



Children Relief Service (CRS)

Dzaleka Dowa, P.O Box 16 Dowa, Malawi

MONITORING, EVALUATION, ACCOUNTABILITY & LEARNING (MEAL) POLICY

Organization: Children Relief Service (CRS)

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1. POLICY STATEMENT

Children Relief Service (CRS) is committed to delivering programmes that are relevant, effective, accountable, inclusive, evidence-informed, and responsive to the needs and priorities of the communities it serves.

CRS recognises that monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning are essential to understanding whether its programmes are achieving meaningful and sustainable results. CRS will use reliable information, community feedback, programme evidence, reflection, and learning to improve its work and strengthen the impact of its programmes.

MEAL is a responsibility shared across CRS. It is not only the responsibility of programme staff or a designated MEAL function. Staff, volunteers, leadership, community representatives, and other relevant stakeholders all contribute to organisational learning and accountability.

2. PURPOSE OF THE POLICY

The purpose of this Policy is to establish CRS's approach to:

- a) monitoring programme implementation and progress;
- b) measuring outputs, outcomes, and where appropriate longer-term changes;
- c) evaluating programme relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact;
- d) ensuring accountability to communities and programme participants;
- e) collecting and using reliable programme data;
- f) promoting learning and adaptation;
- g) strengthening evidence-based decision-making;
- h) meeting appropriate donor and partner reporting requirements; and
- i) continuously improving CRS programmes and organisational performance.

3. SCOPE

This Policy applies to all CRS programmes, projects, activities, and organisational functions where monitoring, evaluation, accountability, data collection, reporting, or learning is relevant.

It applies to:

- a) the Board of Directors;
- b) the Executive Director and management;
- c) programme staff;
- d) MEAL personnel or designated MEAL responsibilities;
- e) finance and administration personnel where programme data is relevant;
- f) volunteers and community-based workers involved in data collection;
- g) consultants and evaluators engaged by CRS; and
- h) implementing partners where applicable.

4. DEFINITIONS

Monitoring means the systematic collection and review of information about programme implementation, activities, outputs, progress, risks, and results.

Evaluation means a systematic assessment of a programme, project, intervention, or organisational activity to understand its relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, outcomes, or impact.

Accountability means CRS's responsibility to listen to communities and stakeholders, provide appropriate information, respond to concerns, explain decisions, and use feedback to improve its work.

Learning means the process of reflecting on evidence and experience to understand what worked, what did not work, why it happened, and how CRS can improve.

Indicator means a measurable variable used to track progress or change.

Output means the immediate product or service delivered through programme activities.

Outcome means a change that occurs as a result of programme interventions and contributions.

Impact means broader or longer-term changes to which a programme may contribute.

Baseline means information collected before or at the beginning of an intervention against which later progress may be assessed.

Target means the intended level of achievement for an indicator within a defined period.

Data quality means the extent to which programme information is accurate, complete, consistent, timely, relevant, and reliable.

5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

CRS MEAL activities will be guided by the following principles:

5.1 Accountability to Communities

CRS will seek to remain accountable to children, youth, women, families, and communities participating in or affected by its programmes.

5.2 Participation

Where appropriate and safe, programme participants and communities will be involved in identifying needs, defining priorities, reviewing progress, and assessing programme results.

5.3 Do No Harm

Data collection, evaluation, consultations, and feedback mechanisms must not expose participants to unnecessary risks or harm.

5.4 Inclusion

CRS will seek to ensure that monitoring and evaluation processes consider the experiences and needs of different groups, including children, women, persons with disabilities, and other potentially marginalised groups.

5.5 Evidence-Based Decision-Making

CRS will use credible evidence and programme data to inform decisions, while recognising the importance of community knowledge and lived experience.

5.6 Data Protection

Programme data and personal information will be handled securely and in accordance with the CRS Privacy Policy and Data Protection & Confidentiality Policy.

5.7 Transparency

CRS will promote honest reporting of both achievements and challenges. Programme results must not be deliberately exaggerated or misrepresented.

5.8 Learning and Adaptation

CRS will treat learning as a continuous process and will adapt programmes when evidence shows that changes are necessary.

6. CRS MEAL FRAMEWORK

CRS MEAL consists of four interconnected areas:

Monitoring

Tracking implementation, progress, outputs, indicators, risks, and resources.

Evaluation

Assessing programme performance, relevance, effectiveness, outcomes, sustainability, and impact where appropriate.

Accountability

Listening to communities, communicating information, receiving feedback, responding to complaints, and ensuring people can raise concerns safely.

Learning

Reflecting on evidence, documenting lessons, sharing knowledge, and adapting

programmes.

These four areas should inform one another rather than operate as separate activities.

7. PROGRAMME DESIGN AND MEAL

CRS programmes should incorporate MEAL considerations during programme design.

