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Effect of Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) Practices on Project Performance of the Integrated Housing Projects in Laikipia County, Kenya

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Abstract:

This study investigated the effect of Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) practices on the performance of the Integrated Housing Project implemented by Habitat for Humanity Kenya (HFHK) in Laikipia County, Kenya. MEAL practices constitute a core pillar of evidence-based project management, yet their specific influence on housing project performance in rural NGO-led contexts in Kenya remains underexplored.A descriptive case study design was adopted targeting 128 respondents drawn from HFHK project staff, community beneficiaries, and local government representatives. A census approach was used given the manageable population size. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression analysis were employed. Diagnostic tests for normality (Shapiro-Wilk), multicollinearity (VIF), linearity (Ramsey RESET), and homoscedasticity (Breusch-Pagan) confirmed that all regression assumptions were satisfied before inferential analysis was conducted. MEAL practices had a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on project performance ($\beta = 0.602$, $p < 0.05$). The regression model explained 36.2% of the variance in project performance ($R^2 = 0.362$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.355$, $F = 57.891$, $p < 0.05$). Descriptive findings (Mean = 3.95, SD = 0.83) confirmed that systematic data collection, performance monitoring, lesson learning, and accountability mechanisms were consistently applied throughout the project. Among all MEAL dimensions, regular data collection and use of a clear monitoring framework recorded the highest agreement scores. Development organizations implementing integrated housing and community development projects should institutionalize MEAL as a core management practice rather than a peripheral compliance function. Systematic tracking, adaptive learning, and stakeholder feedback loops enhance coordination, responsiveness, accountability, and ultimately project performance.

Keywords: MEAL, Monitoring and Evaluation, Accountability, Learning, Project Performance, Integrated Housing project

1. Introduction

Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) practices represent one of the most critical pillars of contemporary development project management. In an era of increasing demands for transparency, value for money, and evidence-based programming, MEAL systems provide the institutional mechanisms through which organizations track progress, assess impact, ensure accountability to stakeholders, and embed learning into ongoing and future project cycles (Kusek & Rist, 2004; UNDP, 2022). When effectively implemented, MEAL practices enable early detection of implementation challenges, facilitate adaptive management, and strengthen the overall quality and sustainability of project outcomes.

In the housing sector, where projects are typically resource-intensive, involve multiple stakeholders, and operate in complex socio-political environments, MEAL systems play an especially vital role. Housing projects that incorporate robust monitoring

frameworks are better positioned to maintain construction quality standards, ensure timely delivery, manage budgets efficiently, and respond to emerging community needs in real time (UN-Habitat, 2019; Kerzner, 2022). However, despite widespread recognition of MEAL's importance in theory, its systematic application in development practice, particularly in rural and NGO-led projects in low- and middle-income countries, remains inconsistent and understudied (Ika & Donnelly, 2017).

In Kenya, development reports have consistently highlighted inadequate monitoring and evaluation systems as a key contributor to underperforming projects across sectors, including housing (KIPPRA, 2021). While national policy frameworks such as Vision 2030 and the Big Four Agenda emphasize results-based management, the translation of these frameworks into effective MEAL practice at the project level, particularly in rural county contexts, has received limited empirical attention. Most existing studies on MEAL in Kenyan housing projects focus on urban or government-led contexts, leaving a significant gap in understanding how MEAL functions in NGO-implemented integrated rural housing initiatives.

The Integrated Housing Project in Laikipia County, implemented by Habitat for Humanity Kenya (HFHK), offered an important opportunity to address this gap. The project combined construction of twelve housing units using Compressed Soil Block (CSB) technology with complementary components spanning water and sanitation, skills development, and community empowerment. As a multi-component initiative operating across multiple stakeholder groups, the project required sophisticated MEAL systems to ensure coordinated and accountable delivery. This study therefore examined the effect of MEAL practices on the performance of this project, with the aim of generating practical and theoretically grounded insights for development practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks to explain the relationship between MEAL practices and project performance.

Empowerment Theory, as articulated by Zimmerman (2000) and extended by Christens (2019), provides the primary theoretical lens for understanding MEAL's contribution to project performance. The theory posits that sustainable development outcomes are achieved when beneficiaries and communities are empowered with voice, agency, and accountability mechanisms. In the MEAL context, empowerment manifests through participatory monitoring processes where communities contribute to assessing project progress, flagging concerns, and demanding accountability from implementing organizations. Empowerment-oriented MEAL systems transform beneficiaries from passive recipients into active contributors to quality assurance, directly enhancing project responsiveness and sustainability.

