Final Report
EU DEAR Exchange Hub
June 22 – 23, 2021
ONLINE | Zoom

Connecting Stories. Using MEL to Build a DEAR Narrative.

1. Report structure and contents

This report brings together key Exchange Hub documents and outputs, including:

- An introduction to the format of Exchange Hubs and the story of the June 2021 Exchange Hub (Section 2 below)
- A catalogue of good practice in DEAR projects' following areas:
  o DEAR MEL data management (Section 3 - Working Group A),
  o DEAR MEL and youth engagement (Section 4 - Working Group B)
  o Public outreach and engagement of DEAR projects (Section 5 - Working Group C)
  o Using stories and storytelling in DEAR projects (see Working Group C and Section 6 - Storytelling Workshop)
- Future DEAR Programme MEL framework (see Section 7 - MEL Workshop)
- The Exchange Hub final programme (Annex 1)
- Video recordings of all plenary sessions and working groups (Zoom links embedded in the text)
- Participant evaluation results (Annex 2)

2. DEAR Exchange Hub introduction

Exchange Hubs are an opportunity for peer learning and contributing to the DEAR Programme future. This Exchange Hub focused on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). The main thread, weaved through the entire event, was working on **MEL with a purpose** - helping DEAR projects tell the 'big DEAR story'. This was done through exploring the place of storytelling and other key elements in monitoring, evaluation and learning. This Hub was also an opportunity to **share experiences between DEAR projects** on **MEL, storytelling and communication of project results**.

The Exchange Hub had three objectives:
- To facilitate a reflection on projects' use of MEL to better represent results to outside stakeholders;
- To highlight the learning and communication potential of MEL systems through storytelling;
- To facilitate peer learning between DEAR projects on good practice in using MEL.

The Exchange Hub **preparation process** was based on the principles of **active contribution** from all participants and **co-creation** of the programme by DEAR projects, the DEAR Support Team (DST) and DG INTPA. All active DEAR projects (2016 and 2018 calls for proposals) were invited, and over 30 projects responded. The Exchange Hub registration process included a **survey on project experiences and good practice in the field of MEL**, covering all aspects of the Exchange Hub discussions, including data management systems, youth engagement and outreach numbers. The survey answers were used in working group planning, and a number of DEAR projects acted as 'resource projects' contributing their good practice and expertise. Furthermore, participants indicated their preferences in choosing working groups, aligned with their interest and learning goals. In addition to this, both the storytelling workshop and the MEL workshop built on inputs and reflections from DEAR projects and the Multi-Stakeholder Group.

The Hub format was a **two-day online event** (4 hours per day). The contents of the meeting built on the **participatory preparation process** and included inputs from DEAR projects (good practice, 'resource projects') as well as from INTPA and DST (storytelling workshop and the MEL workshop). The **methods** used included plenary and group work sessions, multimedia tools (videos and online presentations), online collaboration tools (Miro) as well as a number of creative methods such as drawing, fishbowl and bingo.

The Exchange Hub brought together **72 participants from 24 EU DEAR projects**. A range of profiles and organisations were represented, including DEAR project 2016 and 2018 CfP project lead applicants, partner organisations, DEAR Presidency projects as well as DEAR project MEL experts and evaluators.
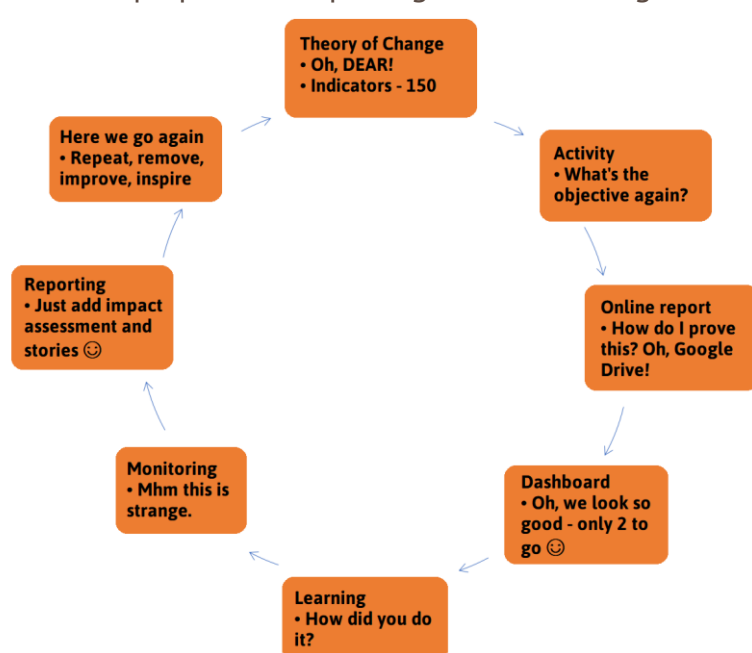
3. Working Group A – Improving MEL data management

