



# **Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning Frequently Asked Questions**

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# Partners



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# Overview

## 1. What is the Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) platform?

MEL (<https://mel.cgiar.org/>) is an online platform for organizations, programs and projects to plan, manage, monitor, evaluate, report and share their activities and results. By allowing all these actions to be completed in one organized space, and by semi-automating many features, it saves both time and resources while reducing the risk of error. Now in use by eight CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs) and centers, it also allows for faster and more informed decision-making both inside an organization and across its partners.

MEL was launched in 2016 as a collaborative infrastructure between the now-concluded CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems, led by the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), and quickly grew to include three other CRPs and four centers (see Question 9). The platform was born out of necessity as the available software at the time, and traditional monitoring and evaluation tools, could not provide MEL partners with a much-needed master overview of their projects, and has since evolved in a flexible and adaptive tool.

## 2. Who is MEL designed for?

MEL is designed for research staff, scientists and managers, who can input, archive, extract, and share a broad range of data, knowledge and ideas through the platform.

It facilitates and automates technical and program implementation and financial processes, saving time and resources while reducing the risk of error and enabling faster and informed decision-making and providing transparent reporting to donors.

## 3. What are its key features?

Through a user-friendly interface, the platform offers a number of features and modules that enable timely and easy planning, reporting, and sharing.

- **Knowledge Sharing hub:** a common system for accessing and disseminating knowledge across CRPs, CGIAR centers and partners. The hub accommodates success stories, resource packs for capacity development and more.
- **Planning hub:** a full project and CGIAR activities planning module, including various tools for risk management, capacity development, intellectual property, gender strategy development, communications and more. The hub includes guidance and alerts.
- **Reporting hub:** multiple levels of reporting that can be customized according to institutional and CGIAR needs, such as customization to serve donor requirements and milestones.
- **Indicators** are standardized across CRPs and CGIAR centers to reduce the burden of data collection and facilitate comparison and analysis across interventions. Indicators can be adapted to non-CGIAR centers.
- **Plan of Work and Budget and Annual Reports** can be generated and exported for CGIAR centers, adaptable to non-CGIAR institutions as well.
- **Open access** information and knowledge is enabled through international metadata standards such as Dublin Core, available on public overviews and the integrated MELSpace repository.
- **Interoperability** with different institutional systems (data and information sharing) such as Dataverse and DSpace repositories.
- **Limited access** and sensitive information are safe-guarded through customizable workflows and user permissions and responsibilities.
- **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** and F.A.I.R. designed solutions for data management.
- **Evaluation of knowledge** produced by partners and users over years.

- **Evaluation of capacity development** activities through a dedicated module, with customizable surveys and reports exports.
- Access to the **Geo-informatics Options by Context** web-GIS, providing geo-data generated at country level with indicators and graphics based on the desired collections of datasets available or provided.
- **Online chat function** for real-time **technical support**, a User Guide and a wide range of guidance videos available on YouTube.
- **Online discussion forum** for scientists and partners working on similar projects or research topics across CRPs and CGIAR centers.

#### 4. What type of information can I capture, monitor and evaluate through MEL, and for what purpose?

Research staff, scientists and managers can input, archive, extract, and share a broad range of data, knowledge and ideas through the platform. This includes:

- Project partners and donor information
- Research outputs
- Outcomes
- Expected deliverables
- Indicators
- Impact pathway and theory of change
- Staff time allocation
- Budget expenditure
- Gender results
- Communication products

MEL captures all the information required to ensure effective results-based management and implementation of research projects from start to finish. The platform also provides aggregated data per country, allowing for synchronization of interventions with national and international partners.

Different users have different levels of access and utilization of information captured through MEL:

##### **Users**

Users can submit inputs and have a full overview of research work plan, outputs, outcomes and financial information within their domain and in specific sites, such as countries. They can archive their research products and share them with external stakeholders, and through MEL can also enable group discussions to generate new research proposals and share results.

##### **Flagship Coordinators**

Flagship Coordinators benefit from an overall view of scientists' products and are able to synthesize information, plan joint research in the flagship, monitor progress on research implementation, manage risks and make adjustments as necessary. They receive aggregated flagship data to involve partners in research activities.

##### **Project Managers**

Project Managers can access timely information on program/project deliverables with smart search engine to organize meetings and produce synthesis reports for donors, partners, and stakeholders.

##### **CRP Directors**

CRP Directors benefit from an overall view of the planned and delivered products in each CRP flagship, including staff allocation and financial information. They receive synthesized information to enable better decision making and CRP reporting and presenting to high-level meetings.

##### **Communication, Capacity Development or Gender Focal Points**

An overall view for CRP planned and delivered products per flagship or per Center helps to support knowledge sharing, capacity development and overall institutional strengthening. It also supports gender-focused research and mainstreaming and increases visibility of CRP activities and research outcomes. They receive synthesized information to help their positions inform and engage stakeholders, generate new project proposals, raise funds, increase visibility and more.