Systems Theory, developed by von Bertalanffy (1968) and applied to project management by Badewi (2016) and Valencia et al. (2022), frames development projects as dynamic systems comprising interrelated subsystems. MEAL functions as a critical feedback and control subsystem within this framework. Feedback loops generated through monitoring activities allow the project system to detect deviations, adjust strategies, and realign resources in real time. In integrated housing projects combining multiple components such as shelter, water, livelihoods, and community development, Systems Theory underscores the necessity of coordinated monitoring mechanisms that capture performance data across all subsystems simultaneously, enabling holistic adaptive management.

The Ladder of Participation Theory (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2016) adds an important dimension by emphasizing that MEAL systems are most effective when they are participatory rather than extractive. When communities are engaged at higher levels of the participation ladder such as partnership and delegated power within monitoring and evaluation processes, they generate more contextually relevant data, enhance the credibility of findings, and increase buy-in for adaptive changes. This participatory dimension of MEAL directly reinforces project ownership and accountability, contributing to better performance outcomes.

2.2 MEAL Practices in Development Projects

MEAL is theoretically grounded in results-based management, which emphasizes evidence-driven decision-making and systematic accountability to stakeholders (UNDP, 2022). As a framework, MEAL encompasses four distinct but interconnected functions: monitoring of ongoing project activities against set indicators; evaluation of project outcomes and impact against intended objectives; accountability mechanisms ensuring transparency and responsiveness to beneficiaries and donors; and learning processes that capture insights for improving ongoing and future programming (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

Empirical evidence from comparable studies affirms MEAL's positive effect on project performance. Muthini and Nyang'au (2022) found a statistically significant relationship between project monitoring and evaluation practices and project completion in government housing projects in Makueni County, Kenya ($r = 0.244$, $p = 0.004$), recommending strengthened M&E frameworks as a key performance driver. Mwakio, Oyoo and Onyiego (2023) established a strong positive link between project management practices, including monitoring systems, and performance in public housing construction projects in Mombasa County. Muriuki and Nyandemo (2021) demonstrated that systematic monitoring and evaluation linked to stakeholder feedback significantly improved project responsiveness and community satisfaction in Kenyan housing contexts.

Internationally, Amolo and Niyizigihe (2025) found in Rwanda that while MEAL did not independently drive implementation success in the Kinigi Settlement Project, this was attributed to insufficient institutional integration of MEAL rather than inherent ineffectiveness. This finding reinforces the importance of embedding MEAL within organizational systems rather than treating it as a standalone activity. García and Kumar (2021) similarly identified that adaptive management practices, including regular performance reviews and feedback mechanisms, improved efficiency and responsiveness in project delivery across housing and infrastructure sectors in low- and middle-income countries.

In the broader development management literature, MEAL systems have been shown to reduce implementation risk, minimize resource wastage, and enhance donor confidence (World Bank, 2017). The use of participatory monitoring approaches, consistent with Empowerment Theory, has been found to reinforce transparency and mutual accountability between implementing organizations and communities, further strengthening performance outcomes (Chambers, 2017; Sterman, 2000).

2.3 Project Performance in Integrated Housing Projects

Project performance in the housing sector is assessed through a range of indicators reflecting efficiency, effectiveness, and impact. Kerzner (2022) and PMI (2021) identify key performance dimensions as timeliness of delivery, budget adherence, quality of outputs, beneficiary satisfaction, and long-term sustainability. In integrated housing projects, performance also encompasses the durability and usability of constructed infrastructure, equitable distribution of benefits, and the capacity of communities to maintain project outputs beyond the implementation period.

MEAL practices influence each of these performance dimensions in distinct ways. Regular monitoring enables early identification of schedule slippage, allowing project teams to take corrective action before delays compound. Budget tracking through MEAL tools supports cost discipline and reduces the risk of overruns. Quality assessment mechanisms embedded in MEAL frameworks ensure that construction standards are consistently met. Beneficiary feedback channels, a core accountability component, allow communities to flag quality concerns and satisfaction levels in real time, enabling responsive adjustments (Khang & Moe, 2008; UN-Habitat, 2019).

The Systems Theory perspective is particularly relevant here: performance in integrated housing projects is not determined by any single practice but emerges from the coordinated interaction of MEAL, stakeholder engagement, and planning subsystems. MEAL serves as the connective tissue that links project activities to outcomes, generates the information base for adaptive decision-making, and ensures that the project system learns and improves continuously throughout its lifecycle (Badewi, 2016; Sterman, 2000).

