MEL ASSESSMENT PRO-ARIDES PHASE II

DRAFT REVIEW

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AUTHORS
ROBBERT RADEMAKERS, DEBBIE KEIJSER, EMMA MARTINEZ & NIENKE OOMES

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Roetersstraat 29
1018 WB, Amsterdam
The Netherlands

+31 20 399 1255
secretariaat@seo.nl
www.seo.nl/en/

Introduction

Pro-ARIDES (PA) is a €105 million, ten-year programme running from 2021 to 2030. Phase II of the programme covers the period 2026–2030 and builds on the achievements of Phase I (2021–2025). PA is implemented in three fragile Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) and works with farmers, (agro-)pastoralists, herder households and various organisations, through five trajectories. [1] The programme aims to drive systemic change, strengthen the resilience of households, local economies, and institutions, and embed these changes in inclusive local ecosystems. It also seeks to foster greater social cohesion and enhance the capacity of communities and institutions to prevent tensions related to natural resource use, governance, and social inequalities.

Phase II aims to deepen and consolidate the achievements made in the communes and villages targeted during Phase I. The goal is to strengthen local ownership and support further scaling and institutionalisation. In particular, the programme aims to reach new communities and to more firmly embed successful approaches in local systems and institutions.

Partly in response to recommendations made during the mid-term evaluation of PA, the PA team has revised its MEL framework. The revised framework consists of five main building blocks: (1) monitoring and evaluation on output[2] and (early)[3] outcome[4] indicators; (2) action research; (3) the tracking of systemic change; (4) knowledge sharing and learning; and (5) program adaptation. These components are intended to function as one integrated system that will generate evidence, support reflection, and inform decision-making across the programme. The overall goals of the framework are to monitor progress, understand how change happens, and translate lessons learned into timely adjustments to strategies and promote scaling.

SEO Amsterdam Economics was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to assess the quality and practical applicability of the revised PA MEL framework. The primary purpose of this assessment is to determine whether the revised MEL framework is fit for purpose—i.e., whether it can credibly track key envisaged results using clearly defined and measurable indicators, and whether it can support valid contribution claims (and, where relevant, attribution claims). We also assess whether the revised MEL framework is likely to support learning and inform programme steering and evaluation.

Methodology

To assess this revised PA MEL framework, we used a structured scoring framework that SEO developed in collaboration with MFA. The framework is based on seven pre-defined criteria that reflect international best practice in programme-level MEL design and implementation:

1. Coherence of the MEL system with the Theory of Change (ToC);
2. Relevance and quality of the indicator set;
3. Quality of measurement methodologies and the underlying evidence base;
4. The learning and steering function of the MEL system;

[1] Trajectory 1: Improving farmer's livelihoods and access to basic services, Trajectory 2: Developing local businesses and improving market access, Trajectory 3: Local governance of land and natural resources, Trajectory 4: Gender equality, social inclusion and civic engagement, and Trajectory 5: Local governance, social cohesion, and public finance.
[2] "Indicateurs des résultats clés" see p. 8
[3] "Indicateurs des effets préliminaires" see p.9
[4] "Indicateurs Outcomes" see p.10

5. Accountability towards BZ/DGIS, including alignment with FNS results frameworks;
6. Linkage to mid-term and end-term evaluations in line with OECD-DAC criteria;
7. Practical feasibility of the MEL system.

For each criterion, we use a set of indicators – agreed with MFA - to assess to what extent the MEL system meets minimum requirements and supports effective monitoring, learning, accountability, and evaluation.

The key sources for this assessment include two key PA documents and one methodological note on FNS Results reporting[5] provided by the MFA. The key PA documents include *"Plan Système Intégré de Suivi et Apprentissage"* ('the MEL-document') and *"Pro-ARIDES Planification 2026-2030"* ('the programme document'). Findings were triangulated between documents to assess internal consistency and to identify strengths, gaps, and areas requiring further clarification.

