations choosing this option
0-10%	29% (17)
11-20%	31% (18)
21-30%	15% (9)
31-40%	14% (8)
41-50%	8% (5)
51-60%	3% (2)
Over 61%	0% (0)

The statistical analysis of the survey found a positive correlation between the time NGOs spent on MEL activities and the amount they wanted to budget for them. The survey does not give any direction for this correlation so some of it could be explained by organisations budgeting more, with some of this extra budget going into financing extra staff time. However, data from the case-studies suggests that, as with financial investment, when NGOs start to invest time in MEL, they realise its value and want to invest more.

One area of capacity that was not a main focus of the study but did arise in the case-studies was that some NGOs have not fully considered the possible risks of data collection and management. It would appear that guidance on data and risk management would be useful in this regard.

3.2.2. Funding MEL

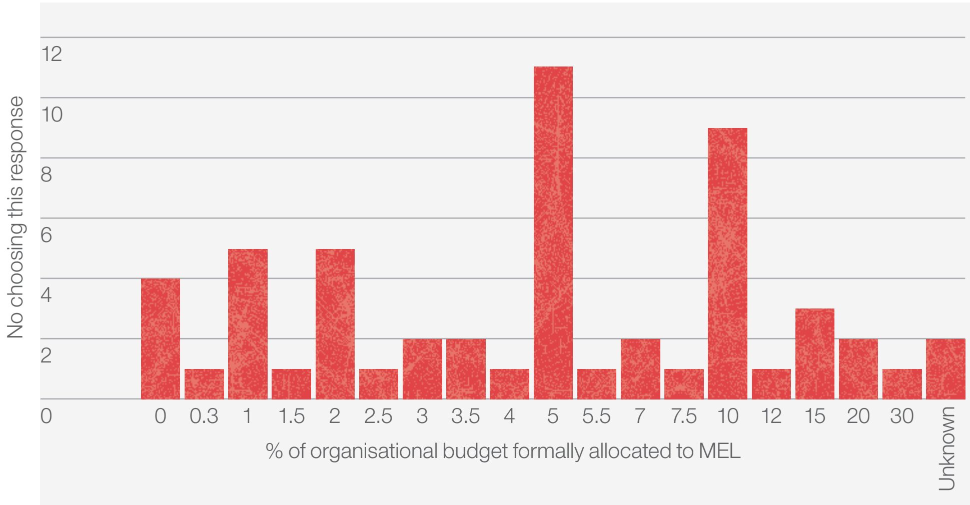
A key component of this study was to explore how much NGOs are actually investing in MEL, including any amount spent beyond what is budgeted in applications to funders. The study reviewed the budgets of the case-study organisations and the applicant budgets from a selection of Comic Relief's funding cycles to analyse amounts budgeted for MEL and whether all MEL activities were included, and if so, whether this was under a MEL heading. Questions as to how much was budgeted for MEL were also asked in the survey.

How much is spent at an organisational level

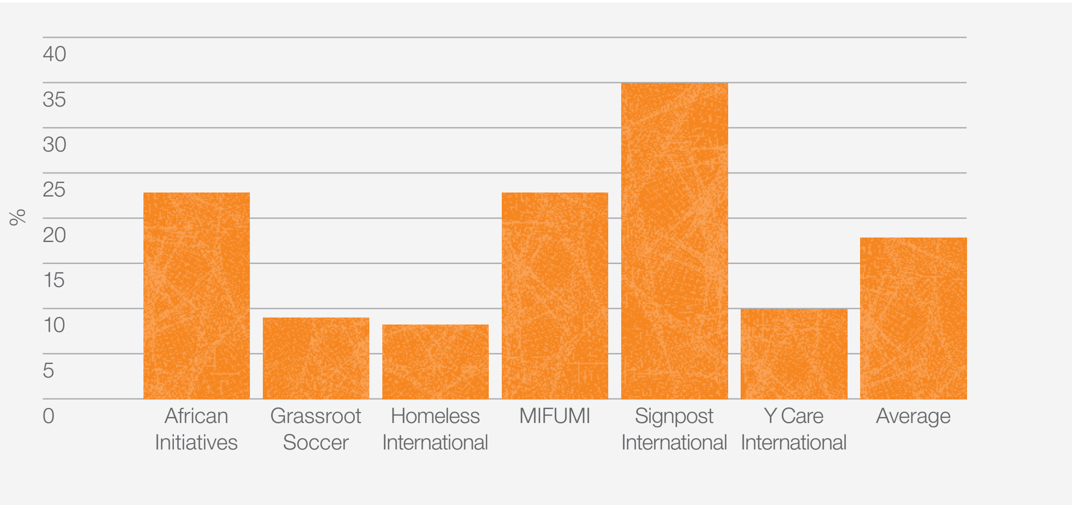
Survey respondents were asked to give a percentage figure for the proportion of their total organisational budget that on average is formally allocated to MEL[11]. As can be seen from Graph 4 this varied from 0% to 30% with the most popular response being 5%, followed by 10%.

The case-study NGOs also showed a large variation in the percentage of annual expenditure used on MEL activities ranging from a low of just less than 8% of overall expenditure (Homeless International) to a high of just over 35% (Signpost International) (see Graph 4). In this case, the data includes 'hidden' costs, ie, costs that could be considered MEL costs but that were not initially included in the MEL budget; in each case what was appropriate to include was decided in discussion between the consultant and the case-study NGO. The most common 'hidden' costs were overheads such as maintenance of the servers that house the MEL database and more accurate accounting of staff time spent on MEL activities.

Graph 3: Count of responses on % of organisational budget formally allocated to MEL



Graph 4: The percentage of annual organisation costs spent on MEL in the case-studies, including 'hidden costs'[12]

