Survey on starting career in M&E – synthesis of results

Introduction

Thanks to everybody who participated in this survey. Unfortunately, and quite disappointingly, considering the pool of potential participants reached – more than 12,000 impressions on LinkedIn – only a small number of participants (n= 53) completed the survey, yielding results that are highly non-generalizable, but informative nonetheless.

Methodological notes:

- When the percentages add up to more than 100%, the questions allowed for multiple answers.
- Redundancies in the responses are due to the fact that I wanted to build the questionnaire quickly and get a general idea of the field, so I didn't pay much attention to precision. Also, my knowledge of M&E and MEAL is almost entirely theoretical – I have never worked in the field – so many imprecisions are due to my lack of knowledge about actual practice.

Personal information

Most of the participants are between the ages of 30–39 (47.2%), followed by 40–49 (22.6%) and 18–29 (17%). Most of them work in meridional Asia (India: 13.2%; Pakistan: 11.3%), Africa, and the Middle East (>20%). The absolute majority of them are nationals (90.6%).

Education, Training, and Languages

Most of the participants have acquired a Master's (69.8%) or a Bachelor's (24.5%), mostly in the fields of Social Sciences (28.3%), Economic and Business Management (22.6%), and Environmental and Climate Studies (13.2%). They have also acquired specific training in M&E or MEAL on the job (56.6%), as part of their academic formation (24.5%), or on the job (17%). Many of the participants work in their mother tongue (35.8%), with English being the most commonly used language (94.3%), followed by French (11.3%) and Spanish (5.7%).

Experience and Job Status

Most of the respondents have 5+ years of experience (58.5%; 2–5 years: 22.6%; 0–2 years: 18.9%) and found their jobs through networking (32.1%), online job platforms (49.1%), and recruitment agencies (18.9%).

While 18.9% of them are unemployed, most work in small NGOs/local organizations (30.2%) or consultancy firms (13.2%). Other well-represented organizations are intergovernmental (7.5%) and large non-governmental organizations (17%).

Job roles are spread mainly across mid-level officer/specialist (35.8%), senior manager/team lead (20.8%), junior officer/specialist (13.2%), and consultant (11.3%), while all considered sectors are well represented: health (54.7%), education (43.4%), food security/nutrition (32.1%), water, sanitation & hygiene (28.3%), protection/human rights (24.5%), livelihoods/economic development (49.1%), governance and policy (22.6%), emergency response/humanitarian assistance (26.4%), and environment/climate change (28.3%).

Almost all participants work in monitoring (94.3%) and evaluation (86.8%), while learning (69.8%) and accountability (49.1%) are less represented.

The activities mostly performed are data collection/field surveys (84.9%), reporting and documentation (86.8%), followed by data analysis and visualization (77.4%), frameworks design (73.6%), training and capacity building (69.8%), indicator development and tracking (69.8%), and conducting evaluations (64.2%).

On the data side, quantitative and qualitative data analysis are evenly represented (17%), while the majority of respondents employ mixed methods (66%).

As for the most demanded skills in the future, the participants indicated framework development (62.3%), data and statistical skills (75.5%), and data visualization skills (64.2%).

Mostly, in their jobs participants employ a mix of standardized and custom tools (67.9%).

Consultancy

Among those who have worked as consultants (64.2%), most of them work sporadically (73.9%), with the majority having 2 to 6 months between contracts (50%); 0–2 months (22.7%) and 6–12 months (27.3%) are the other categories. Only 21.4% regard consultancy as their main activity.

Regarding employees, participants report that the most job opportunities have been offered by international NGOs (70%), donor agencies (30%), contracts (30%), and the United Nations (20%).

Job Development

Online job platforms (75%), social networks (67.3%), employers' websites (51.9%), and recruitment agencies (40.4%) are considered the most effective ways to find a job in MEAL, followed mainly by word of mouth (34.6%) and volunteer experience (26.9%). Most of the participants attribute importance in finding a job to networking (67.9%) and being physically present in the country of intervention (very important: 32.1%; somewhat important: 50.9%).

Challenges Faced at the Beginning of the Career

Overall, the main obstacle was accessing the first job due to a lack of experience, combined with limited practical knowledge of MEAL systems and frameworks, insufficient training and mentoring, and poor understanding and support of the MEAL role within organizations.

Specifically, the following **topics** emerged:

1. Lack of Experience and Difficulty Entering the Sector

The most frequently cited challenge was obtaining the first job due to the requirement for prior experience. Many started as volunteers or faced difficulties finding opportunities, also due to funding cuts, preference for international experts, or few available vacancies.

2. Limited Technical and Theoretical Knowledge of MEAL

Many reported an initial insufficient understanding of key concepts (inputs, outputs, outcomes, impact), MEAL frameworks, logframes, indicators, KPIs, and monitoring systems. Several highlighted a gap between academic theory and practical application.

3. Lack of Training, Mentoring, and Guidance

The absence of initial training, structured support, or mentoring made it difficult to develop practical skills and understand the daily responsibilities of the role.

4. Technical Skills and Data Management

Some struggled with statistical software and data management systems (SPSS, STATA, MIS), data cleaning, statistical analysis, and understanding the information needs of projects.

5. Limited Understanding and Support for MEAL from Organizations and Colleagues

Often, MEAL was poorly understood or seen as a control tool rather than a support function. Some employers did not clearly understand MEAL requirements, lacked standardized systems, or faced resistance from program teams.

6. Operational and Systemic Challenges

These include poor data quality, inadequate systems, limited resources and funding, difficulties in stakeholder engagement, and a weak culture of evidence-based learning.

7. **Transition from Other Sectors or Non-MEAL Backgrounds**

Some found it difficult to enter the sector coming from other fields or without a specific academic background in M&E or statistics.

Key Advice for Aspiring M&E/MEAL Officers

The main recommendation given by participants to those who want to enter in the field of MEAL, is to combine theoretical and practical training, gain field experience, develop transferable skills, and seek mentorship and networking to understand both the data and the program context.

Summary of Practical Advice for Aspiring M&E/MEAL Officers:

1. **Continuous Learning and Education:**
   - Take online courses, diplomas, PGDs, and certifications
   - Read manuals, organizational guides, and books on MEAL
   - Study statistics, data analysis, GIS, and software such as Excel, Power BI, Stata, R, or Python
2. **Practical and Field-Based Learning:**
   - Do internships, trainee positions, or small practical assignments
   - Work with real tools: logframes, indicator tracking, dashboards, questionnaires
   - Learn to turn data into programmatic decisions
3. **Understanding Programs and the Bigger Picture**
   - Learn the programmatic side of projects before focusing on MEAL
   - Understand the results framework, indicators, and objectives vs. outputs
   - Be aware of the operational context and processes driving projects
4. **Mentorship, Networking, and Learning from Experts**
   - Find a mentor or work alongside senior evaluators
   - Participate in networks, shadowing, and cross-sector collaborations
   - Study experiences from organizations such as Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee
5. **Developing Transferable Skills**
   - Project management, theory of change, reporting, and communication
   - Systematic approach and attention to detail
   - Curiosity, commitment, perseverance, a strong work ethic, and passion for data