Assessment

Criteria 1: Coherence with the ToC

The quality of the ToCs (1.1) meets, and on some assessment indicators exceeds, the requirements. It is helpful that the programme works with both an overarching Theory of Change and separate ToCs for each trajectory. This gives a clearer structure to the programme logic and makes it easier to understand the different pathways through which change is expected to happen. At the same time, the causal logic is not yet fully explicit. The ToCs do not yet clearly show which outputs are expected to be most important in driving which outcomes, so the main causal pathways remain only partly defined.[6] The ToC also does not yet include the programme inputs and main activities under each trajectory, which makes it more difficult to see how interventions are expected to lead to change.[7]

The MEL system provides a useful basis for tracking change, by distinguishing between output, preliminary outcome, and outcome indicators that are linked to the ToC. This helps to organise evidence across different levels of change and shows that the system is intended to go beyond routine output monitoring. The MEL document also shows that the framework includes multiple instruments for adapting findings to the local context, such as KIIs, FGDs, and context-sensitive scorecards.However, not all indicators listed in the trajectory ToCs (Annex 3 in the programme document) are reflected in the MEL framework, and the rationale for including or excluding certain indicators is not made explicit.

The MEL system is partly aligned with the ToC (1.2), but ToC alignment remains incomplete. However, the ToC is not explicitly included in the MEL document. Furthermore, it remains unclear how activities, outputs, preliminary effects, outcomes, impacts, and systemic change are expected to connect within and across pathways. Assumptions and risks are mentioned in passing, but they are not yet presented systematically as clear and trackable elements in the MEL system.

Criteria 2: Relevance and quality of indicators

[5] *"Results Reporting and Methodological Notes; Food and Nutrition Secuirity"* (version May 2025)
[6] The implicit assumption is that outcomes are produced by the combined effect of all outputs within a trajectory. This is a valid starting point, but it also makes contribution analysis (part of assessment criteria 3) more difficult if the main expected drivers of change (causal pathways) are not defined in advance.
[7] At the same time, adding this level of detail could also make the ToC more complex and reduce its readability.

Relevance and coverage of indicators (2.1): The MEL framework covers most relevant FNS result areas such as agricultural production,[8] diet and nutrition, income, sustainable land use, empowerment, and enablers (e.g., local governance). At the same time, the operationalisation of key FNS variables - particularly those related to reducing yield gaps and attaining a living income - appears to differ from the data collection plan in Annex 2 of the MEL document. The indicators are not yet fully operationalised or formulated in a SMART manner. Furthermore, the MEL framework does not include all FNS indicators, including those on household resilience (to shocks).[9] [10]

The MEL framework makes a strong attempt to measure systemic change in a structured way. However, the indicator set relies predominantly on perception-based data, with more limited use of observed behaviour (or other measures of revealed preferences of individuals or organizations). While using perception data fits the ambition to capture cultural and relational shifts, it also entails the usual methodological limitations of perception research, including social desirability bias, availability bias, and a weaker basis for drawing conclusions about actual behavioral or institutional change.

The MEL framework proposes a range of qualitative methods to help identify both positive and negative unintended effects and generate learning from them. These include FGDs and KIIs in years without a performance evaluation, action research, feedback and complaints mechanisms, and sensemaking workshops. However, it does not include any *ex ante* indicators to measure such effects systematically and quantitatively, for example by drawing on lessons from Phase I.

Disaggregation by subgroup is partly in place and shows a clear intention to meet the formal FNS requirements. Several preliminary and outcome indicators are disaggregated by sex, youth, municipality, user group, type of actor, service type, and, in some cases, sector (see Annex 2 of MEL document). No clear definitions are given for some disaggregation categories, such as youth, type of organization (for example indicator 1.3.4), and sector (for example indicator 1.2.3). Furthermore, the MEL framework does not set out an explicit disaggregation strategy for indicators on systemic change, for example by country, municipality type, or other territorial characteristics. This is broadly consistent with the framework's treatment of systemic change as a process operating at subsystem and territorial level rather than at the level of individual beneficiaries. At the same time, the absence of a disaggregation strategy means that the MEL-framework currently gives limited guidance on how differences in systemic change will be examined across contexts.

Measurement plan and operationalisation (2.2) are partly developed, but still incomplete. Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 provide a useful starting point by linking objectives, tools, indicators, survey methods, timing, and sample design. The document also explains the distinction between attribution for Phase II households and contribution analysis for Phase I households and organisations, and it includes broader system elements on roles, governance, and data quality assurance. This gives the MEL system a clearer methodological basis than a simple indicator list alone.