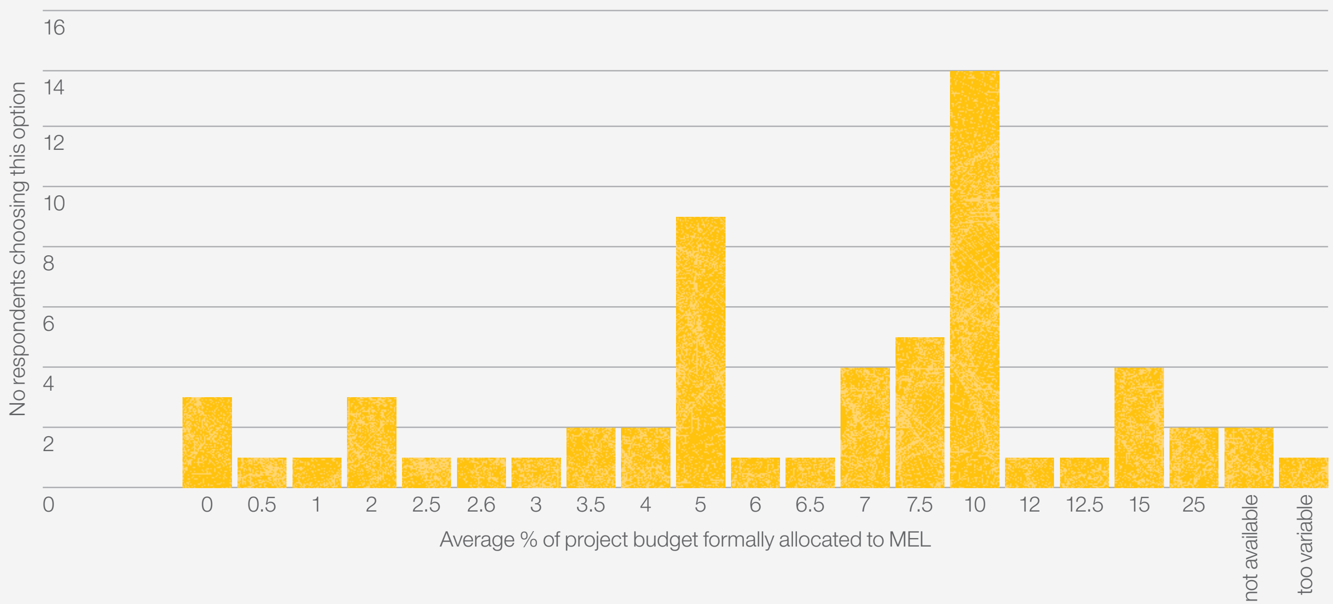


How much is spent per project

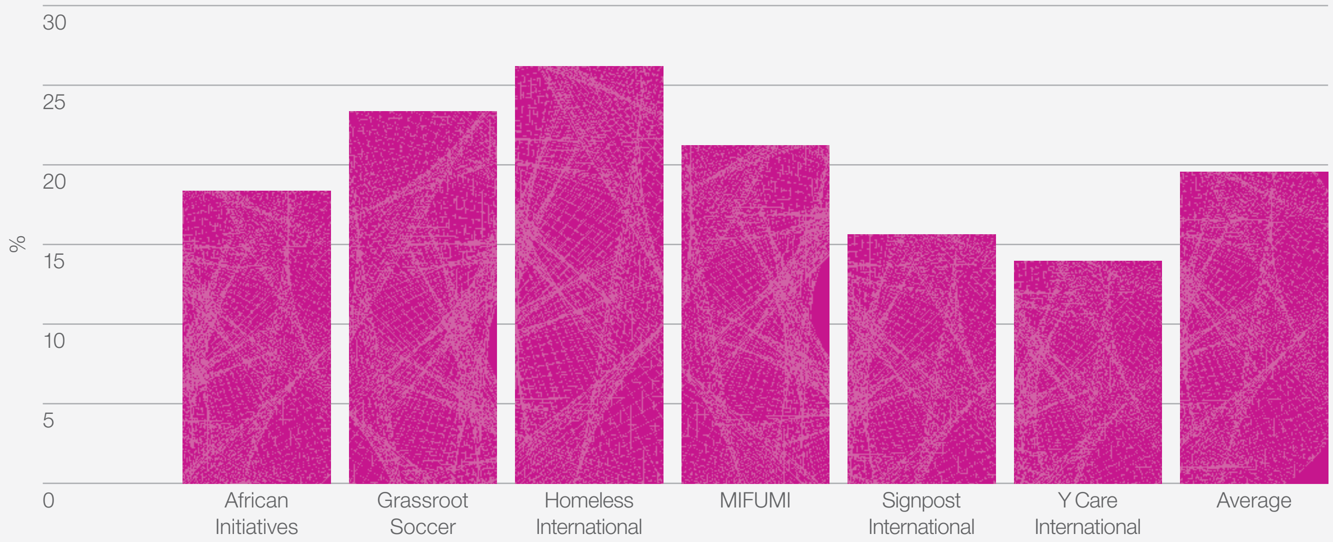
Survey respondents were also asked to give a percentage figure for the average proportion of project budgets that is formally allocated to MEL. As can be seen from Graph 5[13] this varied from 0% to 25% with the most popular response being 10%, followed by 5%. Two respondents commented that their organisations do not allocate MEL funding this way (marked on graph as 'not available'), and one said the figure was too variable to give a meaningful average.

In the case-studies we also interrogated project budgets to determine what percentage of average project spend is made up of MEL activities. As before, we included 'hidden' costs that are not always identified as MEL in the budget. Using this approach we found that the actual average MEL spend per project across the case-study NGOs was 20% (see Graph 6).

Graph 5: Survey respondents: Average proportion of project budgets formally allocated to MEL



Graph 6: The average percentage of project costs spent on MEL in the case-studies



We reviewed budgets from the Comic Relief funding cycles according to the classifications shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Cost classification analysis of a selection of Comic Relief applicant budgets

Cost classification	Proportion of MEL budget
Capital/One-off costs	
Equipment	4%
Other one off costs	20%
Recurrent costs	
Personnel	18%
Training	3%
Equipment	2%
Communication	24%
Management	12%
Other recurrent costs	19%

Here it can be seen that recurrent costs account for 3.5 times more than the capital or one-off costs. In absolute figures this translates to around £42,000 of capital or 'one-off' expenditure, compared to nearly £150,000 of recurrent costs per project, across the budgets analysed.

The 'other' category was quite a substantial percentage of the budgets at 19% and further interrogation of the category showed that it referred to costs such as audits, consultants, or research, or in one case a lump sum for all MEL.

However, not all MEL activities that were described in the projects were represented clearly (ie, identified as MEL costs) or included (ie, not budgeted at all or insufficiently budgeted) in the budgets examined.

In terms of MEL costs not being represented clearly, the study found that across the 90 projects examined an average of £20,000 of MEL costs were 'hidden' within other budget lines, ranging from £440 to £100,000. Key points that emerged were:

- Information management systems were often included in organisational development budgets, rather than MEL
- Capital goods such as computers or vehicles were often included in capital and physical costs as they encompass multiple aspects of the project, not just MEL activities
- There is a general lack of clarity about how much of people's time is spent on MEL and where to allocate this within budgets; the salaries of staff who spend a proportion of their time on MEL are often included in management and administration or in organisational development
- Training/workshops are often budgeted within organisational development and usually encompass other training as well as MEL

If these costs were allocated to MEL it would represent an average increase in the original MEL budget for projects of 38%. This means that the full investment on MEL is effectively hidden.

Furthermore, many of the proposals had not paid sufficient attention to what is required for effective MEL. In 10 of the 90 project budgets analysed, Comic Relief had increased the MEL budget as part of the assessment process by an average of £14,000 per project, because Comic Relief deemed the initial amount budgeted to be insufficient. Areas where applications often fell short of considering the full implications of effective project MEL included:

- A baseline was often not budgeted for and the final evaluation was not always costed or, in the opinion of Comic Relief, was costed too low
- Partner NGOs' MEL or staff costs were often omitted from budgets
- MEL related capacity-building for partners was not included
- Data management systems were not described nor the cost of them included in proposals
- The cost of training on data management systems was often omitted
- The need for data protection and the associated costs of data protection were not always considered
- Dissemination was not described or budgeted for
- A system for validation of findings was not considered or budgeted for

The review showed that the percentage of budget for MEL (after taking account of both costs that had been allocated under other budget headings, and increases made by Comic Relief) averaged 10.3% of the overall project budgets. This ranged from 1.4% to 29.9%.

This analysis demonstrates that Comic Relief applicants lack clarity when budgeting for MEL activities in their projects. There may be multiple reasons, ranging from a lack of knowledge about what MEL activities are needed and how to budget appropriately for them, to a perception that funders will only support MEL up to a certain proportion of project budgets (eg, 5%), to a lack of clarity on what MEL activities constitute and how to budget for capital investments and services that have multiple aims (ie, not just MEL). This means that many NGOs are not in a position to ensure that their project applications allow full cost recovery. Work with the case-study NGOs illustrated that gifts in-kind are often not costed within MEL calculations, again giving an artificially low indication of the true cost of MEL (See Box 4).

In the case-studies, we found that when applying for funding or preparing project budgets for their own or for funders' purposes, all would develop one overarching budget that includes MEL costs for both the commissioning/intermediate NGO and the implementing NGO. In many cases the costs of MEL for both partners are all within one budget line. This was also observed when analysing the project budgets provided by Comic Relief from their funding cycles. This makes it hard to distinguish between MEL costs incurred at different stages of the aid chain and again contributes to the lack of understanding of the true cost of MEL.

Where organisational MEL funds come from

We have seen that project budgets often do not cover the full costs of effective MEL. We also looked at where NGOs find funding for organisational MEL, including financing the setting up and maintenance of MEL systems. In the survey the number of respondents that indicated that funds for organisational MEL came from the project budget (33) was similar to those that indicated they came from unrestricted reserves (29) (see Table 5).

This reflects our findings in the case-studies where NGOs turned to non-project related funding to undertake the initial development of their MEL systems, before including MEL costs relating to an upgraded or new system in project budgets at a later stage, once development was considered complete[16].

Table 5: Survey response on provenance of funds for organisational MEL

Where do funds for organisational level MEL come from? (Can select more than one)	
Project budget	59% (33)
Unrestricted reserves	52% (29)
Dedicated restricted grant for MEL only	7% (4)
Other (not specified)	11% (6)

We found that each case-study NGO had considered the funding challenge of establishing their MEL system and had found various ways of getting around the problem by leveraging the maximum value from their status as not-for-profit organisations and ensuring value for money. This often took the form of receiving gifts in-kind, using volunteers or paying below-market rates. For example, Grassroot Soccer worked closely with the Salesforce Foundation to adapt the Salesforce system to work for their data collection, storage and analysis needs. Grassroot Soccer has received both in-kind support and donated licenses for usage of the system (See Box 4). Signpost International formed a partnership with Dundee University to develop their Poverty Indicators for Community Transformation (PICT) database (see Box 6). That partnership is being developed into a social enterprise to expand on the database's potential, make it available to Signpost International's partners and eventually to other NGOs in the sector. Homeless International reported that most of their donors are happy to fund MEL, but that it is much more difficult to acquire funding for long term MEL capacity building of partners. Other case-study NGOs made similar comments.

