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Evaluation as a Bridge: The Multiple Hats of MEL in Scaling Government-led Graduation Programmes

Overview of BRAC and Graduation Approach

- Established by **Sir Fazle Hasan Abed** in 1972
- World's largest southern-led NGO dedicated to tackling issues of pervasive inequality
- In 2002, BRAC launched the "***Graduation Approach***" as a new lens attuned to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of **people living in extreme poverty**.



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The Graduation ABC's work by addressing multiple barriers at once

Asset:
a productive, large investment in income-generating activities.



Basic needs:
to ensure families can make ends meet until new livelihood generates sufficient income.

Coaching:
intensive, frequent coaching that unlocks agency, know-how, and hope.

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Thesis Statement

- *Convention*: MEL as neutral observer
- *Reality*: MEL practitioners are inside the system
- *Thesis*: Under government-led systems change, **MEL roles multiply, switch faster, and become the substance of the work.**



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Redefining MEL for Systemic Scale

- **MEL must look beyond project outputs to assess institutionalization**. For UPGI, it means whether Graduation becomes embedded in government.

- **Distinguish genuine institutional change from "isomorphic mimicry"**; Examine whether government behaviour and capabilities are actually changing rather than relying only on milestone tracking.



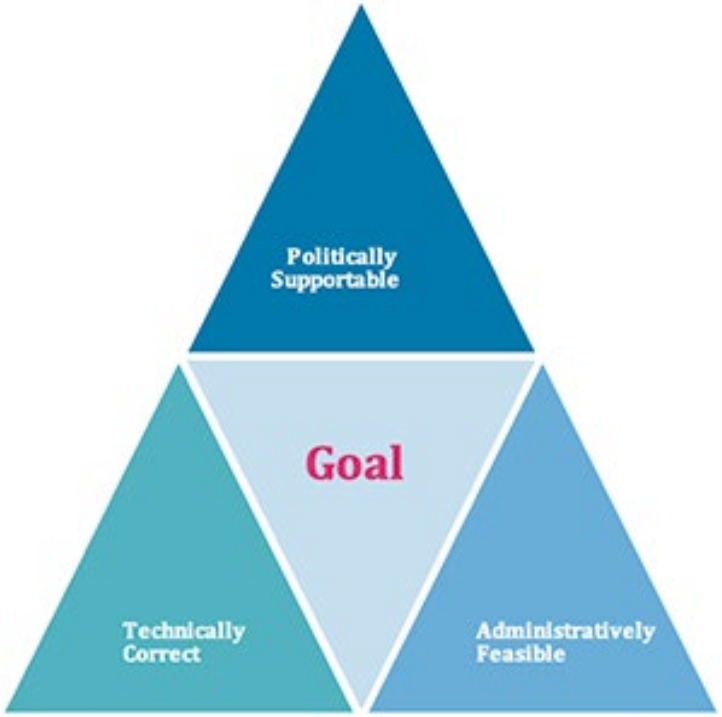
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Redefining MEL for Systemic Scale

- Interpret the gaps between political commitment, administrative feasibility, and technical quality, and use that **diagnosis to guide strategic adaptation**.

- Hold **accountability and learning** together by measuring the quality of adaptive practice, not just predetermined outputs.

- **Instrument of government ownership** when governments participate in defining and assessing progress.



Source: *Scaling Up Development Impact (2024)*

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Redefining MEL for Systemic Scale

- **Team learning culture**, where **safe spaces and structured reflection** enable teams to challenge assumptions, surface uncomfortable evidence, and change strategy when it is no longer working.

- Make **reflection and judgement visible rather than drive compliance** to create evidence that teams can use to question assumptions and adapt strategy.



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Readiness Framework

	Dimensions	Not yet in place	Low	Medium	High	Methodology and sources
1	**Strategic alignment** (Maps commitments)	The agency has not integrated Graduation into any of its plans	The agency has integrated Graduation into the its annual plan	The agency has integrated Graduation into its annual plan and short term plan (3 to 5 years)	The agency has integrated Graduation into its annual plan, short term plan (3 to 5 years), and the Social Development Committee has issued an official decisions about endorsing Graduation	Document reviews Interviews and meetings Sources: Agency annual and short terms plans Social Development Committee official decisions
2	**Leadership / sponsorship** (Maps commitments)	No government official is the agency is championing Graduation	A director of the agency is championing Graduation	A member of the second -tier management (Assistant Secretary or Under Secretary) of the agency is championing Graduation	A head of the agency (Secretary or Minister) or at least 3 members of the second tier management are championing Graduation	Document review Interviews and meetings Sources: Records of speeches, meetings or public events
3	**Organisational structures** (Maps capabilities)	The agency has not identified a unit to lead the graduation implementation	The agency has identified a unit to lead the Graduation implementation	The agency has identified the unit to lead Graduation implementation and the unit has accepted this role and functions	The agency has identified a unit to lead the Graduation implementation, the unit has accepted the role and function, and this structure has been institutionalised as an office/bureau	Government memos/issuances, attendance sheets to meetings, training completions certificates

Read more about it here:

Indonesia Experience

- **Design partner**: contributed from the outset to programme design, Theory of Change, results frameworks, implementation guidance, and work planning.
- **Learning partner**: generated early learning that helped teams identify gaps, challenge assumptions, and refine programme design before and during implementation.
- **Program Planning partner:**contributed to work planning, sequencing, readiness discussions, and early programme decisions; showing that MEL can add value before formal monitoring systems are fully established.



MEL evolving alongside programme design and early implementation

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Philippines Experience

- **Strategy and systems partner**: look beyond participant outcomes and assess government capacity to implement Graduation.
- **Diagnostic and adaptive partner**: make qualitative judgements about government capacity and commitment explicit and comparable over time.
- **Learning and sensemaking partner**: captured significant events, decisions, stakeholder responses, contextual changes, and adaptations that conventional indicators could not capture.
- Connected what changed, why it changed, and how program responded: **continuous feedback loop between evidence, strategy, adaptation, and learning.**



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Conclusions

- **MEL is already part of the system; *not a neutral observer.***

- Strengthen rigour of MEL:
  - Expand what we mean by evidence
  - Build stronger learning routines
  - Be explicit about the different MEL hats



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