This group explored the **importance of data management systems for learning, accountability, and communication**. The purpose of the working group was to develop awareness on the **power of data, combined with evidence-based stories**, to show the impact of projects in a strategic, transparent, and user-friendly way. Two DEAR Programme resource projects showcased their automated data management systems: I am European (lead applicant: NGO Mondo) and ClimAct (lead applicant: Oxfam Novib). The former is based on Google spreadsheets; the latter is built on an integrated online reporting system (IRIS) that, via Cognito forms, automatically selects indicators corresponding to single activities. Output data is then consolidated in a database, which is translated into a PowerBI Dashboard, integrated in MS Teams.

Both systems, and corresponding indicators, are **grounded on the logical framework/theory of change of the project** and capture how data feeds into forecast outcomes. The systems serve both purposes of reporting and maintaining a dashboard that consolidates information from all partners. A shared repository system is used for storing information and materials, sharing it and communicating, both externally and internally. In the case of *I am European*, sub-grantees are also requested to use the same system to report their achievements.

MEL data management system features considered of crucial importance are: easy-to-use; highly automated; comparable, consistent, fed regularly; and able to provide a sense of achievement for partners (Inspire!). Finally, for the purpose of reporting to the donor, the system should also provide ample context on impacts.

Theory of Change
- Oh, DEAR!
- Indicators - 150

Here we go again
- Repeat, remove, improve, inspire

Activity
- What's the objective again?

Online report
- How do I prove this? Oh, Google Drive!

Reporting
- Just add impact assessment and stories ☺

Dashboard
- Oh, we look so good - only 2 to go ☺

Monitoring
- Mhm this is strange.

Learning
- How did you do it?

Main MEL data management takeaways:

Based on their experience in DEAR projects, participants pointed at the following key elements for setting up a MEL data management system, and for implementing it:

- Time and clarity: the logical framework and the MEL system must be agreed upon (and revised if necessary) with partners from the beginning. Pay attention to capacity-building;
- The focus should be redirected from activities to outcomes and impact;
- Automated systems are crucial to decrease the workload of partners;
- Remain flexible, relate to changes in the logical framework, and record them;
- MEL data for accountability and learning purposes are different: set up a system that captures both;
- Partners collect information while they 'are at it', not at the end of the reporting period;
- Revision and feedback on collected information must be provided by the lead partner: regular group/individual communication with the partners is essential (e.g. exchange

on lessons learnt, success stories and challenges, suggestions for change, surveys and interviews, 15 minute story talks, etc.);
- Human resources must be dedicated to the maintenance of the system;
- New organisations (e.g. sub-grantees) and changes in staff require hands-on approach;
- If partners see they are contributing to the "bigger picture" of the project, they are "inspired" to provide accurate and timely data;
- Use stories to assess outcome and impact.

After looking at the MEL systems, a final exercise invited participants to use collected data as the basis for an **evidence-based project story**. Most of the participants were able to find interesting combinations of a visual with a quantitative indicator in a very short time. With more time and specific instructions, the results might be brilliant! To tell a **good MEL story**, the exercise suggested:
- Rather than using slogans, tell what happened and why it was significant in terms of positive changes. Sure, values are crucial - but specific results (e.g. based on an individual´s story) should also be described.
- When telling about the project results, add descriptions of as many layers of deeper impact as possible. A very helpful question is - "So what?". For example: "3,000 youngsters participated in our workshops and signed a petition at the end. ...So what?"

