

# MONITORING, EVALUATION, RESEARCH AND LEARNING POLICY

<b>Functional Area</b>	Strategy and Engagement Department, GH
<b>Business Owner</b>	Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL)
<b>Approved by</b>	Leadership Team
<b>Approval date</b>	March 2024
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<b>Applicability and Exceptions</b>	This policy applies to all work that is undertaken by all Plan International offices under the global Programme and Influence Quality Policy (PIQP), from which it is derived
<b>Related Policies</b>	Programme and Influence Quality Policy Programme and Influence Approach Gender Equality and Inclusion Policy

# APPLICATION

This policy applies to all work that is undertaken by all Plan International offices under the global Programme and Influence Quality Policy, from which it is derived. The policy applies irrespective of the funding source and to all of Plan International's development and humanitarian programmes, projects and influencing.

It is important to note that Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) activities are undertaken by multiple functions across the organisation, and this policy should not be read as being only applicable to the work of MERL staff.

This policy is supported by a set of global MERL Standards that outline the quality expectations for each MERL component.

# PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to support robust, credible and high-quality monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) practices across all Plan International programme and influencing work. The policy establishes a clear vision, direction, common language, and consistent message for the implementation of each of the four components of MERL and also outlines roles and responsibilities to ensure consistency in application of the policy across Plan International entities.

Plan International strives for a just world that advances children's rights and equality for girls. Each component of MERL is vital to the delivery of our strategy. In particular MERL underpins Plan International's delivery of effective and accountable gender transformative programmes and influencing. The adoption of common global results and indicators that align to Plan's strategic thematic priorities (Areas of Global Distinctiveness), amongst other things, greatly enhances the organisation's ability to demonstrate its achievements. In addition, MERL is key for the effective implementation of Results Based Management through supporting the identification, monitoring and reporting of results, thereby allowing Plan International to draw conclusions on the complex causal relationships between operations and outcomes to deliver insights that can inform decision making and continuous improvement of operations and programmes.

Plan International recognises that the four components of MERL – monitoring, evaluation, research and learning – serve different purposes and require a variety of approaches, yet we see them as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. We recognise that continuing to strengthen these four components is critical to being able to fulfil the commitment, identified in the Global Strategy, to improve how we demonstrate impact evidence.

Plan International believes that MERL is useful and drives learning to improve the quality of our programming, informs decision making by providing evidence to support our programme and influence priorities, and helps strengthen other actors' abilities to contribute. As Plan International strengthens its position as an influencing organisation, there is an increased need for good quality MERL for influencing, communication and engagement, from local to global levels. The evidence generated from Plan International's MERL work underpins and grounds our resource mobilisation.

Good quality MERL is an integral part of the development and humanitarian process itself, by supporting children, families and communities and other key stakeholders in all their diversity to articulate their views, analyse their experiences and build up their confidence to take-action. MERL should also help contribute to strengthening accountability by putting communities at the centre of our programming. The people we work with have the direct experience of the results of our work and on the issues affecting their communities and we will systematically engage with them to explore how we can improve our work and achieve more.

## POLICY STATEMENT

We understand and promote the importance of monitoring, evaluation, research and learning to the delivery of our global strategy. We foster an organisational culture that holds itself accountable for the implementation of credible, ethical and participatory MERL practices and for the generation and use of quality evidence as part of an organisational application of Results Based Management. We use quality evidence to drive effective decision making, to demonstrate our impact, improve programmes, influencing and fundraising, and to strengthen our accountability to those who we work with.

# POLICY REQUIREMENTS

## **Plan International adheres to Ethical Standards**

Plan International must adhere to ethical and safeguarding standards in monitoring, evaluation and research initiatives and ensures that the well-being, dignity, rights and safety of children, young people and other participants in data collection are respected and protected.

## **Plan International ensures that MERL is gender transformative**

Gender transformative objectives, practices, and methodologies must be integrated into MERL work so that this thinking can be mainstreamed across all stages of long-term programmes, shorter project cycles and investigative studies that seek to underpin programming and influencing.