The MEL framework does not yet provide one full indicator-by-indicator measurement plan in a single consistent format. Definitions, methods, data sources, frequency, responsibility, and quality checks are not yet shown systematically for all indicators. Furthermore, there are also no targets established for those indicators, which could hamper the learning function of the MEL-framework (see criteria 4). Operationalisation is strongest for household survey indicators (e.g., linked to the RHoMIS-based surver), but weaker for several outcome and systemic change

[9] Although Annex 3 identifies productive assets as a measure of resilience, Chapter 2 of the MEL document does not include it as an indicator.
[10] For instance, using the Multidimensional Poverty Assessment Tool (IFAD);

indicators. Terms such as "improved" or "increased" are still not always defined precisely (as already flagged during the mid-term evaluation), and many systemic change markers remain qualitative criteria rather than fully operationalised indicators.

Criteria 3: Measurement methodology

Data collection and data management (3.1): The MEL-framework includes an extensive data collection and measurement plan. The MEL framework sets out a clear plan for baseline, midline, and endline measurement for households, organizations, and institutional stakeholders and it also distinguishes between Phase I, Phase II, and control groups. For households, the document describes a reasonable two-stage sampling approach, with villages selected first and households second, and it gives some explanation of sample size assumptions linked to power, clustering, and non-compliance.

Several elements remain only partly elaborated and pose a risk, particularly for the attribution strategy. The power calculations do not seem to recognise two important characteristics of the quasi-experimental design, discussed further in 3.2 below: (1) heterogenous effects across disaggregated groups and (2) effective independent units to estimate the treatment effect. Because treatment is assigned at village level, the effective number of independent units is determined by the number of sampled villages rather than by the total number of households surveyed. In practice, this means that the statistical leverage of the Phase II quasi-experimental design rests on 50 village clusters, while the larger household sample mainly improves precision within clusters rather than increasing the number of independent observations.

Ethics and data protection are treated with appropriate seriousness in the MEL framework. It includes provisions for secure storage, differentiated access rights, validation and archiving procedures, attention to national legal requirements, and arrangements for anonymisation and data sharing within the consortium. The framework also provides a clear account of the broader data architecture, notably through the use of LogAlto and the RACI structure for data governance and accountability. At the same time, it is less explicit on how anonymised records will be linked over time and how household-level treatment histories will be tracked consistently across waves.

The mix of using contribution, attribution and mixed-methods analysis (3.2) is a strong feature of the revised MEL framework. The document makes a clear distinction between attribution and contribution, and this fits the programme context well. For Phase II households, it proposes a quasi-experimental design with control villages, difference-in-difference estimation, matching, and regional (commune-level) fixed effects. For Phase I households and organisations, for which no credible control groups are available, the framework proposes contribution analysis based on existing MEL data and additional qualitative inquiry. The wider framework also combines quantitative and qualitative methods (mixed-methods approach), including surveys, KIIs, FGDs, self-assessments, scorecards, participatory interpretation, and triangulation. This gives the MEL system a credible mixed-method basis for analysing both whether change happened and how it happened.

While this improvement compared to the Phase I MEL framework is welcome, the attribution strategy based on difference-in-difference entails several risks, particularly because treatment is assigned at village level (see assessment 3.1). As is typical in such contexts, it is unlikely that key assumptions are met, including the assumption thattreatment groups do not effect the control groups are independent and that assignment to a treatment or

control group is random. For example, it is likely that control group spillover effects may occur[11] or selection into participation within treatment villages (especially for household training).[12] The MEL framework could usefully make these risks explicit and set out mitigation strategies to manage these risks in practice. Another issue to explore is that there appears to be meaningful variation in treatment intensity across villages, with some villages receiving a wide range of interventions and others only one or two. This variation could provide an interesting source of identification in a quasi-experimental design.

The proposed contribution analysis is appropriate, but could be further elaborated. On the one hand, the document explains for which indicators it will be used and usefully provides a basic set-up (Appendix 3 to the MEL document). On the other hand, it is not yet clear which causal chains (contribution claims) will be selected in practice, or how these will be selected, nor how contribution scores will be operationalised, or how the strength of the evidence will be assessed.[13] For the broader mixed-methods approach, it is also not yet clarified how different data sources will be triangulated and how different types of evidence will be weighed against each other. More detail on this would be welcome.