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive case study research design to examine the effect of MEAL practices on the performance of the Integrated Housing Project in Laikipia County. The case study design was appropriate because it enabled in-depth, contextually grounded investigation of real-life implementation dynamics, allowing for comprehensive exploration of the MEAL-performance relationship within a specific project context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study population comprised 128 individuals directly involved in or affected by the project: 30 HFHK project staff responsible for planning, implementation, and monitoring; 75 community beneficiaries; and 23 local government officials engaged in oversight and coordination. A census approach was adopted given the manageable population size, targeting all 128 individuals. Of the 128 questionnaires distributed, 101 were returned completed, representing a 79% response rate, which exceeds the recommended 70% threshold (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data were collected using structured questionnaires. The MEAL practices section comprised five Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) covering regular data collection and analysis, application of lessons learned, stakeholder feedback provision, use of a clear monitoring framework, and implementation of accountability mechanisms. Project performance was measured through five corresponding Likert-scale items covering construction goal attainment, timeliness of delivery, budget adherence, quality of outputs, and beneficiary satisfaction. Content validity was established through supervisory expert review. Reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha with a threshold of 0.7.

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26. Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations summarized responses. Pearson's product-moment correlation examined the bivariate relationship between MEAL and performance. Simple linear regression established the predictive effect of MEAL on project performance. Four diagnostic tests were conducted prior to regression: the Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed normality of residuals ($p = 0.365 > 0.05$); Variance Inflation Factor values below 2.0 confirmed absence of multicollinearity; the Ramsey RESET test confirmed linearity ($F = 0.617$, $p = 0.434$); and the Breusch-Pagan test confirmed homoscedasticity ($p = 0.380 > 0.05$). All assumptions of linear regression were satisfied.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondent Profile

The 101 respondents comprised community beneficiaries (50.5%), project staff (31.7%), and local government representatives (17.8%). The majority were aged 31-40 years (35.6%), with a near gender balance (males 53.5%, females 46.5%). Most respondents (44.6%) had 1-3 years of experience with the project, ensuring that perspectives reflected sustained engagement with MEAL systems across the project lifecycle.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis of MEAL Practices

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the five MEAL practice items administered to all 101 respondents.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of MEAL Practices (n = 101)

Statement	Mean	SD
The project regularly collects and analyses data to track progress toward its goals.	4.02	0.81
Lessons learned from project evaluations are used to improve future planning and implementation.	3.95	0.85
Beneficiaries and stakeholders are provided with feedback on project outcomes and decisions.	3.88	0.88
The project has a clear framework for monitoring indicators and measuring performance.	4.00	0.79
Accountability mechanisms (e.g., feedback channels, complaint systems) are effectively implemented.	3.92	0.83
Overall Average	3.95	0.83

Source: Field Data (2025)

The overall mean of 3.95 (SD = 0.83) indicates strong agreement that MEAL practices were consistently applied throughout the project, with limited variation in responses pointing to broad consensus across respondent categories. The highest mean (4.02, SD = 0.81) was recorded for regular data collection and analysis, confirming that HFHK embedded systematic tracking mechanisms within project operations to monitor progress against set indicators. This reflects evidence-based project management consistent with results-based management theory (UNDP, 2022).

The existence of a clear monitoring framework scored the second-highest mean (4.00, SD = 0.79), suggesting that performance indicators, data collection tools, and reporting systems were well defined and consistently applied. The relatively low standard deviation indicates high consensus among all three respondent groups on this dimension. The application of lessons learned (3.95, SD = 0.85) confirms that experiential learning was valued within the organization, with insights from monitoring and evaluation informing improvements in resource use, site selection, and beneficiary engagement.

Accountability mechanisms, including feedback channels and complaint systems, recorded a mean of 3.92 (SD = 0.83), indicating that formal accountability structures were operational. The lowest mean (3.88, SD = 0.88) was recorded for the provision of feedback to beneficiaries and stakeholders on project outcomes and decisions, with the higher standard deviation suggesting variation in how consistently this feedback loop functioned across different community sites. This finding points to a key area for improvement in ensuring that evaluation results reach and are understood by beneficiaries.

