ADE
Evidence for better policy

DATA-POP ALLIANCE

Improving Decision-Making through Data-Enabled Learning

Concept Note
September 2022

Motivation

Evidence-based and agile decision-making is essential to the success of any policy, programme, or project, especially in times of turmoil and uncertainty. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems are meant to report on the progress and impacts of specific interventions. However, traditional M&E systems mostly assess activities and outputs, often falling short of rigorously measuring outcomes and impacts. Accountability standards are hence only partly met, and learning opportunities are often overlooked.

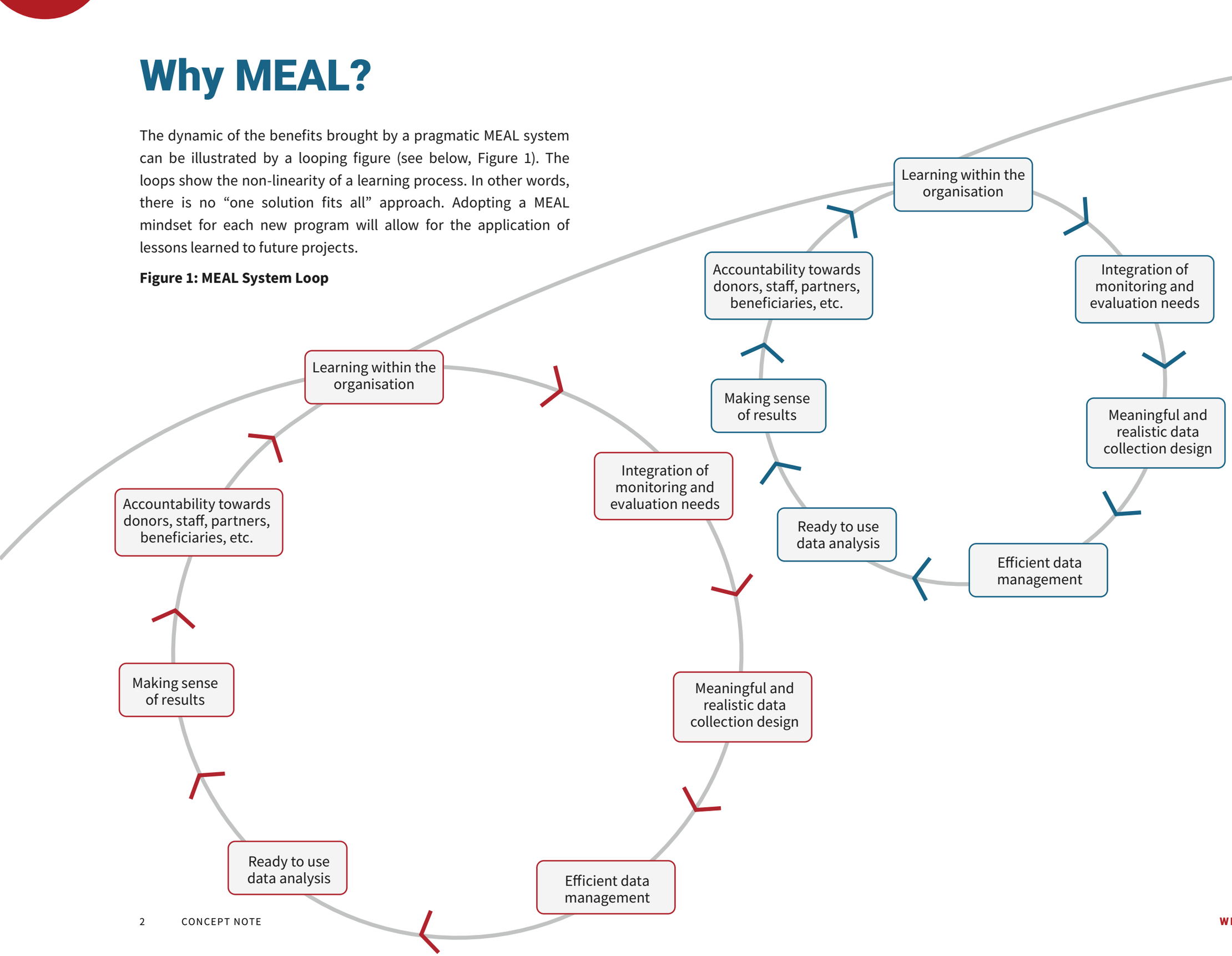
In recent years, the international development community, aware of the shortcomings of standard M&E, has expanded the scope of M&E systems to include learning components (thus changing the shorthand from M&E to MEL), and more recently, accountability (from MEL to MEAL). The aim of these two additions is multifold: to create more comprehensive monitoring systems; to enable researchers to conduct outcomes and impact assessments using the most appropriate tools and methods; to maintain active engagement of key stakeholders; and finally, to meet accountability standards while fostering continuous learning.

