

REGIONALISATION APPROACH - THE MEAL PERSPECTIVE(S)

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The global humanitarian context is rapidly changing due to the nature, scale and complexity of crises, and as such most organisations are re-thinking their operational models and adapting to the context. Action Against Hunger initiated a process of decentralisation to empower country offices in terms of autonomy and decision-making. The creation of two regional office, the West Africa Regional Office and Middle East Regional Office, in 2009 and 2013 respectively aspired to make technical expertise more accessible to country offices, and to make interactions with regional stakeholders such as donors, UN coordination bodies, regional organisations and local civil society more efficient.

The Middle East Regional Office was established jointly by eight offices in the middle-east and in consultation with the respective Action Against Hunger members (France and Spain). Several technical experts were appointed to provide continuous and timely support to the countries where our projects are implemented,

under the leadership of a regional representative who focuses on liaising with regional stakeholders, especially donors.

The regionalisation approach had positive effects in mainstreaming MEAL and integrating MEAL into programmes, particularly in the Middle East Region. Besides that, it promoted collaboration, coordination, and exchange of support at regional level, as well as willingness for harmonisation and standardisation of MEAL systems. Below are some practical learnings and experience that illustrate some progress and benefits of this approach.

CHANGE IN PERCEPTION

The perception of staff around MEAL has improved due to the contribution made and quality of work produced during 2017 by MEAL advisors and heads of department in both the region and country offices, and since then related activities and positions have been dedicated to this function. Through an online satisfaction survey

(December 2017), several MEAL staff had some positive reflections:

- “Now everyone seeks our support while developing proposals, conducting assessments, and in all programme-related key decisions.”
- “Yes, entirely there was no MEAL in 2016, and we developed a MEAL culture.”
- “[...] My mission and I have a clear view about MEAL function and goals in the region.”

HUMAN RESOURCES

Currently MEAL is considered as a separate unit/department within most of the country offices in the Middle East. The MEAL structure has improved, meaning an increase in the number of relevant staff who also have clear roles and responsibilities at different levels. The guidance documents are available on the international MEAL space on the Intranet (No Hunger Forum).

THE REGIONAL MEAL INITIATIVE

The regional MEAL initiative started in late 2016. The process was initiated through a MEAL diagnostic, to study the existing MEAL systems, structure and functions within each country office at coordination and programme/project level. This participatory process identified the MEAL 'grey areas', challenges, needs and good practices. The process comprised an online survey addressed to coordination and field staff, followed by a documentary review and meetings with field teams, so the whole process lasted for 1-2 months per country team. The results were formulated into a report with a plan of action for each country office aiming to strengthen the existing MEAL systems. These results were then used to inform a regional MEAL strategy and the creation of several supporting documents (MEAL minimum standards, proposed structure, roles and responsibilities etc.), that country offices could use as guidance and adapt into their context.



INCREASED USE OF MEAL TOOLS IN MONITORING AND DATA MANAGEMENT

The country office MEAL focal points are now more engaged in proposal development, using the Action Against Hunger M&E Guidelines and Toolkit as a guidance document for developing indicators, designing M&E and measurement plans and standardised thematic tools in their routine and periodic monitoring processes. The project baseline and endline, post distribution monitoring, KAP studies and other programme surveys are now carried out in coordination with programmes while utilising these standard survey tools.

During the first Action Against Hunger regional MEAL workshop in July 2017, MEAL staff were trained on business intelligence software (Power BI) in collaboration with iMMAP, which aimed to address the challenges of data utilisation, data analysis, presentation and mapping faced by many teams in the field. The regional effort partnering with iMMAP was viewed as very productive for staff and Action Against Hunger in the region; iMMAP provided free practical training during this workshop, as well as customised training for the Syria and Lebanon office staff. This served as a start to building strong links between organisations. The existence of a regional office demonstrates the opportunity to benefit from these types of services, such as the iMMAP's project on capacity

building to NGOs/INGOs in the region (Jordan).²³

EVALUATION AND LEARNING

The Action Against Hunger Network is very rich in terms of technical resources and expertise in specific sectors. Although information sharing and coordination happens at a higher level between headquarters and field offices when they have direct management links, this was not previously the case for the Middle East country offices in relation to Action Against Hunger non-project implementing members. The decentralisation through regional offices enables better linkages and the provision of services across the Action Against Hunger network. Despite the fact that previously staff in the region were not even aware of the services provided by the ELA team in the UK in supporting the management of external evaluations, in 2017 several evaluations were conducted for Middle East projects, with technical support and guidance from the ELA team.

The regionalisation approach also connects headquarters and implementing countries especially in terms of communication, MEAL related support, sharing good practices, creating linkages with MEAL at network level, and cross country learning as a motivational factor for field offices to progress and bring innovation. **Regionalisation of MEAL functions has also been an opportunity to harmonise**

MEAL standards within the region and align them with the Headquarter MEAL strategy/approach and good practices. This hopefully creates a space for reflection and for generating a coherent MEAL system for Action Against Hunger as a network.



²³ <http://immap.org/office/jordan>

REFLECTIONS FROM MEAL AND REGIONAL FOCAL POINTS



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FOR TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Action Against Hunger International is a network of 6 members with 50 country offices worldwide. In the Middle East, we are a significant humanitarian player with eight country offices managed by two different headquarters. This means different MEAL approaches, different tools, and different levels of maturity with regards to MEAL standards. However, donors and, above all, beneficiaries, are global. They share the same expectations and needs. They deserve the same quality in our programming and it is our commitment to demonstrate in full transparency how we implement our operations. It is a question of legitimacy and credibility for all humanitarian organisations. Therefore, it was critical for us to go beyond the differences we may have within our network and propose a uniform methodology at regional level while respecting the specificities of each country office. [...]