How satisfied are NGOs with the resources available for MEL?

The survey asked NGOs how satisfied they are with the human and financial resources available for MEL. The responses are shown in Table 6. Over one-third (34%) were not satisfied and a further 41% were only somewhat satisfied. It is notable that only 16% were mostly satisfied, and none very satisfied.

Box 4: Leveraging funds and making savings

Grassroot Soccer: The adoption of the Salesforce database was achieved through an in-kind donation. During the first year, Grassroot Soccer received set-up in-kind support worth US$50,000 and, following implementation, has benefited from 120 free licenses valued at US$180,000.

Y Care worked with a consultant and then a developer to build PAM and MIS to their specifications. They believe that they managed to access below-market rates to the tune of around £180 per day, resulting in nearly £40,000 of savings.

Table 6: Satisfaction with the level of MEL resources

Overall, how satisfied are you that sufficient human and financial resources are in place to set up and maintain your MEL systems?		
Answer options	**Response per cent**	**Response count**
Not satisfied	34.4%	21
Somewhat satisfied	41.0%	25
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	8.2%	5
Mostly satisfied	16.4%	10
Very satisfied	0.0%	0
51-60%	3% (2)	8% (5)
Answered question		61

3.2.3. Leadership

The other element that we found to be necessary for the resourcing of MEL systems and activities was leadership. In our case-studies we found that the senior management team and the board had to understand the role that MEL can play in supporting the NGO to deliver its mission, in order for MEL systems to be successfully developed and to have an impact on operations.

This is seen most clearly in the case-study on Grassroot Soccer (Box 5), which as a result of interest by the board has made it a strategic priority for MEL data to be accessible to board members. It has set up 'dashboards' for its trustees and senior managers to access data on a daily basis to follow the progress and development of its programmes.

Box 5: Generating live data at Grassroot Soccer

On its website, Grassroot Soccer describes its MEL system in this way: "With the help of the Salesforce.com Foundation, Grassroot Soccer has developed a best-practice monitoring and evaluation system called The Scoreboard. Developed on the Force.com platform, The Scoreboard is a user-friendly, open-source system that enables sophisticated reporting, automatic analysis, and constant results feedback to the field. Rather than storing hundreds of spreadsheets, Grassroot Soccer now tracks demographics, attendance, and pre/post quiz results for more than 60,000 participants online. The secure, cloud-based system provides a 'live' picture of programmatic activity and automatically sends site-specific, national, and global dashboards once a month to staff at all levels via email."

At a strategic level within Grassroot Soccer, the senior management team and the board use MEL data to review whether the organisation is on track and delivering the expected changes that were planned. Each person can view country-level dashboards, enabling them to track outputs.

Board reports are produced regularly and include a dashboard that focuses on unit costs and overall numbers reached. Dashboards are developed for each site, demonstrating their progress in achieving programme targets.

The case-studies also showed that MEL system development can be driven by top management within the NGO, as it requests more or different data to that available. In Signpost International the executive leadership has been involved in determining what an appropriate system would look like for their NGO and is closely involved with the development of the organisation's new tailored MEL system, which is being undertaken in collaboration with Dundee University. This development was driven by the desire to improve data collection and to be able to do better analysis alongside Signpost International's partners (who will all receive training to use the system), and also ensure that analysis is done closer to the ground. They consider that these improvements will enable Signpost International's leadership to use more useful data when reporting to trustees, supporters and donors (Box 6).

Box 6: System development at Signpost International

Signpost International, in partnership with Dundee University, has developed an online database for storing both quantitative and qualitative data, and also for analysing quantitative data. It is called Poverty Indicators for Community Transformation (PICT).

PICT has two components: a desktop portal and an online database. The portal can be used to design evaluations using survey-type tools, focus group discussions and other participatory tools. Once the data collection tool has been designed in PICT the results from the data collection process can be entered into the portal using the tool that the system designed. This allows the data to undergo basic statistical analysis without the team needing to be trained in specialised statistical tools. Data can also be exported to MS Excel for manual analysis.

Currently, data entry onto PICT is manual and data is received as hard copy survey responses. Signpost International is working with the software developers to allow electronic data collection in the field. They are developing compatible applications for mobile and tablet devices, and a method to allow the automatic syncing of data with the online database over a secure connection.

Signpost International has recently received funding to conduct market research to determine whether there is a market to sell or make available PICT to other NGOs. This would be done through a social enterprise vehicle in collaboration with the software developers.

3.2.4. Summary of findings: What resources are needed to set up and maintain a MEL system?

Overall this study has shown that three aspects are important in resourcing MEL: staff; strategic investment; and, leadership buy-in.

Staff

Our study shows that in most NGOs:

- MEL takes up a considerable proportion of staff time at all levels.
- Responsibility for MEL activities tends to be clearly articulated either across many job descriptions or within dedicated MEL roles.
- The time that it takes to do MEL activities is often under-recognised in project budgets.
- Capacity of front-line staff in MEL can be a challenge.

Strategic investment

Effective MEL requires strategic investment and adequate funding. We found that:

- NGOs fund MEL through project and unrestricted funds on an ongoing basis. However finding funds to develop bespoke systems can be more challenging, though some donors such as Comic Relief do support this. Some NGOs have found creative ways round this through entering into partnerships with private sector organisations or universities.
- MEL activities are normally separated out within project budgets but these budgets frequently do not reflect the full cost of MEL.
- NGOs generally spend more funding on MEL activities than they budget for or report on. In part this is due to costs normally located in core costs (such as salaries) and overheads (like database maintenance) not being considered valid MEL costs, but can also be due to the perception that some funders will not accept the full cost of MEL being added into project budgets or NGOs themselves not realising the extent of the true costs. There is a challenge in defining MEL and allocating resources accordingly.
- The amount NGOs spend on MEL varies enormously with some NGOs suggesting they spend very little while others spend significant proportions of their overall budgets.
- The case-study NGOs reported that it can be hard to raise funds for MEL capacity building for implementing partners.

Leadership

Significant expenditure on MEL requires leadership buy-in and support. Our case-studies suggest that necessary elements are leadership that:

- Is committed to having a MEL system that supports the needs and aims of the organisation and is prepared to make it a strategic priority.
- Has determined what an appropriate MEL system looks like for their NGO.
- Is clear why MEL is important for the organisation.

3.3. How do NGOs use and value their MEL systems?

This section presents the evidence from the study on how NGOs use their MEL systems, and how they value them including how effective they perceive their systems to be.

3.3.1. How do NGOs use their MEL systems?

Who is responsible for collecting data?

In our case-studies we found that on-going qualitative and quantitative project monitoring data – the main focus of our study - was collected directly from the beneficiaries by the one implementing NGO, MIFUMI. The three commissioning NGOs relied on indirect data collection and the intermediate organisations varied with two using both direct and indirect data collection and the other one only using indirect data collection. This is summarised in Table 7. All kinds of NGO might directly collect data for baselines or evaluations.

The distinction as to who collects the data is significant. In our case-studies we found examples where organisations implementing projects, that were collecting data according to guidelines provided by commissioning or intermediate NGO partners, considered this data to belong to the commissioning or intermediate partner. As a result it tended to be passed on without the partner implementing the project using it for its own analysis and adaptive management.