Validation, aggregation, and quality assurance (3.3): The MEL framework has several strong quality features. It refers to data quality standards for surveys, including validation protocols, anomaly detection, audits, and multi-level verification from field to regional level. At the same time, the logic for aggregation and extrapolation is not explained explicitly (e.g., for instance on double counting). The document explains harmonisation and consolidation across levels, but apart from noting that organisational data will not be extrapolated, it does not yet show clearly how it will aggregate indicators from local level to country and programme level for each part of the framework. This is especially important because the MEL system mixes standardised indicators with more context-specific learning tools and systemic change markers.

Criteria 4: Learning and steering

Learning (4.1) is a partially developed component of the PA MEL system. The triangulation of evidence across components is correctly presented as a key first step in the learning process. This includes the cross-referencing of findings from, action research, systemic change monitoring, impact stories, and the FCM to build a comprehensive understanding of programme results and inform operational decisions. The document describes a range of instruments designed to promote learning, including action research cycles, sensemaking workshops, a Feedback and Complaints Management Mechanism, annual impact story writing workshops, and technical notes and thematic briefings. A set of learning questions is nicely framed around action research outputs, notably "Are we doing the right things?, Are we doing things the right way?, Are we making a difference?".[14] In addition, role assignments exist for specific mechanisms: joint RA teams are responsible for the full action research cycle, and KIT and WUR are assigned to lead strategic regional studies.

However, the learning function is not yet fully operationalised. The learning questions appear specifically under Action Research outputs and do not function as a programme wide learning agenda, and it is not yet clear how data and analyses from the broader M&E system (including household surveys, systematic change monitoring, impact

[11] Such spillover effects could happen because control villages located near treatment villages may learn from, or be affected by, the treatment villages, for example through communication or migration. In that case, treatment effects might be underestimated.

[12] This is known as self-selection: more motivated individuals may be more willing to participate in training, and that motivation may itself be correlated with outcomes such as income and productivity.

[13] A possible example is the way contributions and the strength of the evidence were scored in the mid-term evaluation by SEO. See Mid-Term evaluation of Pro-ARIDES - SEO Economisch Onderzoek

[14] Learning questions can be found in Section 3.2.2 (pg. 14)

stories, and FCM feedback) feed into and answer these questions. The link between data collection activities and learning question answering is not specified, and the learning agenda is described at the programme level, leaving unclear how the different MEL components feed into a common set of learning questions. Furthermore, there is no standardised template for documenting and communicating lessons, which limits comparability across stakeholders, countries, and years. Follow-up on lessons is mentioned only in the context of FCM feedback, and not for lessons from research or evaluations. The document also states that primary data will be made available within the consortium and, where relevant, released publicly, but the how is not yet explained.

Steering and governance (4.2) has a clearer foundation, but key elements remain unspecified. Adaptation is described as a continuous process in which lessons from period reviews, learning workshop analyses, and community feedback are used to identify effective practices and guide operational decisions. The RACI matrix specifies roles and responsibilities across five levels (those being: field, country data manager, country SEA consultant, regional SEA consultant and programme management) and quality responsibility per partner is clearly assigned.[15] At the instrument level, adaptive management is operationalised through activity sheet revisions that translate national insights into local interventions, annual regional meetings that consolidate lessons and define strategic directions, and Country Advisory Committee sessions that advise on coherence with national policies.

However, the RACI matrix covers data management roles only and does not yet extend to sensemaking, reflection, and learning decision processes, leaving the ownership of these functions ambiguous. How frequently and how to adjust activities or the ToC is not specified, and it is unclear what level of evidence or underperformance would lead to a formal adaptation decision. While this is understandable, given the complexity of the programme, agreeing on some formal trigger points or decision rules (for when evidence should lead to adaptation of activities, revision of activity sheets, or revision of the ToC) can provide useful guidance for programme management.

Activity sheets can be a useful tool through which the programme can track and adjust its activities at the local level. These are at this moment not included in the MEL document and could therefore not be assessed. The document also does not include provisions for reflection on the MEL system itself, including mechanisms to periodically assess what works and what does not within the monitoring framework, in order to keep it proportionate over time.