All expectations, takeaways and stories by participants were collected on a Miro Board

Working Group A session recording (Zoom video)

4. Working Group B – DEAR MEL and youth engagement

This group looked at examples of youth stories and **youth engagement practice in DEAR projects** and explored the potential of **using MEL tools to illustrate youth engagement**. The main learning outcomes of the working group were: 1) increased knowledge of DEAR project good practice in using MEL to better represent youth engagement to outside stakeholders and 2) increased ability to use youth engagement outputs to amplify the learning and communication potential of DEAR projects.

At first, working group participants reflected on the **role and purpose of youth engagement** in their work. Key insights included: the need to change the ways organisations think about youth, going beyond addressing them as a target audience, the need to give up control to give young people a space to engage, and enabling young people to be shapers and system changers, rather than recipients of information.

The first resource project, **Start the Change,** shared insights into their engagement with youth through three tools. The first one was a video on 'Three years of changes' showing how the project engages with youth (aged 14-28) by involving them in: designing communication activities, common project actions, as well as qualitative and quantitative evaluation. Young people's journey to participation is an evolutionary one, with the first year supported by a youth worker and the second guided by youth themselves (with optional support available). The second tool, a 'Changemaker Guide' (see three-step guide below) identifies 8 steps a young person can take to effect change - from identifying the issues, to organising a group, implementing, evaluating and celebrating. It identifies both quantitative and qualitative evaluation as key moments to pause and rethink and a great opportunity to grow. Finally, 'A year with a changemaker' video highlighted the journey of a young person involved in project activities from local to international level.

1

If you feel the need for change, don't ignore this feeling. Start now, just somewhere, just doing something.

2

Tackle one issue at a time, and take your time. There is no need to rush.

3

Be curious, ask questions, get informed, and... don't forget to have fun!

The second resource project, **Eat4Change**, engaged the audience in a journey of their own learning on youth participation. According to project staff, the DEAR (2018) call for proposals

Great News and Progress!

May 2020 E4C - **project launch**

EARLY - SUCCESS:

Established the **E4C Intl Youth Team!**

was a great opportunity for the project partners to connect environment and active citizenship, with a strong youth dimension. The main idea driving the partnership is the attempt **to change the paradigm from teaching and training to enabling young people to take actions by themselves**. Project partners, led by WWF, put out a call for young people to create the project and the vision for the project and involved AIESEC, one of the largest youth-run organisations in Europe, as a partner. The

key to successful engagement was involving youth in the development of the project proposal since the very beginning. Among the main challenges on this journey was the reluctance of some partners to embrace youth-led actions (in the absence of prior experience with this approach) as well as involving youth in the design of MEL activities, as they often require specialist knowledge. **Successful engagement formats** of the project include: involving young people in selecting the company that would assist the project with its pan-European campaign, preparation of the 1st Youth Summit (November 2021) and interviewing Commission staff and MEPs on policy issues. Some **takeaways** from the project include: letting young people brainstorm on the skills they want to learn/develop, allowing young people to 'speak off message' (they do not work for you, they speak for themselves!), and that you don't need to be a youth organisation to involve youth in your work.

The third resource project, **Climate of Change**, presented the debate competition format used as a format to engage youth. The debates enable young people to represent their views but also to increase their awareness of the role they can play in addressing the causes of climate change. The project empowers young people to take the lead on themes they select themselves. Teachers and educators are trained in using debate methods and participants of the training organise local and national debate contests. The project also organises a pan-European debate contest final. MEL results have been used to inform and expand the scope of activities: direct youth engagement in communications and advocacy activities. Additional participatory activities have also been planned thanks to youth feedback - including letters to EU policy-makers (young people asked for a sample letter to their representatives).

Key **takeaways** from the project include the need to involve young people actively in MEL activities not only as key informants but also 'creativity advisors' suggesting changes to enable further youth participation.

Resource project inputs were used as an introduction to a small group discussion on all projects' engagement potential and ways of increasing youth participation across their actions. Group participants shared good practice tips and recommendations (see Miro board extract, right).

Working Group B session recording (Zoom video)

5. Working Group C - Making sense of outreach and engagement numbers

The workshop **linked quantitative data to story-telling**. The group explored the question of 'giving life' to numbers, through **stories of change and testimonials**. We placed the quantitative data and the stories behind them within the "bigger picture" of DEAR Programme objectives.