This is particularly important because of the nature of the humanitarian crises we have to face in the region, manmade conflicts. One of the main constraints we have to face in the region is access. In such an environment, MEAL plays a bigger role. How can we guarantee to our donors and beneficiaries that assistance reaches the most vulnerable, the most in need? In the light of the recent allegations of sexual exploitation within humanitarian assistance, how can we make sure that

feedback and complaint mechanisms are well in place? Today, this is a joint responsibility of our country offices, the regional office and the headquarters. Zero tolerance is our principle; our MEAL departments put tools in place to make sure our principle is respected.

Arnaud Phipps, Regional Representative

THE RELEVANCE OF MEAL

The MEAL regional office has significantly contributed to cover the existing gap in our offices, where no MEAL department or MEAL specific positions have been approved until 2018. The excellence of the MEAL activities in the region has also contributed to visibility for the relevance of MEAL and the importance in harmonising and offering regular supervision and technical support to MEAL teams in the field. The MEAL regional office is highly relevant and much needed in order to build a common and strategic MEAL approach in the Action Against Hunger Network. The high technical quality of the Middle East Regional Office MEAL adviser in particular has helped us to increase the quality, knowledge and relevance of our key MEAL staff, and increase our MEAL outcomes.

Ana Martin, Quality Desk Officer Action Against Hunger Spain

REGIONALISATION AND EVALUATION

Action Against Hunger is evolving towards a decentralised model to make sure learnings are captured and utilised as close as possible to where programmes are implemented. The regionalisation of the evaluation capacity is essential since it demonstrates the value of contextual specificities in shaping relevant evaluation questions and the importance of recognising how much of a priority a certain issue is within a determined geography. For this reason, the role of MEAL support at the regional level is expanding its capacity across the Network to ensure evaluations generate learning that can be used in similar contexts.

The role of regionalisation in evaluation practice is particularly important in an evolving funding environment where unforeseeable risks and volatile contextual forces are defining factors to consider for the success of a programme. For these projects, the attempt to link multi-country evaluation evidence to regional approaches could further position Action Against Hunger as a reliable partner to implement global calls. The role of a MEAL support function at the regional level represents the essential step to maximise the uptake of recommendations produced from

evaluations across programmes that are increasingly larger and more complex, which large donors are keen to finance more than ever before.

As regional approaches in delivering large-scale contracts are increasingly preferred, the establishment of a network of regional MEAL focal points can yield greater returns when positioning evaluation evidence with relevant stakeholders and donors. For example, Action Against Hunger could optimise the use of evaluation evidence through the support of regional MEAL focal points to advocate for future funding with both private and public donors. There is great potential to use high-level change evidence cumulated from the previous years and having evaluation capacity at the regional level could help with using this.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though the decentralisation of MEAL has positive impact, there is still more to do at regional level as well as at network level.

1 Replicating a decentralised model

The decentralisation model including MEAL as functional area could be extended to other country offices that do not currently have additional regional structures. The support can be extended by linking the respective country with a regional focal person to obtain ad hoc support as and when required. As an example of these linkages, the Georgia team managed to participate in the 2017 Regional MEAL workshop.

2 Harmonisation of MEAL standards

Every Action Against Hunger Headquarter with direct management of projects²⁴ has minimum MEAL standards. These standards vary for each headquarter. It is often quite difficult for a regional focal person to harmonise MEAL systems or staff roles and responsibilities for country offices under different headquarter's management in same region. Even if MEAL systems are harmonised it can be difficult to implement because of different priorities. Therefore, the Network should consider developing common MEAL standards approved by all members and which can be adapted based on the context and donor requirements.

24 Action Against Hunger in France, Spain and USA.

3 Staff Retention and localisation of MEAL Positions

In 2016-2017, there was high turnover of MEAL staff. Those who started the MEAL diagnostic process are no more in the country offices. The turnover is not limited to the MEAL but at all levels (Management, Operations, Technical roles). As a consequence, the effort and time to hire new teams, handover existing work, introduce newcomers to MEAL practices and build good working relationships takes considerably more time. As a recommendation, we should consider our MEAL staff development plans in a way that allow a smooth handover process, managing an additional level, and retaining staff for longer by investing in professional development and building national staff capacity.

4 MEAL at Project Design Stage

The engagement of MEAL staff in proposal design stage is very important for proposal quality, project implementation and the monitoring of results. It has been observed that sometimes project indicators are not properly aligned with results, which leads to poor MEAL budgeting and later quality issues evident at implementation stage. This could be improved through exchange of information within units, capacity building of Grants Officers and proposal writers on MEAL standards and vice versa.

5 MEAL integration in Technical Trainings/ Workshops

Annual technical workshops are among the good practices of the Action Against

Hunger Network. Engagement of MEAL staff in these trainings can be very productive for cross learning, sharing and understanding of thematic programmes, new developments and future planning. This will not only help MEAL teams to understand the technical aspects of programmes and to better support them in measuring the sector-specific indicators, but also provide project staff with quality survey design, data analysis and visualisation skills.

6 MEAL and Accountability

Accountability is a key requirement for every donor, organisation, government and community. Action Against Hunger has developed various accountability systems such as Whistleblowing, Child protection and Risk Management policies, as well as Accountability guidelines and Feedback and Complaint mechanisms specific to field offices or projects. However, awareness on these policies and guidelines needs to be further strengthened. Therefore awareness raising sessions, meetings, and information sharing through dissemination of information education & communication materials are useful. The MEAL country teams should lead on international quality standards (Core Humanitarian Standard, etc.) and beneficiary accountability mechanisms to improve and strengthen the existing systems, especially in relation to registering and responding to complaints and feedback from beneficiaries.