Table 7: Who collects data in the case-study NGOs

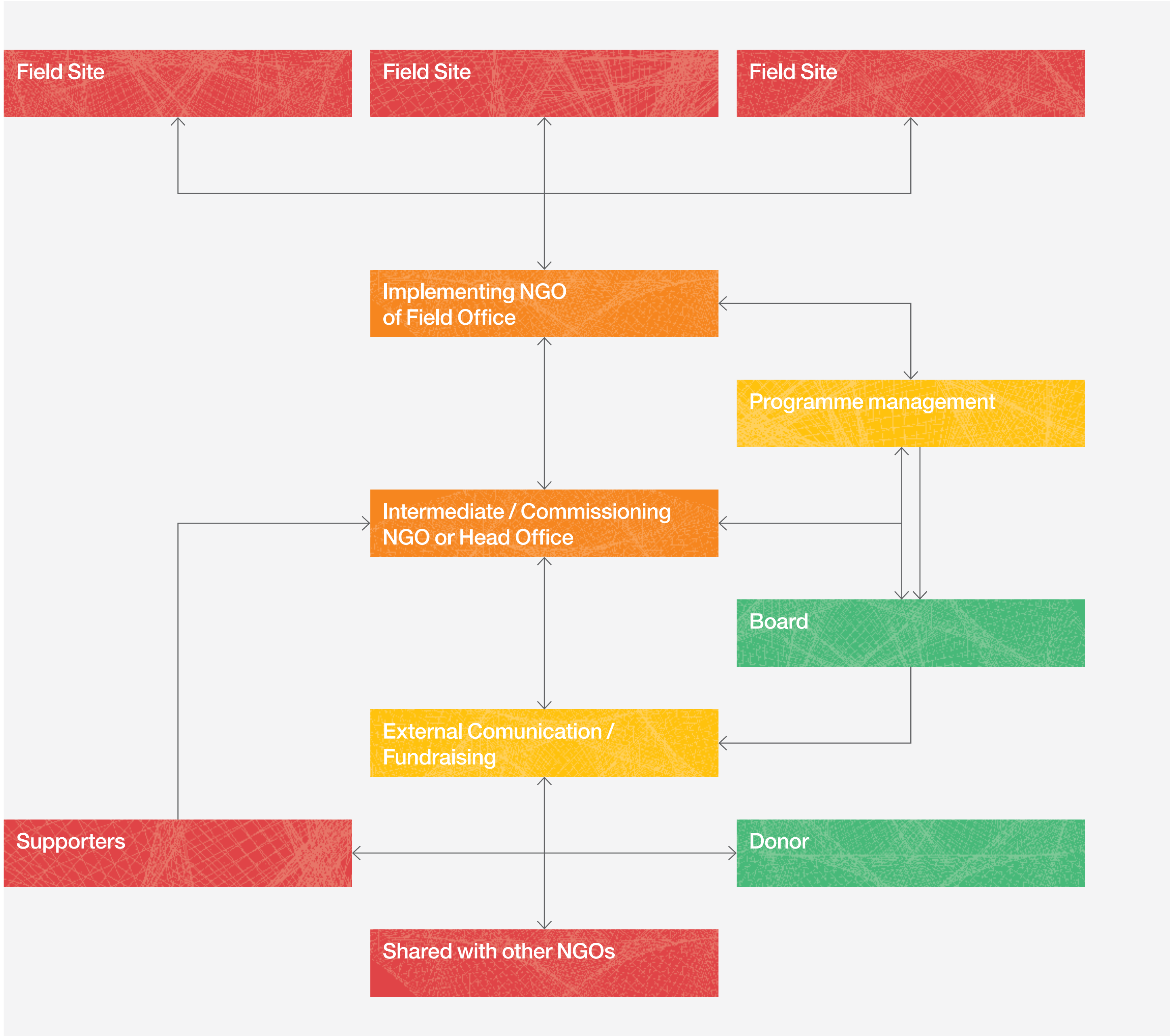
	Type of NGO	Project Data Collection	
		Direct	Indirect
Grassroot Soccer	Intermediate	✓	✓
MIFUMI	Implementing	✓	
Y Care International	Commissioning		✓
African Initiatives	Intermediate		✓
Homeless International	Commissioning		✓
REPSSI	Intermediate	✓	✓
Signpost International	Commissioning		✓

How does data flow in a MEL system?

To fully understand how NGOs use their MEL systems requires understanding data flows between partners or different parts of the organisation.

Data derived from MEL activities is often used by different people, sometimes in different locations, for a range of purposes. This means the data has to be moved either electronically or physically to enable this. We assume that each data flow incurs a cost to the organisation or the project in terms of staff time or overheads[17] and that how data flows may give us some insights into the effectiveness and efficiency of the overall MEL system.

Figure 4: Generic diagram of data flows



During our study we created models for each of the case-study NGOs, representing their MEL data flows[18]. These were then shared with them. Figures 5 and 6 show those for Grassroot Soccer and Homeless International.

Figure 5: Grassroot Soccer data flows

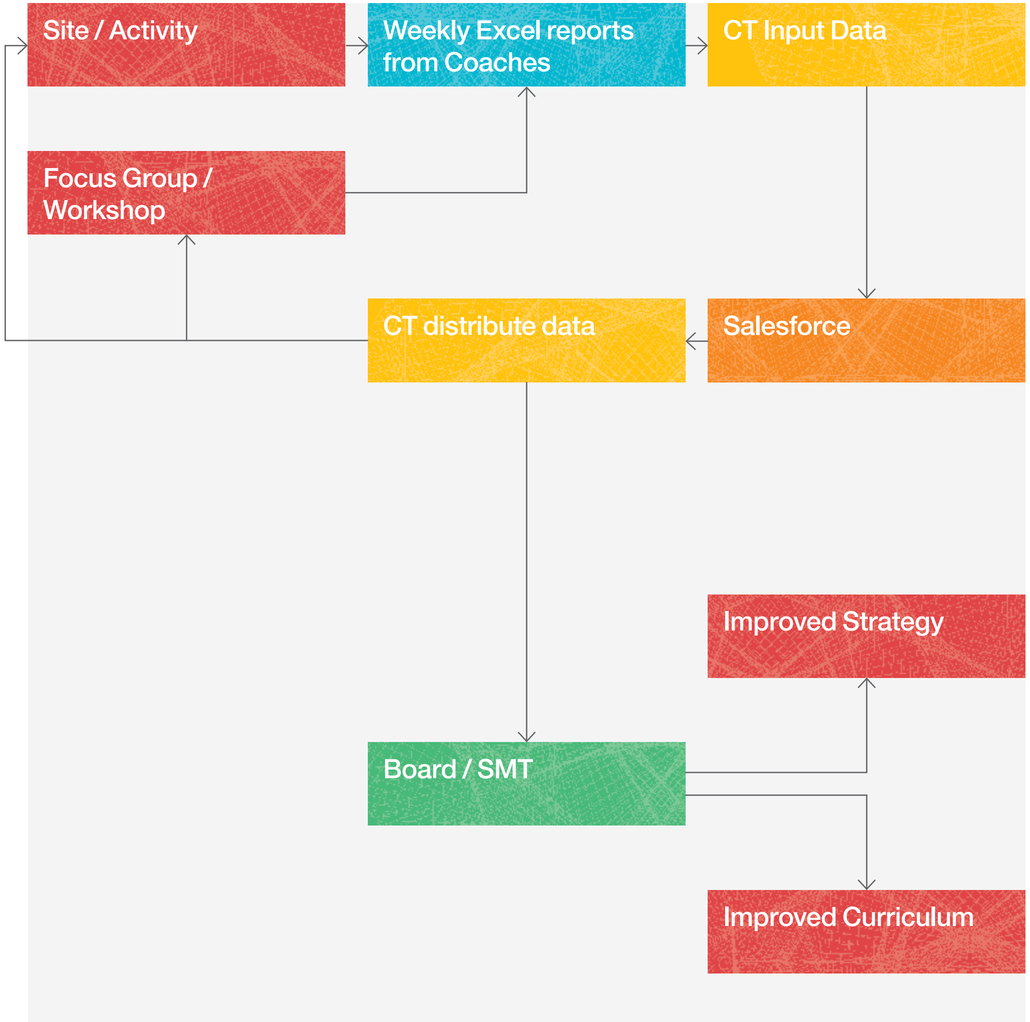
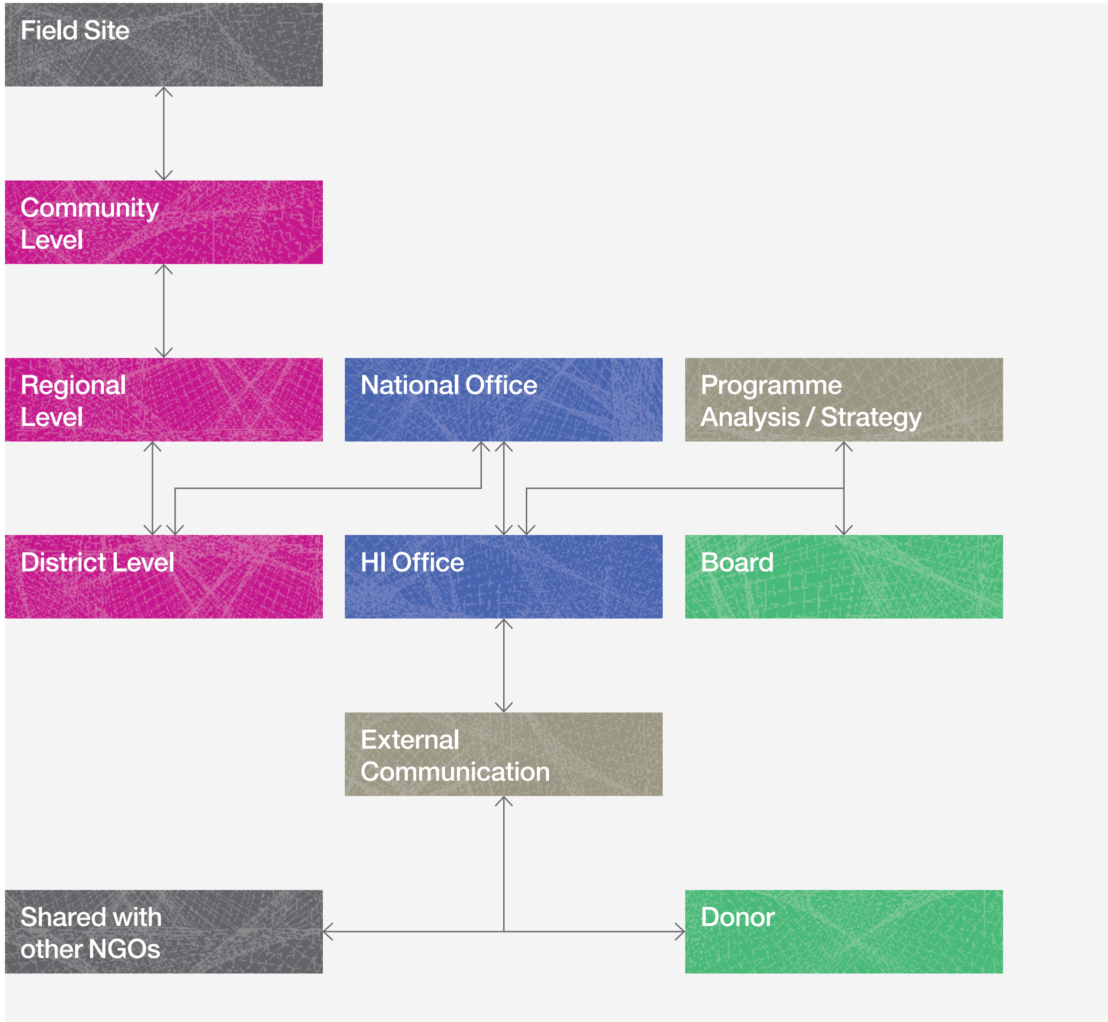