1000s reached
100s engaged
1 of their stories
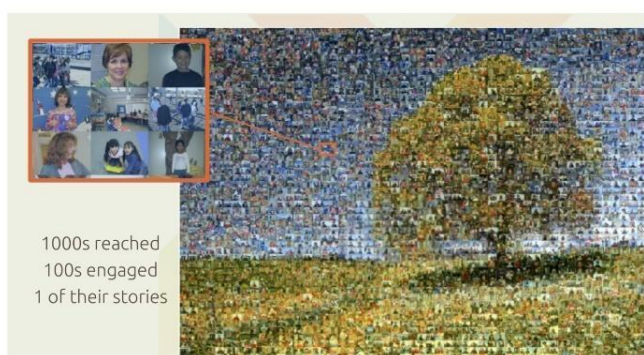
The workshop had the following structure:
1.   DEAR Programme objectives
2.   Presentation of three resource projects
3.   The story of the DEAR project "Walk the Global Walk"
4.   Group discussion and feedback from participants
5.   Sharing resource projects' engagement stories in break-out rooms

The group began with the starting point for MEL stories: who are we telling the story to? e.g. media, a donor, students or potential partners we want to convince to join. And why not a friend to show that your work has impact?

Two resource projects told their stories, their "seeds of change":
In "Walk the Global Walk", 7.000 students took courses on SDG 13, 700 worked on a manifesto, which was presented to the local authorities in Carmarthenshire (Wales). What is the success story? The city took on many of the recommendations, changed some of their local policies and specifically committed to reducing carbon emissions.

"I am European" delved into the numbers: of 244 journalists, 97% said they would write about migrants in a new way. The story was about one of these journalists and how she would trigger a debate within media about unconscious biases against migrants. Bridge 47 shared testimonials of participants and their statements that skills and knowledge increased through the "Learning Journey" they undertook.

The guiding feedback questions were:
- Which outreach indicator is the most valuable and best to transform into a story?
- What needs to be more developed? What could be left out?
- Is there a link with outreach numbers, project and/or Programme objectives?

Takeaways:

Participants pointed to indicators that could be transformed into stories:

Indicator	Story behind one of them
Students taking classes	How one of the students developed competencies to engage with development issues, his/her enthusiasm and concrete actions.
Influencers activated	How did you convince the influencer to come on board? How did you find him/her? What were his/her initial responses? How has he/she changed attitudes?
Teachers (multiplier) engaged	How did the teacher use his/her new tools? How successful were they? What challenges did he/she face?
Number of media articles	How did you identify and approach the media? How did you convince the journalist to report about your project and/or the issues you are promoting? What did he/she write? What was the result? Did a "user/reader" of the media get back to you?

Participants also provided **advice on the three stories**:

- Focus on concrete outputs, e.g. local authorities/government in Wales commit to reduce carbon emissions
- Tell a story from start to finish about the change due to the project
- Leave out details and refrain from telling everything being done under the project
- Add quotes and pictures.

Additional tips regarding social media monitoring: hire a digital comms agency and/or software that tracks social media engagement. Show screenshots of specific social media comments and "conversations". Use hashtags to track social media engagement.

[Working Group C session recording (Zoom video)](#)

6. DEAR storytelling workshop

The workshop started with an [introduction to story-telling](#) and sharing of multimedia materials by the facilitator, Jaan Aps. After the introduction, participants engaged in drafting their own MEL stories using prompts in a [shared table](#). After completing their story, participants joined in pairs and presented their stories whilst providing feedback to each other.

Learning outcomes - As a result of this workshop, the participants gained knowledge about:
- The difference between storytelling to achieve the project's aims and storytelling about the project´s MEL
- The difference between internally and externally oriented
- The main aspects of using storytelling for MEL (purposes, audiences),
- How to create a draft of their own MEL story (message, structure, source data).