Criteria 5: Accountability towards MFA

Reporting and compliance (5.1) provides a basic structure but leaves some gaps with regard to donor-specific requirements. Table 8[16] summarises reporting outputs across all MEL components, and donor reporting is included in the RACI matrix with the Regional SEA Consultant responsible and Program Management accountable. The document also commits to reporting in line with IATI standards, stating that financial data and reports will be updated regularly and that data acquired through the grant will be publicly available.

However, several gaps remain. For example, it is not specified which indicators are reported to MFA/DGIS, in which product (e.g., annual report, dashboard, or data table), and with what frequency. MFA/FNS standard indicators are not mentioned in the document, and some discrepancies with FNS indicators can be observed (see criterion 2). Regarding IATI compliance, while the document states that reporting will be done in line with IATI standards[17], it

[15] RACI Matrix is presented in Table 9, Section 8 (pg. 33)
[16] Table 8 "Dashboard of the Integrated Monitoring and Learning System" can be found in Section 7 (pg. 30).
[17] Section 8.10 (pg. 34)

does not specify how this will be operationalised in practice, for instance, which data fields will be reported, and who within the consortium bears responsibility for IATI submissions.

Criteria 6: Evaluation readiness ('evaluability')

Evaluation planning and evaluation questions (6.1) has a solid foundation in terms of impact evaluation design, but gaps remain regarding the full OECD-DAC evaluation framework.

Effectiveness is measured through a combination of household surveys (tracking adoption of practices, yields, income, and food security), organisational self-assessments, and systemic change monitoring. Compared to the previous MEL framework, many improvements have been made in this area, but some issues remain, as discussed above. Regarding **relevance**, more information could be provided on the extent to which information is gathered and at which level (communes or villages; types of households) before deciding on interventions. In sampling, more efforts could be made to collect data for pastoralist households, as the mid-term evaluation found that this group was notably underrepresented. Regarding **efficiency**, the MEL framework could usefully include more cost-effectiveness indicators, for example realised vs. planned expenditures by input/activity and location. For the measurement of **coherence**, another useful addition would be to include a mapping of other donor programmes active in the same villages or communes, which is also relevant for the quasi-experimental design. More generally, while the system gathers a large volume of data across a wide range of stakeholders, it is unclear what data will be made available to evaluators and how protection of vulnerable households will be assured while maintaining the evaluability of the programme. While multi-level verifications, audits, and Data Quality Assurance processes are mentioned in sections 8.4 - 8.7,[18] covering the internal data management cycle, there is no mention of the independence or quality assurance of external evaluations.

Criteria 7: Feasibility

Proportionality and capacity (7.1) of the MEL system appears broadly appropriate for the scale and complexity of Pro-ARIDES Phase II, combining M&E, action research, systemic change monitoring, knowledge capitalisation, and program adaptation components across three countries. The system reflects the programme's risk context through elements such as the use of mobile tools adapted to low-connectivity contexts, deferred synchronization, and multi-level verification mechanisms. Annual capacity-building plans per country are mentioned, and section 6.1.4 describes targeted training sessions for local partners.

The system is quite ambitious in scope, and the risk of it becoming burdensome is appropriately acknowledged in the document itself. For example, Appendix 4 correctly notes that, when the number of indicatorsis (too) high, there is a risk that monitoring will be prioritised over learning and analysing.[19] Although capacity gaps are mentioned in the risk matrix of the programme document, they are not explicitly translated to mitigation measures for the MEL-planning in the MEL-document. In terms of broader feasibility, the document does not yet describe the programme's mitigation strategy for fragile contexts, including how the programme and MEL system would be adapted in the case of political or climate instability or security concerns. This is surprising giving that, during the mid-term evaluation, the programme scored highly on its adaptability to security risks.