Figure 6: Homeless International data flows



We were not able to put figures on the actual transaction costs in each case, and these will vary considerably depending on the system. In one case-study NGO, the systems used by different partners were not compatible so data had to be exported from and imported to MS Excel files between systems, thus increasing transaction costs at those particular data flows. There were also cases where data had to be entered manually more than once – taking time and resources and increasing the chances of human error.

We found that most organisations duplicate the data that gets collected thus increasing MEL costs. The same data is often stored in different forms by the implementing partner, by the commissioning and intermediate NGOs, and also by the funders. Sometimes this was simply because the data was attached to an email and the email server stores copies of the attachments, but in most cases it was deliberately stored multiple times in each of the partner's filing systems or databases. The need for this duplication of data is assumed. In other words, most people that we interviewed did not question why similar data is required by organisations in different parts of the aid chain that have different roles and responsibilities. Studying the data flow processes in the case-study NGOs has allowed us to understand this duplication, and suggest that it would not be necessary if NGOs consciously thought about the MEL implications of their position in the aid chain, and the different parties' resulting roles and relationships to each other.

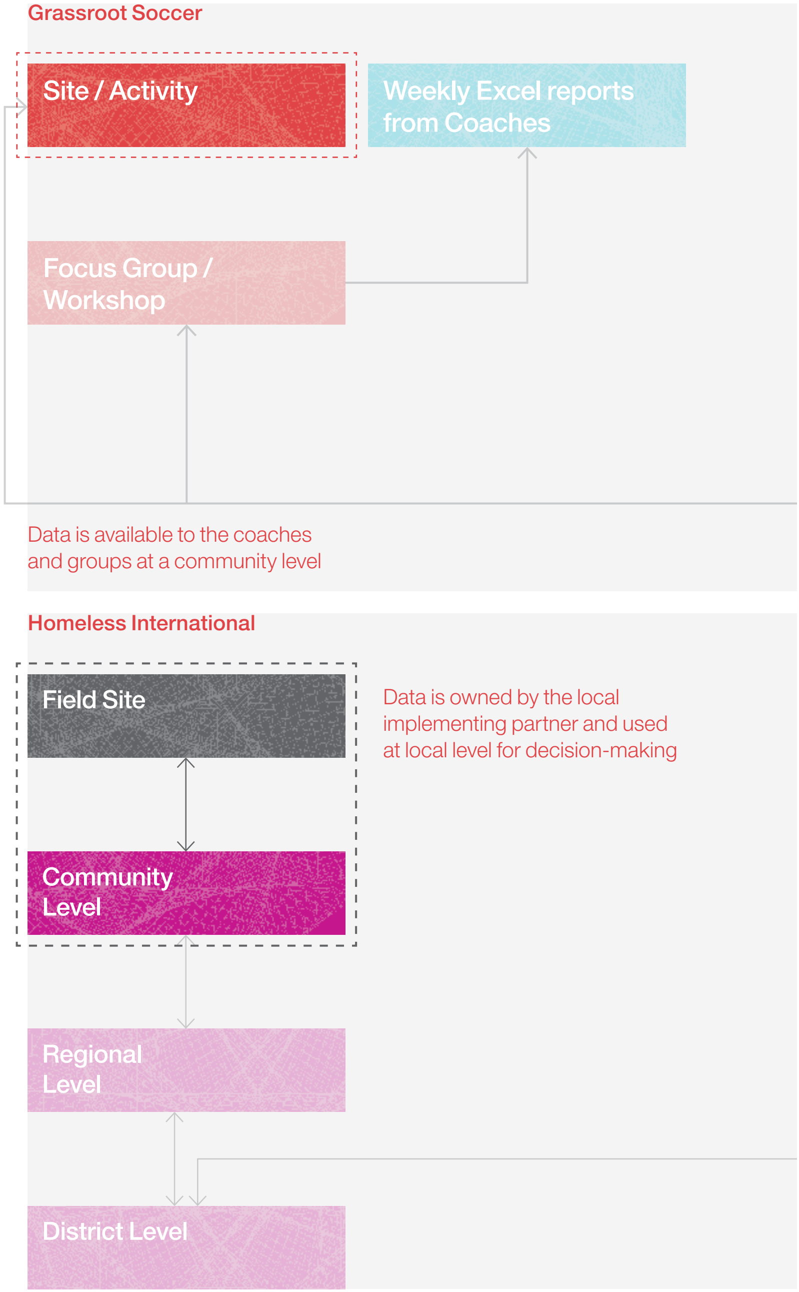
Who uses MEL data and what for?

Grassroot Soccer and Homeless International both reported that data flows back to the beneficiaries (see Figure 6) where it can be used for local level decision-making.

The other case-study NGOs recognised the value of ensuring data flows back to the community level, but face challenges in implementing this, especially if they not have direct access to beneficiaries and have to rely on their implementing partners.

The case-studies show that the way data is used in implementing NGOs tends to be what we have termed 'project management and accountability' ie, focused on day-to-day management of the project rather than broader lessons or strategic decisions. This means data is used by the partner to better inform project management decisions, although changes to the project design as a result of findings from the data analysis would have to be agreed with the commissioning or intermediate NGO. In general, using data for learning and communications is mainly happening within commissioning and intermediate NGOs. Figure 7 below was developed as a generic diagram based on the patterns we saw in the different data flows for the case-study NGOs[19].