Participant discussion:

1. **Storytelling benefits** - according to the participants

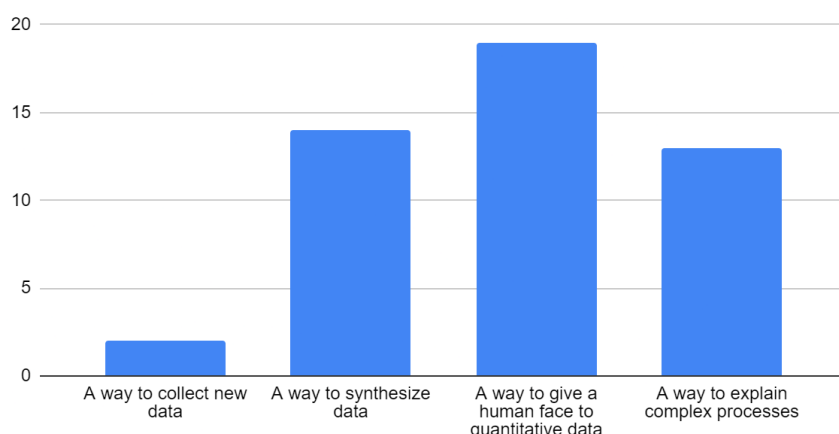Which of the benefits of storytelling would be the most useful for the participants' project´s MEL?

Figure 1. Participants' opinions on which storytelling benefits are most useful for their project.

2. Internal vs external use
Most of the participants need MEL storytelling for external use:

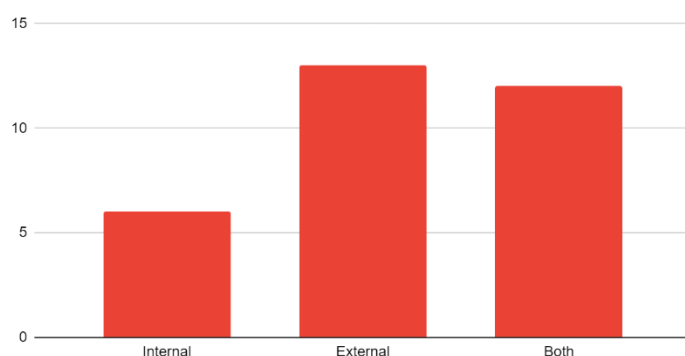Would the target audience of your MEL story be primarily internal or external?

Figure 2. Participants' choices on their story's target audience

3. Storytelling as empowerment discussion

One participant brought out a concern that the discussion in the workshop revolved too much around "how to empower organisers to recruit people to their project" and too little on "how to empower the beneficiaries to make their voices heard". The participants agreed that both goals are important. However, as the second one gets often overlooked, the project leaders should make a special effort to make the beneficiaries' original voices heard among the stories collected and told as a part of the project´s MEL.

4. The main insight from the discussion with other participants

Some recurring feedback from participants were:
- Think more carefully about whom to choose as a story's main protagonist
- Be concrete with examples and concise in messages
- Give more thought to the target audience.

It is preferable to use few but concrete achievements that exemplify the project's success, over many vague ones. We need to think about how that story protagonist relates to a bigger group of people, and to which group.

Storytelling workshop recording (Zoom video)

7. Future DEAR MEL workshop

Why a new DEAR MEL framework

The EU DEAR Programme initiated a process of revision of its Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) system for the 2021-27 policy cycle. The **purpose** of the new MEL framework is two-fold:
- Accountability: to communicate DEAR programme contributions/uniqueness to high-level policy makers so that they support it;
- Learning: To help DEAR stakeholders learn what works in achieving DEAR Programme objectives and how (as well as what does not and why).

Following the March 2021 DEAR Multi-Stakeholder Group (MSG) meeting, the DEAR Support Team developed a DEAR Programme MEL gap analysis. Further, it engaged a working group of 16 DEAR researchers, educators, policy-makers and practitioners to ensure multiple perspectives and a participatory approach to the new MEL design. DG INTPA staff also participate in the group meetings. The group is coordinated by Inka Bartošovà, DST MEL Consultant, with the assistance of the DEAR Support Team. The MEL workshop on 23 June was based on the initial principles and key elements of the potential new MEL framework (aspirations, responsibilities, indicators), developed by the DST and the working group.

It should be noted that the proposed indicators provide a basis for evaluation and stakeholder discussion on the project, programme or system level. Without context, they cannot clearly confirm how effective or impactful the DEAR Programme is. The extent to which the new framework will affect current DEAR projects is still to be determined. An interim phase is expected, during which implementers will continue monitoring project-specific indicators.