[19] Appendix 4, Section 7 (pg. 9)

Recommendations

Table 1 Main recommendations per criterion

Criterion	Main recommendations
Coherence with TOC	• Embed the overarching and trajectory-specific ToCs (from the programme document) explicitly in the MEL framework. • In the trajectory-specific ToC, describe the programme's main causal pathways more explicitly, by showing which outputs are expected to drive which outcomes, and where pathways interact across trajectories • Make explicit which causal linkages will be tested through contribution analysis, and why those linkages are prioritised. • Translate key assumptions into explicit, trackable elements in the MEL system, with standard review moments. • Embed inputs and activities explicitly in the ToC and MEL framework, so that the full causal chain is visible (and indicators on inputs and activities are important for measuring efficiency).
Relevance and quality of indicators	• Further operationalise all core programme indicators into SMART indicators with clear definitions, formulas, units of measurement, baselines, targets, disaggregation, and data sources. • Align indicators as much as possible with MFA/FNS definitions and standard indicators so that the framework supports both donor accountability and programme learning. • Define all disaggregation categories more clearly (for example youth, type of organisation, sector, municipality type) and develop an explicit disaggregation strategy for systemic change indicators across territorial contexts. • Complement perception-based systemic change indicators as much as possible with a set of behavioural or observed-change indicators as much as possible to strengthen the evidence base on actual change. • Add a small set of quantitative indicators to capture anticipated (based on learnings from Phase I) external effects more systematically.
Measurement methodology	• Operationalise contribution analysis more fully by defining which causal chains will be assessed, how evidence will be assembled, how contribution scores will be derived, and how confidence in findings will be expressed. • For quasi-experimental design, in addition to estimating the village-level ITT effect, make analytical use of variation in treatment intensity across villages and households (for example, number, type, timing, or combination of interventions received) to assess "dose-response" patterns and identify which intervention mixes appear most effective. • Strengthen the attribution strategy by setting out mitigation measures for spillovers, contamination of control villages, self-selection into participation, village-level treatment assignment, and treatment-intensity variation. • Revisit the statistical design and power calculations so they reflect that treatment is assigned at village level, and clarify how subgroup analyses will be handled. • Establish a clear protocol for unique identifiers, household tracking, and treatment histories across data-collection rounds. • Clarify how indicators will be aggregated/extrapolated from local to country and programme level, including rules to avoid double counting and other forms of invalid extrapolation.
Learning and steering	• Make the feedback loops between monitoring, action research, systemic change monitoring, sensemaking, and programme adaptation more explicit. • Further develop learning and steering mechanisms for the MEL framework (also to enhance its adaptability). • Extend the RACI matrix beyond data management to cover inclusion of a wide range of programme stakeholders (including staff and consultants of all consortium partners) in sensemaking, lesson ownership, follow-up, and adaptation decisions. • Develop a standardised template for documenting and communicating lessons to enable comparability across stakeholders, countries, and years. • Improve transparency and efficiency of learning, by introducing a simple recommendation tracker that records decisions, follow-up actions, timelines, responsible actors, and status of implementation. • Define clear trigger points or decision rules for when evidence should lead to adaptation of activities, revision of activity sheets, or revision of the ToC.
Accountability	• Make explicit which variables are required for the MFA (both accountability and learning) and which are programme-level indicators (more relevant for learning) • Formulate targets

	• Specify which indicators and with what frequency are reported to MFA/DGIS • Clarify how IATI reporting will be operationalised in practice (including data fields, how often, and responsible parties)
Evaluation readiness ('evaluability')	• Expand the MEL framework so it also captures evidence relevant to other OECD-DAC criteria, especially efficiency, and to a lesser extent relevance, and coherence. • Track community/village/context information systematically, including mapping of other donor programmes active in the same areas (it is mentioned but not yet operationalised) • Further increase efforts to collect data for pastoralist households, as the mid-term evaluation found that this group was notably underrepresented. • Clarify which datasets, metadata, tools, and documentation will be made available to external evaluators, and under what access and anonymisation conditions. • Clarify how vulnerable-household protection will be balanced with the programme's evaluability and data-access needs.
Feasibility	• Explicitly describe risk mitigation measures and backup plans for regions with a high level of political or climate instability. • Conduct a structured MEL feasibility assessment and translate identified gaps and operational constraints—such as access, safety, seasonality and logistics—into a realistic MEL operational plan with adjusted timelines, roles and mitigation measures to ensure feasible and consistent data collection. • Identify capacity gaps explicitly and address practical feasibility considerations including safety, seasonality, and language diversity in the MEL planning.