Figure 6: Local access to data



In the survey, we found that nearly half of respondents (49%) reported that project MEL data is mostly analysed at head office level (see Table 8), with only 40% reporting it is analysed at project or country level and a further 6% saying it was done jointly. This low level of analysis at project or country level implies that much project data is being extracted and passed on to others to use. This has implications for ownership by, and accountability of, projects with regards to both beneficiary communities and implementing NGOs. It also has implications for long term capacity of, independence of, and learning within, implementing NGOs.

Figure 7: Where learning and communication tends to happen

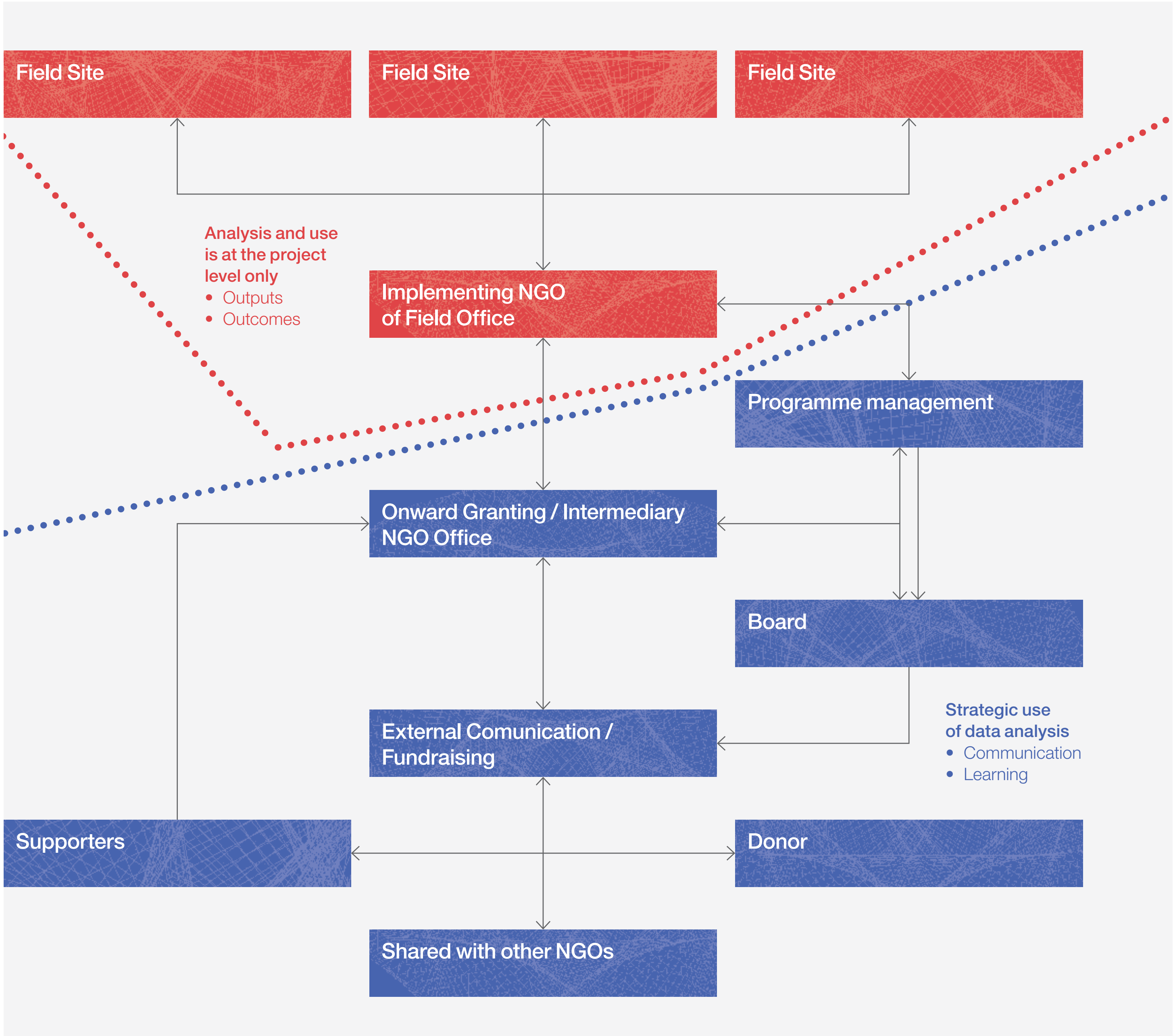


Table 8: Who analyses project MEL data – survey responses

Who mostly analyses the MEL data from projects?[20]		
	Response per cent	Response count
Mainly at project or country level	**39.7%**	**25**
Project-level staff (ie, front line staff)	17.5%	11
MEL staff at a country, regional or partner level	22.2%	5
Mainly at head office level	**49.2%**	**31**
MEL staff at head office	28.6%	18
Senior management at head office	19.0%	12
Team at head office	1.6%	1
Mix of project/country/partner and head office	**6.3%**	**4**
Board of trustees, partner organisation and CEO	1.6%	1
Project staff and head office staff	4.8%	3
Other	**4.8%**	**3**
External evaluators/consultants	1.6%	1
Volunteers	3.2%	2
Total	**100.0%**	**63**

Other studies have shown that an unbalanced relationship often exists between an implementing partner and the commissioning or intermediary NGO because the former is delivering activities on behalf of the latter who controls the funding. Therefore the implementing partner will have a series of obligations and requirements that will govern the funding relationship with the commissioning or intermediary NGO. These normally include reporting obligations to their partners that creates a data flow away from them towards the commissioning or intermediate NGO that does not always flow back again to the implementing NGOs. As the example from Homeless International demonstrated, building partnerships that are broader than either a project or programme, that do not consider only money and reporting, and that last longer, results in a more balanced approach to MEL and data flow [21].

All of the case-study NGOs used the project data in their MEL systems for learning and communication as well as project management and accountability. In all our case-study NGOs, learning from projects is mainly at project or team level, but is also shared within the organisation. Y Care International create half an hour for MEL during team meetings and a concerted effort is made to learn from past projects and integrate learning into future or existing projects. Although increasingly, in our experience as consultants, learning is also shared with others, the survey results showed that this is not as common as it could be as only 25% of respondents to the survey said their MEL system allowed them to share their learning with others in the sector. How MEL systems support learning is a question that is worth investigating further.

Box 7: Y Care International learning

Y Care International has working groups to evaluate projects and highlight learning. This has informed their strategy and contributed to their effectiveness as they have made a concerted effort to integrate previous learning on aspects such as programme design and theory of change development. Y Care International's recent livelihoods strategy was developed following learning from previous projects.

The study of proposals to Comic Relief funding cycles found that many proposals did not identify how the MEL for the project proposed would sit within a broader organisational MEL approach. Another common shortcoming was that learning from previous MEL was not included in new proposals, nor was it evident how this learning was influencing the design of new projects.

3.3.2. How do NGOs value their MEL systems?

As has been highlighted in this report, some NGOs are making considerable investments in their MEL systems; money that could otherwise be used elsewhere. Whilst this is indicative of the value some NGOs place on MEL, this value varies greatly. The survey responses to the question 'For your projects on average, what proportion of your total budget do you formally allocate to MEL?' ranged from 0% (3 out of 57 clear responses) to 25% (2 responses). An even larger range was given to the question 'Over the course of a year, what proportion of your total organisational budget do you formally allocate to MEL, on average?' where again it went from 0% (4 out of 53 clear responses) to 30% (1 response) (see Graphs 3 and 5 in Section 3.2.2).

Understanding investment in MEL must be considered alongside an understanding of how effective MEL systems are for decision-making to get a sense of how NGOs value their MEL system. We have taken MEL effectiveness to be the extent to which the MEL system allows NGOs to make useful decisions that are appropriate to them. As part of this study, we developed an effectiveness scale of 1-7 which was used with the case-study NGOs to understand how well the NGOs believed their MEL systems help them to make organisational decisions (see Table 9).

Table 9: Organisational MEL effectiveness rating scale used with case-study NGOs

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We have no MEL systems in place in our organisation. We have no capacity to collect data and we do not believe that we have a need to do so.	Our MEL is very limited. We don't have the capacity to analyse or use the data that we collect.	We collect MEL data on our outputs only (i.e. things that tell us our interventions have taken place). We do some basic data collection and the information is used for internal purposes only.	We collect MEL data on our outputs and this is sufficient for donor reporting, fundraising and other communication activities.	We collect MEL data on our outputs and outcomes. This data is sufficient for reporting to donors, fundraising and other communication activities.	Our MEL data tells us about the difference that we make through our work at an outcome level. This data allows us to learn and make operational changes to existing projects.	Our MEL data tells us about the impact of our work in people's lives. This data allows us to make longer-term strategic changes to the aims and activities of the organisation.