Key aspirations for the new DEAR MEL framework

Based on the initial feedback of the MSG, the MEL Working Group, CONCORD Europe and the Exchange Hub participants, the following aspirations were drawn for the new MEL framework:
- Have a **holistic** approach, consider **diversity** of projects, approaches, stakeholders and countries, keep MEL **simple** and **applicable** to all;
- Create a learning strategy: **multi-stakeholder learning and co-creation spaces** to understand the context, how changed have (not) came about and why, lessons learnt, to set a new agenda and co-create innovation;
- Use the **intervention logic** approach (or Theory of Change on project level) to promote participatory approach, support a greater understanding how changes happen, in what context and based on what assumptions;
- Let implementers **tailor project-specific MEL and** (quantitative and/or qualitative) **indicators, aggregate some output and outcome indicators** (set by DG INTPA);
- Focus monitoring and evaluation on **changes** (stories of change, i.e. outcomes related to diverse stakeholders; impacts on systemic, policy, social, environmental level) that projects, direct awards and service contracts contributed to (*"Do not look for big numbers but (for) big transformative changes.",* use outcome mapping / harvesting), how they came about, in what context and to what extent have the changes been sustained;
- Support self-/peer-assessment of **GCE / DEAR quality** via learning spaces provided by the DEAR Support Team, Angel et al and dedicated questions in narrative reports;
- Support **participatory** MEL, systematically **develop capacities of implementers and target groups in MEL** (including planning);
- Be transparent, maximise **automation** of data collection, regular **analysis and synthesis** (of narrative reports, monitoring of changes, results oriented monitoring and evaluation reports), **publish** the key outputs;
- Engage **strategic partners** to monitor context and long-term changes.

- Link to EC priorities, **communication** of the DEAR Programme (funding and other decision making, accountability to all)

Further individual suggestions of workshop participants included:
- Integrate a gender and LGBTQI+ -sensitive approach
- Clearly set elements such as deadlines
- Ensure ownership of DEAR, review DEAR MEL language
- Fund baseline where appropriate
- Simplify report formats so that MEL can be used for ongoing decision-making, include reporting on changes and innovation
- Simplify / update logframes (they cannot be replaced)
- Start with intervention logic as basis for indicators, have a few common ones
- Proposed qualitative indicators need to be further specified (attribution cannot be guaranteed, just contribution, consider the power of different target groups)
- Proposed indicator measuring the "no. of citizens (...) engaged" needs definition of engagement as well as guidance for data collection

Next steps

All participants received detailed minutes of the workshop. Current DEAR projects are encouraged to provide feedback to the initial draft directly to inka@evaluace.com by 12 July 2021. The next draft MEL design will be available for feedback in late August or September 2021.

MEL workshop recording (Zoom video)

Annex 1 – Exchange Hub Programme

 Day 1 | June 22nd, 2021

Time	Description	How we do it
10:00 10:20	**Welcome and introduction** Welcome by DG INTPA – Agata Sobiech Welcome by the DEAR Support Team Introduction to programme and format	Plenary session
10:20 11:00	**Getting to know each other** DEAR Bingo	Plenary session
11:00 11:05	Introduction to the Working Group format and contents	Plenary session
11:05 11:15	❚❚ Break	
11:15 12:15	**Working Groups – Session 1**	**Three groups** work in parallel
	Group A – **Improving MEL data management** This group will look at examples of MEL systems used by DEAR partnerships, notably at the data management systems, and identify ways of improving DEAR MEL to serve its purposes (learning, accountability, communication etc.) by using data management. Those data can be the basis for our evidence-based project stories.	A – Facilitated by Francesca B – Facilitated by Max C – Facilitated by Bianca

In each group: Inputs are shared by selected projects that have provided cases/experiences via the registration survey. They are contacted separately to arrange their contribution. Each room uses a different methodology to exchange concrete cases and facilitate peer-learning. |
	Group B – **DEAR MEL and youth engagement** This group will look at examples of youth stories and youth engagement practice in DEAR projects and explore the potential of using MEL tools to illustrate youth engagement.	
	Group C – **Making sense of outreach and engagement numbers** This group will work with the numbers that projects collect and link them to the broader DEAR objectives, to highlight its uniqueness and added value. We will explore how to give life to quantitative data, through stories of change and testimonials.	Please make sure you bring your project's MEL documents/evidence along to the working groups
12:15 12:30	❚❚ Break	
12:30	**Working Groups – Session 2**	Continuation of morning's