While this trend represents progress, based on our analysis of the current state of the field, we think adoption of and improvements in MEAL systems need to be faster, deeper, and broader to fully leverage the opportunities created by new digital data and technologies and meet new societal demands. Today and in the future, institutions need end-to-end data-enabled MEAL systems that allow for the specification and quantification of the expected objectives of an intervention, assessing its effects in near real-time through a broad lens, adjusting when needed, and drawing lessons for continuous improvement. Importantly, the opportunities and “pain points” of developing and deploying such next generation MEAL systems are as much cultural as they are technical. In other words, factors such as data literacy and mindset, as well as digital infrastructure and systems will determine the extent to which MEAL systems will be effectively and sustainably implemented.

Why MEAL?

The dynamic of the benefits brought by a pragmatic MEAL system can be illustrated by a looping figure (see below, Figure 1). The loops show the non-linearity of a learning process. In other words, there is no “one solution fits all” approach. Adopting a MEAL mindset for each new program will allow for the application of lessons learned to future projects.

Figure 1: MEAL System Loop



The first requirement when setting up any MEAL system is developing a framework that integrates monitoring and evaluation needs and goes hand in hand with accountability and learning objectives. Operationalizing such a system requires having access to the relevant (first-hand or existing) data through a meaningful and realistic data collection design.

A well-designed MEAL system also provides a harmonised and integrated data management system, enabling efficient data analysis and interpretation, making reporting easier.

A pragmatic MEAL system is designed within constraints (time, budget, skills), hence balancing ambitions with available resources of the system itself, as well as the program activities, objectives and implementation processes. By providing ready-to-use data, it can also provide valuable inputs for external evaluation, hence saving time and money.

Finally, a fully operational MEAL system provides information for accountability requirements - to donors, staff, partners, beneficiaries -, as well as lessons learned for the organisation as a whole.

Weaknesses in current M&E, MEL or MEAL systems

Significant efforts have been made by the international development community, governments, and private companies towards designing and implementing these systems. In practice, however, a number of factors weaken their ability to reach the intended objectives.

Throughout our long experience in evaluation, we have observed important gaps in all building blocks of these systems. The most common weaknesses in the four building blocks are listed in the table below.

Table 1: Building blocks of MEAL systems and identified weaknesses

Building blocks	Weaknesses
M&E Design	• Poorly designed theory of change, with unclear causal chain of results (especially regarding outcomes and impact levels) • Theories of Change rarely used as a backbone of the M&E system • Lack of relevant indicators to assess intended results • No clear link between indicators and ToC results boxes • Inappropriate/insufficient identification of data sources to populate indicators • Lack of strategy to assess contribution/measure attribution • Lack of inclusive process in the design to take into account different stakeholders' perspectives, reality and objectives • Lack of effective M&E implementation plan
Data collection and management	• Poor quality of first-hand data collection process (quantitative and/or qualitative) • Little use of relevant publicly accessible data • Poor data management (database architecture, data storage, integration of different data sources, etc.)
Data analysis and interpretation	• Lack of internal skills to rigorously analyse quantitative/qualitative data • Lack of sensemaking process to validate results interpretation and derive lessons learned • Lack of powerful communication skills (data visualisation, focus on key messages for specific stakeholders, etc.)
Right incentives	• Fear of being monitored often outweighs learning opportunities • Results-based management often dominated by donors' budget spending rules • Disintegrated approach (siloed' process) leading to inefficiencies and lack of engagement • Time consuming, complex, and little rewarding tasks • Lack of vision of the use and utility of such system (outside 'tick the box' accountability purposes) • Insufficient resources (time/skills) to meet objectives/ambitions