Two of the case-study NGOs rated themselves 5 indicating that their MEL systems give data that is sufficient for reporting to donors, fundraising and other communication activities. Four out of the seven case-study NGOs reported that their systems also allowed them to make operational changes to their projects (rating 6). African Initiatives, a smaller NGO compared to the others in the research, was the only one that felt that their MEL system gave them the information needed to make longer-term strategic changes to the aims and activities of the organisation (rating 7). African Initiatives doesn't have one dedicated post for MEL, instead it is a shared responsibility among all staff.

We also asked the case-study NGOs what they felt would enable them to reach a score of 7 on our effectiveness scale. Most of the case-study NGOs responded either that more people and more money (or a variation of the two) would enable them to progress up the scale and reach a score of 7.

It should be noted that there appears to be no relationship between how the case-study NGOs rated the effectiveness of their organisational MEL system and the specification of MEL systems (Table 10).

This highlights that the case-study NGOs do not consider system specification to have a significant impact on whether they believe their MEL system to be effective or not. In our discussions with case-study NGOs, the questions regarding system specification and effectiveness were asked consecutively. While system specification clearly matters to the case-study NGOs as they are investing significantly in developing their systems, it is equally clear that they view systems as only one of a number of factors that are important when considering the effectiveness of their organisational MEL, other factors being human resources, funding and leadership. This finding also suggests that higher specification (as in developing a bespoke system) does not necessarily correlate to greater MEL system effectiveness, and there may be times when using existing software is a more effective approach for an NGO.

Another indication of how much NGOs value their MEL systems is the extent to which they are satisfied with the way it works. Whilst the NGOs selected for this study were deemed to have particularly invested in MEL, none of them perceived themselves to be perfect and all highlighted progress to be made in their own processes and systems. In the survey only 20% of respondents were satisfied with their MEL system (taking 'mostly' and 'very' together), whereas 56% were 'somewhat satisfied' and 16% 'not satisfied' (Table 11).

Table 10: Relationship between system specification and effectiveness

Case-study NGO	MEL system specification	NGOs' self-assessed rating for organisational MEL system
Grassroots Soccer	Bespoke	5
MIFUMI	Bespoke	6
Y Care International	Bespoke	6
Signpost International	Bespoke	6
REPSSI	Existing software/bespoke	5
Homeless International	Existing software/bespoke	4
African Initiatives	Existing software only	7

Table 11: Survey respondents' satisfaction with their MEL systems

Overall, how satisfied with your MEL system are you?		
Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Not satisfied	16.4%	10
Somewhat satisfied	55.7%	34
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	8.2%	5
Mostly satisfied	18.0%	11
Very satisfied	1.6%	1
Answered question		61

3.3.3. Summary of findings: How do NGOs value and use their MEL systems?

The evidence from the case-studies suggests that NGOs invest in MEL with a view to improving their work and that of their partners, and they also invest to ensure that their system meets their particular needs. Some NGOs value their MEL systems highly and this is evidenced by the level of investment in collecting, storing, analysing and using data for decision-making that can be found in our case-studies. In our case-studies, we found that when NGOs start to invest in MEL and see the value of doing so, the amount they would like to invest often increases. Overall we found:

- Most NGOs believe that their MEL systems are sufficient to provide them with data at an outcome level.
- MEL systems generate data that is used for a number of different purposes.
- Some learning is shared with other NGOs, however this sharing remains less common than it could be.
- Most intermediate and commissioning NGOs focus on ensuring that their implementing partners are able to collect the project data required for project management and accountability purposes, rather than considering the MEL needs of implementing partners more broadly.
- In a significant number of NGOs, there is a tendency for project data to be analysed at head office level without the inclusion of staff from the field or implementing partners.
- The most useful MEL systems, according to the NGOs using them, combine long-term relationships with partner NGOs with the ability to do data analysis close to the ground and MEL capacity building of local partners. They also have deep integration of MEL within an NGO's head office, ensuring MEL is perceived as a collective responsibility and is focused on improving work with beneficiaries and partners, rather than proving effectiveness to donors or external stakeholders.

3.4. Summary

We have found that many NGOs take MEL very seriously and make considerable investments in it. Data from the survey and the case-studies suggest that for most NGOs this allows them to make day-to-day project management decisions and many suggest it also supports strategic management and learning. However, the case-studies and the investigation of the Comic Relief project applications suggest that there are some key shortcomings in the way that many NGOs are approaching MEL that means that they may be spending time and money less than optimally, and are not recovering the full cost of MEL in their project applications:

- Not all NGO explicitly link their MEL systems and what they require of them with their position in the aid chain. If they were to do this it would support them to think more systematically about the differing roles of commissioning, intermediate and implementing NGOs with regards to MEL, and how MEL can be designed to help them evaluate how well they are playing their specific role. As the Homeless International example shows, understanding what data each party needs for their operations allows NGOs to focus more clearly on the data they will use (for strategic planning, future planning, programme management, donor reporting, etc) rather than on the actual data collected.
- MEL systems are often expected to meet multiple needs that are not always well articulated or defined. The case-studies and study of Comic Relief funding cycles found insufficient clarity as to what are the key purposes of MEL for particular organisations. We have split these into three:
  - Project management and accountability
  - Learning
  - Communication

Each of these purposes also has to be interrogated as to who is the agent and audience in each case. Our study suggests that in many cases the focus of MEL for implementing partners is on meeting the conditions of project funding ie, it prioritises the needs of accountability towards donors. MEL systems for commissioning or intermediate NGOs may also focus on learning for senior management in order to make strategic decisions and on using data for communication for advocacy and fundraising purposes. Where some MEL systems appear to remain under-developed is in supporting strategic analysis at the grassroots and ensuring accountability, learning and communication at field and country level within implementing NGOs.

- Whilst many NGOs collect qualitative data, our case-studies showed that storing and using this remains a key challenge. NGOs appear to find it easier to design management information systems and databases to store and analyse quantitative data. Given the complex nature of the environment in which NGOs work, where change is unlikely to be a linear process, this is a key weakness as qualitative data is an important tool for identifying unexpected outcomes and verifying relevance.
- As can be seen from this study, full MEL costs can be a significant proportion of project or organisational budgets. Our case-studies and analysis of the Comic Relief funding cycles showed that there are two key issues in the way NGOs are budgeting for MEL. The first is perhaps less significant – costs that should be allocated to MEL are sometimes allocated elsewhere in the project budget. The second is more serious - NGOs are not actually aware of the full cost of MEL and are not budgeting sufficient resources within projects to cover their or their partners' full staff and overhead costs. Costs that are often under allocated or not recognised include the full cost of staff time in collecting, manipulating and analysing data and the full cost of infrastructure such as databases or computers. If NGOs do not allow sufficient resources within project budgets to cover the full costs of MEL, then project MEL either won't adequately collect the data required or will be subsidised by the NGOs' other resources. For NGOs that rely on project funding, this can undermine their long term sustainability as their central functions become weakened and strained over time. Both issues mean that NGOs are not aware of the full costs of collecting, storing and analysing data and thus are thus not able to make an informed assessment as to whether their MEL system is value for money.
- Whilst this study shows that NGOs are spending significant amounts on MEL, it is unable to say with any certainty that this money is producing quality data or whether this is money well spent or proportionate.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Implications for NGOs:

The findings of this study have a number of implications for NGOs to take account of when considering their MEL systems

- **Position in aid chain:** Our case-studies indicated that MEL is most effective when NGOs have thought clearly about their position and role in the aid chain, and those of their partners, and used this to inform the design of MEL systems. The study of Comic Relief funding cycles showed that project applications rarely differentiate between different partners' roles and responsibilities in MEL. A starting point for designing an efficient and effective MEL system should be to consider the implications of each organisation's role in the aid chain and what this means in terms of what should be measured.
- **Purpose of MEL:** MEL data and systems can support NGOs in project management and accountability, learning and communications at many levels. To do this effectively the right kind of data has to be available, analysed and used in the appropriate places by the appropriate people. Our findings showed that it is still common for analysis of project data to take place away from those who are implementing or benefiting from the projects, suggesting that accountability and communication to, and learning of, those further up the aid chain remains a higher priority than accountability and communication to, and learning of beneficiaries and local organisations. NGOs should be clear when designing MEL systems as to what their main priorities are with regards to the uses of MEL data and at what level, for both themselves and their partners. They then need to ensure that their system works to support these priorities. Factors to be clear on include:
    - why particular data is being collected, who manages and owns it, and who uses it
    - whether analysis is taking place at the most appropriate level
    - whether all the data flows within the MEL system are necessary
- **Budget for MEL in joint proposals:** Our findings show a number of common shortcomings in how MEL is budgeted for in joint proposals. MEL budgets in joint proposals should be clear on which partner will be responsible for what in terms of MEL data collection, storage and analysis and should also consider whether organisations have sufficient capacity to carry out these roles, with any capacity building requirements for all parties being budgeted for.
- **Understand the full cost of MEL:** NGOs should develop systems that allow them to assess the full cost of MEL so that they can a) judge whether their MEL systems are an optimum use of resources given the quality of the data and analysis they are getting out of them and, b) ensure full cost recovery of the projects that they deliver.