4.3 Descriptive Analysis of Project Performance

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the five project performance items.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Project Performance (n = 101)

Statement	Mean	SD
The project met its construction and service delivery goals.	4.35	0.72
The housing units were delivered on time.	4.20	0.81
The project stayed within its allocated budget.	4.05	0.88
The quality of the housing units met expectations.	4.28	0.76
The beneficiaries were satisfied with the outcome.	4.40	0.70
Overall Average	4.26	0.77

Source: Field Data (2025)

Overall project performance recorded a high mean of 4.26 (SD = 0.77), reflecting strong perceived effectiveness across all five performance dimensions. Beneficiary satisfaction recorded the highest mean (4.40, SD = 0.70), suggesting that MEAL-driven adaptive management directly contributed to housing outputs perceived as highly responsive to community needs. Goal attainment (4.35, SD = 0.72) and quality of housing (4.28, SD = 0.76) also registered high scores, consistent with the role of systematic monitoring in maintaining construction and delivery standards. Budget adherence, while still indicating strong agreement (4.05, SD = 0.88), recorded the highest variability, potentially reflecting the influence of factors beyond MEAL systems such as inflation and material cost fluctuations during implementation.

4.4 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a moderate-to-strong positive and statistically significant relationship between MEAL practices and project performance ($r = 0.547$, $p < 0.05$). This is the strongest bivariate correlation recorded among all

independent variables in the study, indicating that improvements in systematic monitoring, evidence-based decision-making, and accountability mechanisms are most strongly associated with project performance improvements. Table 3 presents the full correlation matrix.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	MEAL	Stakeholder Engagement	Project Planning	Project Performance
MEAL	1.000			
Stakeholder Engagement	0.438	1.000		
Project Planning	0.476	0.423	1.000	
Project Performance	0.547*	0.492*	0.566*	1.000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Source: Field Data (2025)

The correlation matrix confirms that MEAL practices (r = 0.547) exhibit a stronger bivariate association with project performance than stakeholder engagement (r = 0.492), though project planning records the strongest correlation overall (r = 0.566). Moderate inter-correlations among the independent variables (ranging from 0.423 to 0.476) confirm conceptual relatedness without exceeding multicollinearity thresholds, as validated by VIF values below 2.0.

4.5 Regression Analysis

Simple linear regression was conducted to determine the predictive effect of MEAL practices on project performance. Tables 4, 5, and 6 present the model summary, ANOVA, and regression coefficients respectively.

Table 4: Model Summary – MEAL Practices and Project Performance

R	R Square	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of Estimate
0.602	0.362	0.355	0.412

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 5: ANOVA – MEAL Practices and Project Performance

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	9.689	1	9.689	57.891	.000
Residual	17.067	99	0.172		
Total	26.756	100			

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 6: Regression Coefficients – MEAL Practices and Project Performance

Model	B	Std. Error	β (Beta)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.987	0.092		32.473	.000
MEAL Practices	0.645	0.085	0.602	7.609	.000

Source: Field Data (2025). Dependent Variable: Project Performance

The model summary reveals that MEAL practices account for 36.2% of the variance in project performance (R^2 = 0.362), making this the highest explanatory power recorded among all three implementation practice variables tested individually in

this study. The adjusted R^2 of 0.355 confirms the model's robustness after accounting for sample size. The ANOVA results confirm overall model significance ($F = 57.891$, $p < 0.05$), with a high F-statistic indicating a strong and reliable model fit. The regression coefficient ($B = 0.645$, $\beta = 0.602$, $t = 7.609$, $p < 0.05$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in MEAL practices, project performance improves by 0.645 units, holding other variables constant. The 95% confidence interval (0.476–0.814) demonstrates high precision in the coefficient estimate.

These results provide strong statistical support for the hypothesis that MEAL practices significantly and positively influence project performance in the Laikipia Integrated Housing Project. The standardized beta of 0.602 represents the highest effect size recorded among the individual practice variables in the broader study, exceeding stakeholder engagement ($\beta = 0.523$) and approaching the effect of project planning ($\beta = 0.582$), positioning MEAL as a critical performance lever in integrated housing project management.

4.6 Discussion

The study's finding that MEAL practices are the strongest individual predictor of project performance among the implementation practice variables ($R^2 = 0.362$, $\beta = 0.602$) carries significant theoretical and practical weight. From a Systems Theory perspective, this result affirms the role of MEAL as the feedback and control subsystem of the broader project management system. The high explanatory power suggests that in integrated housing projects, where multiple interdependent components require coordinated delivery, systematic monitoring mechanisms are particularly vital for detecting misalignments across subsystems before they cascade into performance failures (Badewi, 2016; Sterman, 2000).