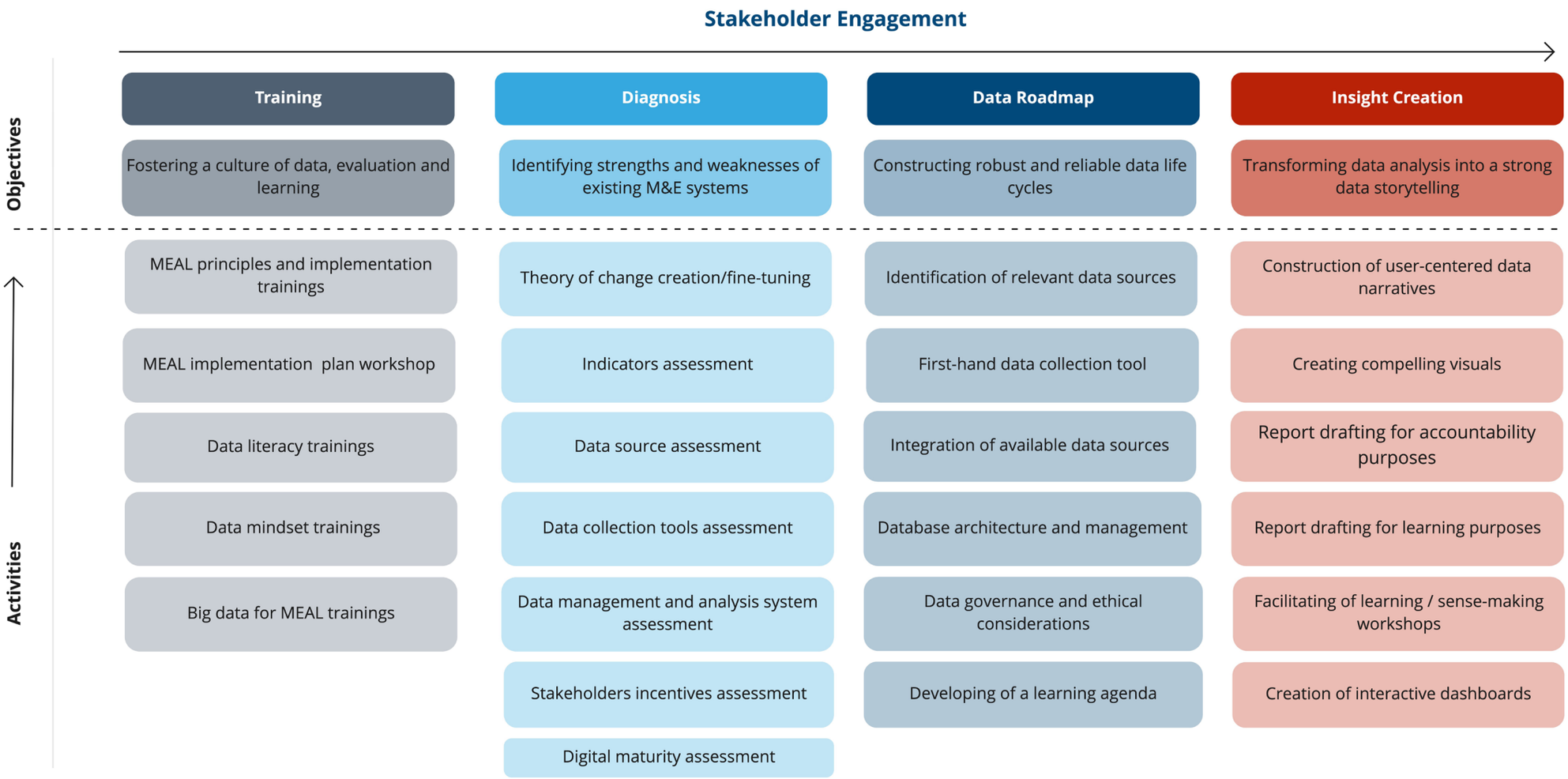
Proposed services

Because most institutions' M&E, MEL, or MEAL systems face one or several of these issues, ADE and DPA have created WinD-MEAL, a portfolio of services aimed to build and improve MEAL systems, with a focus on accountability (A) up to impact, and on learning perspectives (L) to generate continuous meaningful knowledge to support better decision-making. Based on our experience and values, ADE and DPA develop MEAL systems that are participative, relevant, reliable, realistic, agile, and impact-oriented.

The WinD-MEAL service portfolio includes a series of activities that can be combined in a modular manner, depending on the requirements and needs of the client. The MEAL system could be created from scratch or adapted to an existing system, integrating different sources of data and meeting different accountability and learning objectives.