Where appropriate, programme proposals and plans should identify:

- a) the problem or need being addressed;
- b) intended beneficiaries and stakeholders;
- c) programme objectives;
- d) expected outputs and outcomes;
- e) indicators;
- f) targets;
- g) data sources;
- h) data collection methods;
- i) responsibilities;
- j) reporting arrangements;
- k) risks and assumptions;
- l) accountability and feedback mechanisms; and
- m) learning questions.

8. MONITORING

CRS will monitor programme implementation regularly and proportionately to the size, complexity, duration, and risk of each programme.

Monitoring may include:

- a) activity tracking;
- b) beneficiary or participant records;
- c) distribution records;
- d) training attendance;
- e) service delivery records;
- f) field observations;
- g) community feedback;
- h) progress against indicators;
- i) financial and budget monitoring where appropriate;
- j) photographs or other programme evidence where ethically collected;
- k) partner reports;
- l) surveys;
- m) interviews and focus group discussions; and
- n) other appropriate methods.

9. INDICATORS AND TARGETS

CRS will use appropriate indicators to measure programme progress.

Indicators should be:

- a) relevant to programme objectives;
- b) clearly defined;
- c) measurable where possible;
- d) practical to collect;
- e) appropriately disaggregated where useful; and
- f) reviewed when programme circumstances change.

Targets should be realistic and based on available evidence, programme capacity, resources, and community needs.

10. DATA COLLECTION

CRS will use appropriate quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

Data collection should be:

- a) relevant to programme decisions;
- b) proportionate to the purpose;
- c) conducted by appropriately trained personnel;
- d) respectful of participants;
- e) sensitive to safeguarding and protection risks;
- f) conducted with appropriate consent where required; and
- g) consistent with CRS data protection standards.

CRS will avoid collecting personal information that is unnecessary for legitimate programme purposes.

11. DATA QUALITY

CRS will seek to ensure that programme data is:

- a) accurate;
- b) complete;
- c) consistent;
- d) timely;
- e) relevant;
- f) verifiable where appropriate; and
- g) securely maintained.

Reasonable data quality checks may include:

- a) reviewing source documents;
- b) checking calculations;
- c) comparing reported information with available records;
- d) reviewing unusual or inconsistent figures;
- e) conducting verification visits; and
- f) providing training and guidance to data collectors.

12. DATA DISAGGREGATION

Where appropriate and safe, CRS may disaggregate programme data by relevant characteristics such as:

- a) age group;
- b) gender;
- c) disability status;
- d) location;
- e) programme category; or
- f) other characteristics relevant to understanding programme inclusion and outcomes.

Disaggregation must not expose individuals to unnecessary risks or compromise confidentiality.

13. EVALUATION

CRS may conduct evaluations at appropriate stages of programmes.

Evaluations may assess:

- a) relevance;
- b) effectiveness;
- c) efficiency;
- d) outcomes;
- e) sustainability;
- f) impact where measurable;
- g) inclusion;
- h) accountability;
- i) safeguarding considerations; and
- j) lessons for future programming.

The scope and methodology of an evaluation should be proportionate to the programme's size, resources, complexity, and importance.

14. BASELINES AND ENDLINES

Where appropriate, CRS may conduct baseline assessments before or at the beginning of a programme and endline assessments toward the conclusion of a programme.

Baseline and endline information may be used to understand changes over time.

Where a formal baseline or endline is not practical, CRS may use alternative evidence appropriate to the programme.

15. COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY

CRS recognises programme participants and communities as important stakeholders in programme accountability.

CRS will seek to:

- a) provide relevant information about programmes;
- b) explain programme objectives and eligibility criteria where appropriate;

- c) communicate relevant changes;
- d) provide opportunities for feedback;
- e) make complaints mechanisms known;
- f) listen to community concerns;
- g) respond to reasonable feedback; and
- h) use community perspectives to improve programmes.

16. FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS

Feedback and complaints received through programme activities should be handled in accordance with the CRS Complaints, Feedback & Whistleblowing Policy.

MEAL processes should capture relevant trends and lessons from feedback while protecting personal and confidential information.

17. SAFEGUARDING IN MEAL

MEAL activities involving children or vulnerable people must comply with the CRS Child Safeguarding Policy, GBV Policy, PSEA Policy, Communications Policy, Privacy Policy, and Data Protection & Confidentiality Policy.

Children must not be involved in research, interviews, photography, surveys, or other data collection activities merely for convenience.

Appropriate safeguards must be considered before collecting information from children or other vulnerable participants.

18. CONSENT AND PARTICIPATION

CRS will seek appropriate informed consent or other required permissions when collecting information from programme participants.

Participants should understand, as appropriate:

- a) why information is being collected;
- b) how it may be used;
- c) whether participation is voluntary;
- d) any relevant risks;
- e) how confidentiality will be handled; and
- f) that they may decline participation where appropriate.

Participation in data collection should not be used to pressure people into receiving or maintaining access to CRS services.

19. PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION

MEAL data containing personal or sensitive information must be handled in accordance with CRS's Privacy Policy and Data Protection & Confidentiality Policy.