Time		
13:30	Group A (continued) Group B (continued) Group C (continued)	session, same Working Groups
13:30 14:00	Evaluation and closing Feedback from participants Planning for Day 2	Creative activity (get ready for some off-screen drawing – keep a pen and paper handy!) and comments from the group

Day 2 | June 23rd, 2021

Time	Title/Description	Comments / backstage
10:00 10:30	Morning coffee and recap from Day 1	Group A – takeaways Group B – takeaways Group C – takeaways
10:30 12:30 break included	Storytelling workshop - using Storytelling in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning This workshop will allow participants to identify the storytelling potential of their projects and develop stories on the basis of their MEL data with the assistance of an experienced storyteller. Each project participating in the Hub will develop a story using their MEL data/evidence.	Facilitated by Jaan Aps Impact Storytelling expert Practical hands-on experience of developing a story based on project MEL outputs/data Please make sure you bring your project's MEL documents/evidence along to the working groups
12:30 12:45	❚❚ Break	
12:45 13:45	DEAR MEL revision workshop Collection of contributions by participants of the Exchange Hub for the future MEL framework. How can we "prove" and show that we are making a difference?	Facilitated by Inka Bartošovà MEL expert
13:45	Final evaluation and closing Online Evaluation Form Closing Remarks Next steps	Online evaluation link (to be shared at the session) and comments from the group

Annex 2 – Participant evaluation summary results

A final evaluation of the Exchange Hub was conducted via a questionnaire. It covered the following aspects of the event: preparation process, preparatory materials, facilitation, topics, relevance to participants' work, favourite and least favourite element of the programme, as well as additional comments and suggestions.
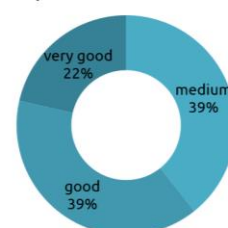
29 responses were collected and provided a **positive evaluation of the Hub**. The preparation process was rated good or very good by the majority of respondents (61%). The quality of preparatory materials was rated good or very good by a similar number of respondents (60%). Facilitation was rated good and very good by most participants (60%) and the vast majority of participants (82%) rate the selection of topics as good or very good. The overall Exchange Hub programme relevance was also rated good or very good by the vast majority of respondents (78%).

Participants highlighted a range of Hub sessions as their **favourite element of the programme**, including focus on MEL throughout the event, methods used (Miro boards), as well as specific topics such as storytelling or data management. A number of participants were highly appreciative of the opportunity to meet colleagues implementing DEAR projects.
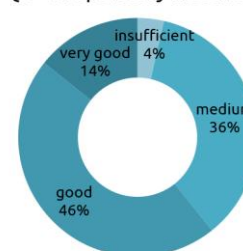
When it comes to **least favourite Hub elements**, responses were just as diverse. Some participants found the MEL workshop to be too time-constrained, others concluded that more time would have been required for discussions on all Hub sessions.

Other participants' **comments and suggestions** included further remarks regarding the programme intensity, suggestions to share more preparatory materials in advance and the need to cover a smaller number of issues, with more time devoted to each. Participants also suggested that further, regular Exchange Hubs are held as there are a number of key issues to be discussed and exchanged, and that online delivery mode is conducive to higher levels of participation.
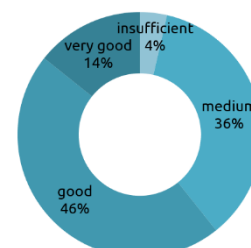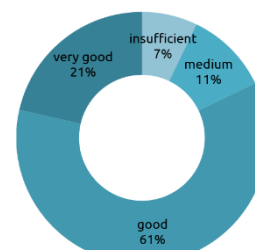
Q1 – Preparation and communication

- very good 22%
- medium 39%
- good 39%

Q2 – Preparatory materials

- insufficient 4%
- very good 14%
- medium 36%
- good 46%

Q3 – Exchange Hub facilitation

- insufficient 4%
- very good 14%
- medium 36%
- good 46%

Q4 – Exchange Hub group topics

- insufficient 7%
- very good 21%
- medium 11%
- good 61%

Q5 – Exchange Hub relevance

- insufficient 3%
- medium 18%
- very good 50%
- good 29%