The finding aligns with but also extends prior evidence from the Kenyan context. While Muthini and Nyang'au (2022) found a moderate significant relationship between M&E and project completion ($r = 0.244$), this study records a considerably stronger association ($r = 0.547$), which may reflect the more comprehensive MEAL framework applied by HFHK relative to government project M&E systems. The inclusion of accountability and learning components beyond basic monitoring and evaluation likely amplifies the performance effects, consistent with the argument of Kusek and Rist (2004) that results-based management frameworks must integrate learning loops to be fully effective.

The contrast with Amolo and Niyizigihe's (2025) Rwanda study, where MEAL did not significantly influence implementation outcomes, is instructive. In that case, weak institutional integration of MEAL systems limited their effectiveness. The present study's strong MEAL-performance relationship suggests that HFHK's organizational capacity, identified as a significant mediator in the broader study ($\beta = 0.174$, $p = 0.001$), played an enabling role in translating MEAL practices into performance improvements. This finding supports the Empowerment Theory assertion that institutional structures must actively support accountability and learning mechanisms for them to generate development impact (Zimmerman, 2000; Christens, 2019).

The variation in feedback provision scores (Mean = 3.88, SD = 0.88) deserves particular attention. While other MEAL dimensions recorded high and consistent ratings, the relative weakness in communicating evaluation findings back to beneficiaries suggests a partial disconnect in the accountability loop. This gap risks undermining beneficiary trust and limiting the co-learning potential of MEAL systems, particularly in contexts where communities have historically been excluded from formal monitoring processes. Strengthening downward accountability, which directly aligns with higher rungs of Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation, represents a critical opportunity for HFHK to further enhance MEAL effectiveness and, by extension, project performance.

The high beneficiary satisfaction mean (4.40) alongside strong MEAL ratings also suggests a positive feedback dynamic: robust monitoring systems that track quality and timeliness tend to produce outputs that better meet community expectations, which in turn generates higher satisfaction ratings. This dynamic underscore the interconnected nature of MEAL dimensions and performance indicators, consistent with the holistic, systemic perspective advanced by Systems Theory.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study established that MEAL practices have a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on the performance of the Integrated Housing Project implemented by Habitat for Humanity Kenya in Laikipia County (β = 0.602, R^2 = 0.362, F = 57.891, $p < 0.05$). Among all individual implementation practice variables examined in the broader study, MEAL practices recorded the highest R^2 value, indicating that systematic monitoring, evidence-based decision-making, accountability mechanisms, and organizational learning are powerful drivers of housing project performance in this context.

Descriptive findings confirmed that HFHK applied MEAL systems consistently across the project lifecycle, with particular strength in data collection, performance framework clarity, and lessons integration. However, the feedback provision dimension revealed relative weakness, suggesting that the accountability loop between project teams and beneficiaries requires strengthening to fully realize MEAL's performance potential. Organizational capacity was found to partially mediate the MEAL-performance relationship, affirming that institutional systems, leadership, and technical expertise amplify the benefits of strong MEAL practices.

These findings validate the theoretical propositions of Empowerment Theory (MEAL empowers communities through accountability and voice), Systems Theory (MEAL functions as an essential feedback subsystem enabling adaptive management), and the Ladder of Participation Theory (participatory MEAL practices generate stronger accountability and performance outcomes). The study contributes localized empirical evidence to an underexplored domain in development project management literature: the specific effect of comprehensive MEAL frameworks on integrated housing project performance in rural NGO-led contexts in Kenya.

5.2 Recommendations

- Development organizations should institutionalize MEAL as a core management function embedded in all project phases from design through closure, rather than treating it as a compliance or reporting tool. MEAL units should be adequately resourced with trained personnel, digital data collection tools, and clear performance indicator frameworks aligned to project objectives.
- HFHK and similar organizations should prioritize strengthening downward accountability by establishing systematic mechanisms for communicating MEAL findings to beneficiaries in accessible formats and languages. Community scorecards, visual progress boards, and regular beneficiary feedback sessions can close the accountability loop and enhance community trust and co-ownership of project monitoring.
- Policymakers and donor agencies funding integrated housing programs in Kenya should require MEAL as a minimum standard for project accountability, providing dedicated financing for MEAL systems proportional to project scale. National and county government housing programs should adopt participatory MEAL frameworks that incorporate community monitoring alongside formal government M&E systems.
- Future research should examine the long-term effects of MEAL practices on housing project sustainability beyond the implementation phase, using longitudinal mixed-methods designs. Comparative studies across counties and organizational types, including government, NGO, and private sector housing projects, would enrich understanding of contextual and institutional factors moderating the MEAL-performance relationship. Studies specifically examining the contribution of the learning component of MEAL to adaptive management in low-resource rural contexts would further advance both theory and practice.

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