## **Plan International implements high quality MERL for Results Based Management**

Plan International appropriately resources rigorous, relevant and high quality MERL on all our programming and influencing work using the results and evidence to inform decision making and continuous improvement at project, programme and strategy level for Results Based Management and evidence-based programming and influencing. To do so, Plan International ensures that all relevant staff have the appropriate MERL competencies.

## **Plan International is inclusive and accountable to all with whom we work, including young people, programme participants, affected populations, donors, and partners**

Plan International includes programme participants, affected populations, donors and partners in MERL practices in a meaningful way. We recognise that MERL must drive greater efficiency in programme and influence work. This requires all offices within the organisation to recognise an integrative approach, that promotes participation – especially of young people, avoids duplication, harmonises practices and builds broad collective ownership and support for MERL that minimises cost and time. This means utilising established methodologies but also being open to applying innovative and forward-thinking approaches to evidence gathering and analysis, where appropriate.

## **Plan International is transparent and honest**

Being open and accountable is one of our core values and underpins our MERL practices. Plan International is committed to sharing and feeding back findings and learnings both internally and externally. One of the mechanisms to facilitate this is the consistent use of globally licensed digital systems (in this case, M&E functionality in PMERL) to support accessible and quality data.

Specific requirements for each of the four components of MERL:

## Monitoring

Plan International will plan and continuously collect and analyse data, including feedback from stakeholders, to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing intervention with relevant information about the extent of progress and achievement of results, quality of approaches and relationships, as well as progress in the use of allocated funds.

Data generated through monitoring activities will be systematically and periodically analysed and learnings identified from this evidence. Following the analysis, specific actions to improve the on-going design and implementation of our programming and influencing work will be identified and applied.

Plan International staff, across different functions, monitor processes, outputs, outcomes and finances in all programme and influence work.

## Evaluation

Plan International will evaluate on-going or completed projects, programmes or policies, covering their design, implementation and results. Our evaluations will include analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, incorporate feedback from key stakeholders and assess Plan International's contribution to any observed changes. The availability of high-quality monitoring data will support evaluations to achieve their objectives.

Plan International's evaluations include assessments of the OECD DAC criteria:

1. Effectiveness: the extent to which, and the reasons behind, the achievement (or not) of the project or programme's objectives, and whether these are leading to unintended (positive or negative) consequences for anybody involved or affected by the interventions.
2. Sustainability: the *probability* of continued long-term benefits to the target populations after the project or programme has been completed.
3. Relevance: the extent to which the interventions and their approaches were aligned to local and national priorities and policies, and responsive to the needs and priorities of the people and communities they were intended to benefit.
4. Efficiency: the extent to which financial resources were used economically and efficiently.
5. Child rights, gender and inclusion: the extent to which the project or programme applied gender and inclusion sensitive approaches and explicitly aimed for results that improve the rights of children and young people and gender equality.
6. Impact: The extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects.
7. Coherence: The compatibility of the interventions with other interventions in a country, sector or institution.

Decisions on which criteria to use will be based on the purpose of the evaluation, the audience, and how the findings and recommendations are going to be used. As a minimum, a comprehensive Final Programme/Project Evaluation will include assessments of criteria 1–5. In humanitarian contexts, evaluations may also consider other criteria such as the Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) and SPHERE.

In some specific cases, it will be appropriate to conduct evaluations (sometimes referred to as ‘impact evaluations’) to establish causal attribution to any observed positive and negative, primary and secondary effects observed. However, due to the complexity and cost of such evaluations, this will require the appropriate level of planning and resourcing.

Management responses will be developed and tracked for each evaluation to support the improvement of projects and/or programmes, as well as the conceptualisation and implementation of MERL initiatives themselves.

## Research

Plan International research will be undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding about issues critical for Plan International’s programme, influencing, fundraising and communication priorities, through the use of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.<sup>1</sup>

We will conduct research on topics which:

- have been identified as a knowledge gap related to Plan International’s programming and/or influencing priorities and/or country strategies.
- reflect Plan International’s broader ambitions around child rights, inclusion and gender transformative programming and influencing.
- provide relevant, up-to-date information and analysis that contributes to strengthen the knowledge in the sector and in the country or region of implementation.
- Target specific policy development and enhance our strategic engagement.