To minimise potential issues related to the four building blocks of a MEAL system, we identify four pillars of action where our expertise brings added value: training, diagnosis, data management, and insight creation, with stakeholder engagement being an essential ingredient for a successful MEAL journey. In each pillar of action, several activities, which can be combined in a modular way, are proposed (see below).

Figure 2: WIND-MEAL modules



Potential application domains

Based on ADE and DPA's expertise and areas of work[1], a WIND-MEAL solution can be adapted to many different settings. Over the past years, ADE and DPA have developed continuous experience in various domains where WIND-MEAL could bring an added-value for better decision-making.

D4D projects remain largely unmeasured and unassessed, limiting the potential for informed digital-related policy making, and instead leading to decisions being made based on anecdotal evidence. Despite 95% of the population living within a range of a mobile broadband network, the digital divide affects a third of the global population (almost 3 billion people)[2]. Digital for Development (D4D) projects aim to better mainstream information and communication technologies (ICTs) in least developed countries as an enabler of sustainable development. However, the lack of reliable monitoring related to D4D projects risks hampering the achievement of their full potential.

International efforts to achieve the full participation of women in the economy are not meeting their expectations. Data on the gender gap in labour force participation shows that the global gender parity has been slowly decreasing since 2009, with COVID-19 bringing this trend to new lows in 2020 and 2021[3]. These developments point to the need for rethinking how interventions are designed and implemented to ensure that gender equality is sustainably achieved.

Entrepreneurship and the development of the private sector in least-developed countries take place in a highly dynamic context. Factors such as high levels of informality or low financial access hamper the sustainability of new businesses. This also poses the challenge for policy-making to ensure fostering the right business environment while accounting for systemic constraints.[4] Robust MEAL systems can play a key role in the understanding of how such policies can be designed to achieve the intended impact.

The consequences of climate change call for action through holistic approaches. For instance, sustainable forest management aims to ensure that forest activities deliver social, environmental and economic benefits, while safeguarding the current and future preservation of the ecosystems[5]. Implementing coherent and consistent data cycles in this process is key to ensure the monitoring of socio-cultural and environmental objectives.

1. See DPA's Overview and Outlook 2021-2023 and ADE's areas of expertise for more information.
2. World Economic Forum. URL.
3. World Economic Forum. URL.

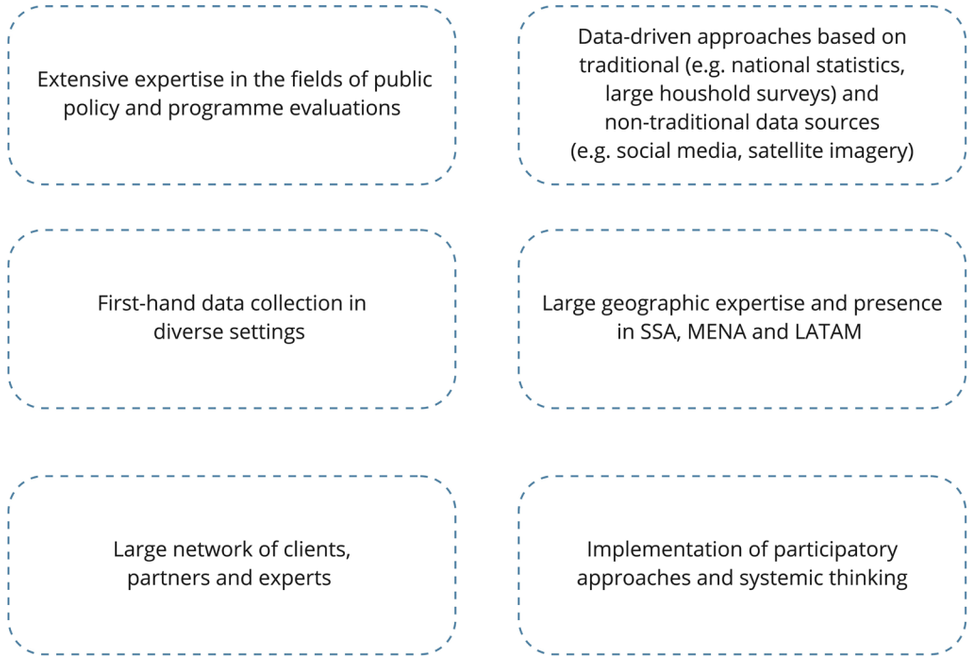
ADE and DPA partnership

Since 2019, ADE and DPA have established strong ties in the evaluation of programmes and policies in international development for different clients and covering a wide range of geographical areas. ADE and DPA have complementary expertise bringing true comparative advantage in the MEAL ecosystem.