Implications for funders:

Funders can play their role in supporting effective and efficient MEL by:

- Being clear on their expectations: Funders should be clear, and give clear guidance on:
- What they expect to see in applications with regards to MEL systems for different sizes and kinds of grantee organisations
- The kind of costs that should be considered for MEL and the level of detail they want
- The level of detail required in applications as to the different roles different partners will play in MEL and how this should be budgeted for
- The data they require to have reported to them and any expectations they have as to the uses of MEL data for accountability, learning and communication at other levels

- **Full cost recovery:** Donors should be clear on the cost implications of their expectations for MEL data and reporting and be prepared to fund the full costs of this for both UK and overseas partners. This includes taking full account of costs such as staff, capacity building and infrastructure. If they consider these costs to be excessive then they may need to readjust their expectations for MEL data.

Areas for further consideration

This preliminary study has mainly focused on analysing issues around financing and budgeting for MEL, but it has also touched on some other issues and in doing so has highlighted some areas that merit further consideration either for follow up studies or where it would be worthwhile developing guidance for NGOs:

- **Bespoke systems:** There is sometimes a tendency to consider bespoke systems as better systems. The findings of this study question this assumption. Further work could usefully be carried out to understand under what circumstances bespoke systems are valuable and what is their full cost. This could also look at some examples of failed attempts to develop bespoke systems to see what lessons can be learnt.
- **Analysing qualitative data:** The study highlighted a large capacity gap in analysing qualitative data despite its wide use for fundraising. Further work could usefully be done to look at simple ways that NGOs can use qualitative data at a more aggregate level.
- **The factors underlying the effectiveness of MEL systems:** This study was only able to take a broad approach to investigating the factors underlying the effectiveness of MEL systems and relied on NGOs self-reporting of how effective and accurate they found their systems to be. A closer look at what factors support MEL systems to be both accurate and useful at different levels, and at different points of the aid chain, could yield some useful findings.
- **Risk in managing data:** The case-studies showed that some NGOs have not fully considered any legal restrictions or data protection issues that there might be on data they collect. It would be useful for guidance for development NGOs on data management and risk to be developed; this could draw on existing guidance from other sectors such as the humanitarian sector.
- **How MEL systems can effectively support learning:** The study of Comic Relief funding cycles found that a common shortcoming was that it was not clear how learning from previous MEL was influencing the design of new projects. How MEL systems can better support learning is a question that is worth investigating further.
- **Data flows:** These initial attempts to understand how data flows within MEL systems raises questions that would be useful to examine in more detail:
  - How much does each data transaction cost?
  - Are there data transactions that do not justify the associated costs?
  - How can data flows be made more effective, efficient and accurate?

REFERENCES

1 For example one of the priorities that Comic Relief's trustees set for 2012-13 was to 'Implement the new Grants Strategy to focus on the change we can make, the impact we can measure…'; this requires the organisation to have better data collection, analysis and reporting from its grantees. BIG's outcomes approach to funding requires an increased focus on outcomes reporting by its grantees, so that it can properly report on BIG's overall impact. This was raised as an area for improvement in an evaluation of its international funding programmes in Needham, J. Sanders, A. Sexton, C. 2013, An Evaluation of Big Lottery Fund's International Funding Programmes, Big Lottery Fund, London, UK

2 The study focused on work on projects within communities rather than on advocacy.

3 For many purposes project data alone will not be enough, but will need to be complemented with data on changes in all aspects of the context, what other initiatives are taking place in the local area, innovations in best practice, the added value of commissioning or intermediate NGOs etc. This study has not looked at these aspects in any detail.

4 Homeless International was initially a top level case-study but was then revisited to go into more depth.

5 Signpost International does deliver some programmes directly in the UK, however the focus of the study is on international work where it acts as a commissioning organisation.

6 ITAD, 2013, Grassroot Soccer Case Study points out that it is important to consider whether the technology that an NGO chooses will work in the environment in which it works.

7 Maintenance costs can include: licenses, servers, staff time for upgrades, training for both commissioning/intermediate NGOs and implementing partners.

8 Y Care International's system has been through three iterations so far, in each case the consultant were improving their understanding of the organisation's MEL requirements and how the system would be used in practice.

9 Respondents could select more than one option.

10 The sample size for implementing NGOs was too small to draw conclusions (n=10).

11 To prepare this graph the following modifications were made to textual entries: a) where a range of responses was given the middle point was taken e.g. '3-5%' was taken as 4%; b) where an 'up to' or 'less than' answer was given this was taken as the response e.g. 'up to 5%' and 'less than 5%' were both taken as 5%.

12 Where an NGO has other activities (such as Y Care in the UK or Homeless International's loan scheme) these are not included in the figure for total expenditure. REPSSI isn't included here as the data required was not supplied.

13 To prepare this graph the following modifications were again made to textual entries: a) where a range of responses was given the middle point was taken e.g. '3-5%' was taken as 4%; b) where an 'up to' or 'less than' answer was given this was taken as the response e.g. 'up to 5%' and 'less than 5% were taken as 5%

14 MIFUMI reported that all of their donors apart from Comic Relief restrict MEL funding to 5% of a project budget, as they estimate their full cost of MEL for an average project to be 21% this can force them to supplement project MEL costs from core funds.

15 For more details on the debate about the importance of full cost recovery see http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/-/media/Files/Research%20Documents/er_res_fcr_funders_manual.pdf

16 This was true of Y Care International, Grassroot Soccer and Signpost International in the development of their tailored systems. Homeless International also worked with a consultant to make its existing system more efficient, with funds that did not come from project costs. We should note, however, that MIFUMI received funding from Comic Relief to develop its system and Signpost International has received funding from Comic Relief to undertake market research to make their database market-ready.

17 Where two NGOs collaborate on a project, their costs are often presented jointly under the commissioning/intermediate partner. In these cases, the costs that should be analysed within both NGOs should relate to all aspects of the project, including, for example, time taken by the implementing partner to write reports on a regular basis for the commissioning/intermediate partner, and the cost of sending data (electricity and server memory and staff time) to the commissioning/intermediate partner.

18 These are not the only data flows that will exist in these NGOs and are intended only to represent the flow of MEL data. As we have focused on examples of general data flow for each case-study NGO we have not gone into detail about the partners with whom the case-study NGOs work.

19 Since the data collection for this study was completed the model has been tested with a number of partner NGOs to a large international NGO. With one exception, they all reported that the model reflected their experience.

20 To get this table, those that answered 'other' and gave a textual description were fit into one of the broad categories.

21 This study did not consider issues of how the ownership of data is perceived, however experience from our other work has suggested to us that if data is framed within a project that is being implemented on behalf of another NGO and the implementing partner has an obligation to that NGO that is attached to funding, then the implementing partner and the commissioning/intermediate NGO may consider that the data belongs (conceptually) to the latter, even if in reality both parties have duplicate copies of the actual data. In our consultancy experience we have experienced a number of cases where MEL data collection is seen as an obligation towards funding partners and not as an opportunity to learn and improve one's work.

"MANY NGOS TAKE MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING VERY SERIOUSLY AND SEE IT AS A MEANS TO IMPROVE THEIR WORK AND THAT OF THEIR PARTNERS."