We will utilise research to support our programming and influencing work and provide evidence to underpin, improve and scale policy, advocacy, fundraising and strategic communications.

## Learning

Plan International staff will learn as an ongoing and continuous process of reflection and critical thinking with the purpose of developing new or modifying existing knowledge, attitudes, skills and practices, including how we do MERL, as well as contributing to evidence based decision making.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the *Code of Practice for Research*, UK Research Integrity Office, 2009.

Learning activities and processes will, at a minimum, draw on findings and analysis from monitoring, evaluation and research initiatives, as well as the experiences and information that exist among those involved in our development and humanitarian programme and influencing work.

We will use the evidence and insights we generate:

- in strategic reflection, fundraising and communications, with a particular focus on strengthening our ability to talk about outcomes for children, especially girls.
- to feed into new programme and project design.
- to underpin our influencing, engagement and advocacy efforts and highlight the voices and experiences of young people and children, especially girls, and other groups we are working with.
- to strengthen our accountability and to mitigate risks.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

PII is responsible for ensuring that monitoring, evaluation, research and learning work carried out in regional offices, country offices, and global headquarters comply with this PII Policy and the MERL Management Standards in all applicable areas of work, including programme and project design and delivery, influencing, fundraising, communications.

Specific roles and responsibilities of staff for MERL are included in the MERL Business Processes and the accompanying use of the PMERL system.

All Plan International Entities shall work collaboratively to support monitoring, evaluation, research and learning work to achieve our Purpose. This includes National Organisation's support to work carried out by PII, and PII support to local programme and influence work by National Organisations.

Attaining the standards set out in this PII Policy will be assessed on the basis of how well the high-level requirements are achieved and applicable supporting MERL Management Standards implemented. This will be subject to audit across all Plan International Entities by the Global Assurance department of Plan International Inc. on behalf of the International Board and Members Assembly.

The accountability for adherence and implementation of the policy and related MERL Management Standards lies; Country Directors for COs, Regional Directors for Regional Hubs and the Leadership Team for PII.

# TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

When used in this document:

**“Evaluation”** refers to an in-depth assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, covering its design, implementation and results. Evaluations include analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, incorporate feedback from key stakeholders and assess Plan International’s contribution to any observed changes.

**“Impact”** refers to the long-term and sustainable change that our work contributes to.

**“Learning”** refers to an ongoing and continuous process of reflection and critical thinking with the purpose of developing new or modifying existing knowledge, attitudes, skills and practices, including how we do MERL, as well as contributing to evidence-based decision making.

**“MERL Business Processes”** refers to the L4 processes developed as part of Y.O.D.A.

**“Monitoring”** refers to a continuing process that involves systematic collection and analysis of data, including feedback from stakeholders, to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing intervention with relevant information about the extent of progress and achievement of results, quality of approaches and relationships, as well as progress in the use of allocated funds.

**“Monitoring finances”** refers to monitoring the full cost of project delivery and the required support.

**“Monitoring processes”** refers to monitoring the quality of how we implement our interventions.

**“National Organisation”** or **“NO”** refers to a legal entity that has signed a Members’ Agreement and License Agreement with PII.

**“Outcomes”** refers to specific changes among target groups, stakeholders and institutions.

**“Outputs”** refers to the immediate results of our activities.

**“PII”** refers to Plan, International, Inc., including when operating through one of its subsidiaries. It generally includes international headquarters, regional offices, liaison offices, and country offices.



**“PMERL”** refers to the Project Management and Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning system which uses a product called AmplImpact, an application on the Salesforce platform.

**“Research”** refers to original investigation, undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding about issues critical for Plan International’s programme, influencing, fundraising and communication priorities, through the use of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

**“Results”** refers to describable or measurable changes that are derived from a cause-and-effect relationship.

**“Results Based Management”** refers to Plan International’s commitment to results and operational performance and the systematic use in effective decision making and reporting across different level of the organisation.