ADE has a strong experience in conducting rigorous impact evaluations, but also in more classic program/project, strategic and thematic evaluations for various donors, implying different types of implementing partners (e.g., civil society, private and public sector) in different regions of the world. ADE has developed a thorough understanding of the needs and objectives of building sustainable MEAL systems to extract the most of what these systems can offer to enhance better decision-making. For example, rigorous impact evaluations would become much cheaper, hence more accessible if rigorous and effective MEAL systems were of better quality and in place from the start of a programme. Moreover, ADE has strong in-house expertise to collect appropriate first-hand data and integrate them with other publicly available data sources (e.g., satellite data, DHS data, etc.) and make sense of these various sources of information to generate learning and also meet accountability purposes.

4. World Bank. URL.
5. PEFC. URL.; FAO. URL.

Figure 3: Added value of ADE-DPA partnership



Data-Pop Alliance (DPA) is a collaborative laboratory created by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, MIT Connection Science, and the Overseas Development Institute. It brings together researchers, experts, practitioners, and activists to change the world with data through three pillars of work: diagnosing local realities and human problems with data and AI; mobilising capacities, communities, and ideas towards more data literate societies; and, ultimately, transforming the systems and processes that underpin our societies and countries. Positioned as a 'Think-and-do Lab', DPA's mission is to leverage and shape data and technologies to contribute to fairer, safer, and more sustainable human societies, especially in countries and communities in the Global South.

Past projects and collaboration

Strategic Evaluation of WFP's use of technologies in constrained environments: This evaluation looked at the extent to which WFP has effectively and efficiently deployed the most appropriate Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and how, why and under which conditions the use of technologies has contributed to management and program objectives. The team designed a mixed methods approach consistent with WFP's proposed analytical framework and outlined the factors affecting technological innovation and diffusion. In addition, six case studies were conducted in Jordan, Niger, Iraq, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Bangladesh.

Impact Evaluation of Min Ajliki on women's entrepreneurship and employability in Morocco (Belgian Development Cooperation): ADE conducted a full impact evaluation - from baseline to endline - on a sample of around 1500 women using a mixed method approach with a quasi-experimental and an experimental design, respecting ethical considerations for four different types of beneficiaries. Creative data collection tools were developed to adapt to the low literate target population and measure key indicators such as welfare and empowerment, but also revenue and business development. This impact evaluation was designed in collaboration with key stakeholders to enhance learning on methodological aspects (capacity building) and program results (accountability and improvement for future projects) and to serve as the basis for the current MEAL system of the next program.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Forest Legality Enforcement Governance and Trade Voluntary Partnership Agreements (FLEGT-VPA) in timber-producing countries (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guyana, Honduras, Indonesia, Republic of Congo): ADE used a theory-based and cross-country approach to evaluate the impact of the FLEGT-VPA process. Relying on in-depth reflection on the theory of change, ADE conducted an experience-based survey (100

participants per country) using an innovative mixed-method data collection tool to collect individual data in group sessions (CAPI-G®).

NRC Digital Maturity Assessment – Methodology Development and Implementation: DPA developed a Digital Maturity Assessment (DMA) framework to provide Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Country Offices (COs) with a tool to self-assess their digital transformation journey based on the perceptions and experiences of its staff. The DMA framework is the analytical background guiding the calculation of a Digital Maturity Score that measures the level of digital transformation in the COs from the perspective of (1) the digital ecosystem, data, and tech management; (2) user-centricity and digital inclusion; (3) digital mindset, literacy, and innovation; (4) strategy, governance, policies, and frameworks; (5) investment and partnerships. The DMA was tested in the COs in Bangladesh and Sudan. The results and outputs of these pilots were made available in an interactive dashboard created to facilitate the visualisation and extraction of insights.

School Health Sector Evaluation - Sector Refinancing Scenarios: ADE conducted an economic study to capture the financial and human resources needed to carry out the missions of the school health sector in French-speaking Belgium. Based on the development of a grid of indicators and an efficiency analysis, ADE then proposed several options for financing mechanisms as part of the gradual refinancing of the sector. This project included an institutional assessment and a large remote survey using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data collection.

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