##### **Finance/HR Focal Points**

Finance and HR Focal Points can find an overall view of the planned and delivered products per scientist or project to mitigate delivery risk and measure staff performance. They can receive synthesized information for annual planning and reporting – for example, by center, CRP or project.

## Intellectual Property (IP)/Legal Managers

IP and Legal Managers benefit from an overall view of all legal mechanisms in place to ensure CRP/project partnerships are properly managed and key legal aspects are covered in the agreements. The platform contains a module to indicate the intellectual assets, knowledge, technologies and information that are used from other organizations and that are generated.

### 5. Is MEL compatible with Open Access requirements?

Yes, MEL is compatible with Open Access requirements. Repositories have been integrated with the platform to achieve the best data quality and full interoperability, meaning that datasets, publications, reports and presentations are easily retrievable.

These features, combined with the platform's open access and open data policy, ensures that MEL aligns with CGIAR's principles of making research outputs F.A.I.R., or Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable.

### 6. How is learning, knowledge sharing, and communication enabled through MEL?

#### Learning and knowledge sharing is enabled through:

- Open access repository integration.
- An internal smart keyword dashboard that notifies users about new or similar knowledge/data produced by other scientists with similar keywords. This functionality has been extended to non-registered partners, such as National Agricultural Research Systems, who can register in the platform.
- The platform's discussion forum enhances collaboration amongst stakeholders across different geographies, CRPs, centers and partners.
- A collaborative research planning and proposal writing tool.



## Adopting and customizing MEL

### 7. Where is the platform hosted?

The platform is hosted on cloud by Amazon Web Services.

### 8. What are the costs required to adopt and maintain MEL?

MEL is available to CRPs, centers and other partner institutions free of charge for adoption in its current structure.

The current annual server hosting cost is approximately USD1,500 for three terabytes, while the technical support is USD2,64 for one day per month of server maintenance. These costs are shared among all partners who adopt the platform, and hence are continually reduced with more participants.

### 9. How many CRPs and CGIAR centers have adopted the platform?

As of 2018, eight CRPs and centers have adopted MEL as a solution for the portfolio of their projects due to its flexibility and the capacity to manage multiple frameworks at the same time.

- CGIAR Research Program on Grain Legumes and Dryland Cereals (GLDC)
- CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas (RTB)
- CGIAR Research Program on Fish (FISH)
- International Potato Center (CIP)
- International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA)
- International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA)
- French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD)
- International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF) are also using specific modules and features.

### 10. How is MEL governed?

The initial core structure of MEL is intellectually owned by its founding partners, ICARDA and CIP, and extended to others (ICRAF, ICRISAT, IITA and WorldFish) based on their contribution to the MEL modules. The ownership of the code is documented using GitHub where developers and quality assurance officers deposit their product. The decision processes and changes to the MEL structure are based on reviews logged in GitHub which are approved by members before being implemented. Quality assurance is provided by officers from each partner.

### 11. What are the resources or costs required to develop new/additional modules?

The costs for developing new or additional modules are based on the number of days and resources needed to create and implement a new module according to client specifications and requests.

For example, the tools developed for capacity development, risk management, gender and outcome stories took up to three working days at an estimated rate of USD220 per day. The cost for customization can be estimated upon request.

### 12. What are different levels of reporting in MEL, and can these be further customized?

Reporting in the MEL is currently customized by Activity, Cluster of Activities, Flagship (Window 1/Window 2) and Project (Window 3/Bilateral). These can be easily customized to suit your needs.

## CGIAR Funding Windows

**Windows 1 and 2 funds** are provided by CGIAR for allocation across the agreed product portfolio. Window 1 funds are allocated by the CGIAR System Organization to different CRPs, while Window 2 funds are designated by donors to a specific CRP.

**Window 3 funds** are allocated directly to CGIAR centers by donors and are mapped into a CRP when they are consistent with that CRP's product portfolio. Window 3 includes a deduction of 2% of the total budget as contribution to the CGIAR System Organization.

**Bilateral funds** are contracts directly signed between a center and a donor.

### 13. Can it be connected to other platforms?

Yes, MEL provides two-way connectivity. Repositories have been integrated to achieve the best data quality and full interoperability, meaning that datasets, publications, reports and presentations are easily retrievable. MEL also provides data to other systems via log-in.

These features, combined with the platform's open access and open data policy, ensures that MEL aligns with CGIAR's principles of making research outputs F.A.I.R., or Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable.

### 14. What are the technologies behind the platform?

- MEL uses full stack open source environment.
- Its backend is developed using Zend Framework version 1.12 on top of PHP.
- Its frontend uses Javascript, CSS, HTML and Metronic frontend theme.
- The platform database engine is MySQL.

### 15. How can I access MEL?

The MEL technical team can set up a user account associated with your CGIAR or other email account. Your rights as user are defined by your role, such as Flagship Coordinator, Cluster of Activities Coordinator, Project Manager, Activity Leader, HR Manager, etc.

All you need is a laptop or desktop computer with an internet browser and connectivity.



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### For more details

Please see the Frequently Asked Questions about MEL