CRS will seek to:

- a) collect only necessary information;
- b) restrict access to authorised personnel;

- c) store information securely;
- d) protect identifiable information;
- e) avoid unnecessary sharing of personal information; and
- f) retain or dispose of information appropriately.

20. REPORTING

CRS will produce appropriate internal, community, donor, partner, or other reports based on reliable programme information.

Reports should:

- a) present results accurately;
- b) distinguish activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact;
- c) explain significant challenges;
- d) identify important deviations from plans;
- e) document relevant lessons; and
- f) avoid deliberately misleading claims.

CRS will not knowingly inflate beneficiary numbers, programme achievements, or impact.

21. LEARNING

CRS will promote learning through:

- a) programme review meetings;
- b) reflection sessions;
- c) after-action reviews;
- d) staff discussions;
- e) community feedback;
- f) evaluation findings;
- g) documentation of good practices;
- h) identification of challenges and failures;
- i) sharing lessons across programmes; and
- j) adaptation of future programme design.

CRS recognises that honest discussion of challenges and failures is essential for organisational learning.

22. ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Where monitoring, feedback, evaluation, or other evidence indicates that a programme is not achieving its intended results, CRS may revise activities, implementation approaches, targets, timelines, or other programme elements.

Significant changes should be documented and, where relevant, communicated to appropriate donors, partners, management, or other stakeholders.

23. MEAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Board of Directors

The Board provides oversight of organisational performance, accountability, risk, and learning.

Executive Director

The Executive Director ensures that MEAL is integrated into CRS planning, programme management, accountability, and organisational decision-making.

Programme Team

Programme staff are responsible for implementing agreed monitoring activities, maintaining appropriate records, reporting results, and using evidence to improve implementation.

MEAL Personnel or Assigned MEAL Focal Point

Where CRS has dedicated MEAL personnel or assigns MEAL responsibilities, they will support:

- a) MEAL planning;
- b) indicator development;
- c) data quality;
- d) monitoring;
- e) evaluation;
- f) accountability mechanisms;
- g) learning activities; and
- h) evidence-based programme improvement.

Finance and Administration

Relevant finance and administration personnel will support the accuracy and reconciliation of information where financial and programme data intersect.

Staff and Volunteers

Staff and volunteers involved in data collection must collect and report information honestly and responsibly.

24. PARTNER AND CONSULTANT RESPONSIBILITIES

Where CRS works with partners, consultants, enumerators, or external evaluators, appropriate MEAL responsibilities should be clearly established.

CRS will seek to ensure that external parties handling CRS programme information comply with applicable CRS requirements relating to:

- a) data quality;
- b) confidentiality;
- c) safeguarding;
- d) privacy;

- e) ethical data collection; and
- f) reporting.

25. USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL DATA

CRS may use digital tools for data collection, analysis, storage, monitoring, communication, and reporting.

Digital systems must be selected and used with appropriate consideration for:

- a) data protection;
- b) access controls;
- c) confidentiality;
- d) security;
- e) reliability;
- f) participant safety; and
- g) responsible use of personal information.

26. MEAL DOCUMENTATION

CRS may maintain appropriate MEAL documentation, including:

- a) programme monitoring plans;
- b) indicator tracking tools;
- c) beneficiary or participant records;
- d) baseline and assessment reports;
- e) evaluation reports;
- f) feedback summaries;
- g) monitoring reports;
- h) learning briefs;
- i) programme review records; and
- j) other relevant evidence.

27. USE OF MEAL INFORMATION

MEAL information may be used to:

- a) improve programme implementation;
- b) inform strategic decisions;
- c) identify risks;
- d) strengthen accountability;
- e) demonstrate results;
- f) support fundraising and proposal development;
- g) inform organisational planning;
- h) meet appropriate reporting requirements; and
- i) strengthen CRS's overall effectiveness.

28. ETHICAL USE OF EVIDENCE

CRS will not manipulate, fabricate, deliberately misrepresent, or selectively distort programme data to create a misleading impression of programme performance. Where results are below expectations, CRS will seek to understand the reasons and identify appropriate corrective action.

29. MONITORING MEAL PERFORMANCE

CRS will periodically review the effectiveness of its own MEAL systems.

This may include reviewing:

- a) data quality;
- b) timeliness of reporting;
- c) use of programme evidence;
- d) community participation;
- e) complaints and feedback trends;
- f) evaluation findings;
- g) implementation of learning recommendations; and
- h) staff capacity.

30. POLICY REVIEW

This Policy will be reviewed periodically and may be updated based on organisational learning, programme experience, changes in operational requirements, or emerging good practice.

31. APPROVAL

Organisation: Children Relief Service (CRS)

Policy: Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability & Learning (MEAL) Policy

Approved by: Board of Directors

Effective Date: September 2026

Review Date: September 2028

Policy Owner: Executive Director

Version: 1.0