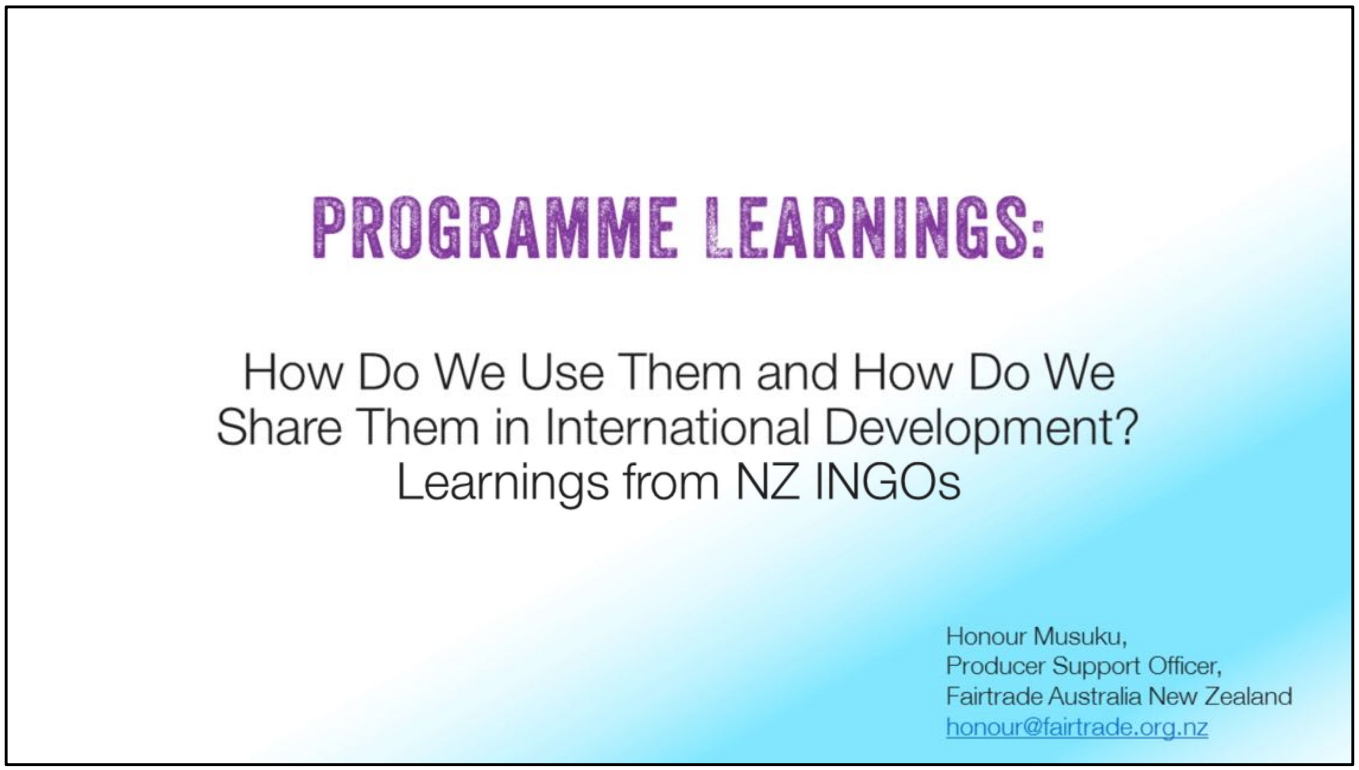
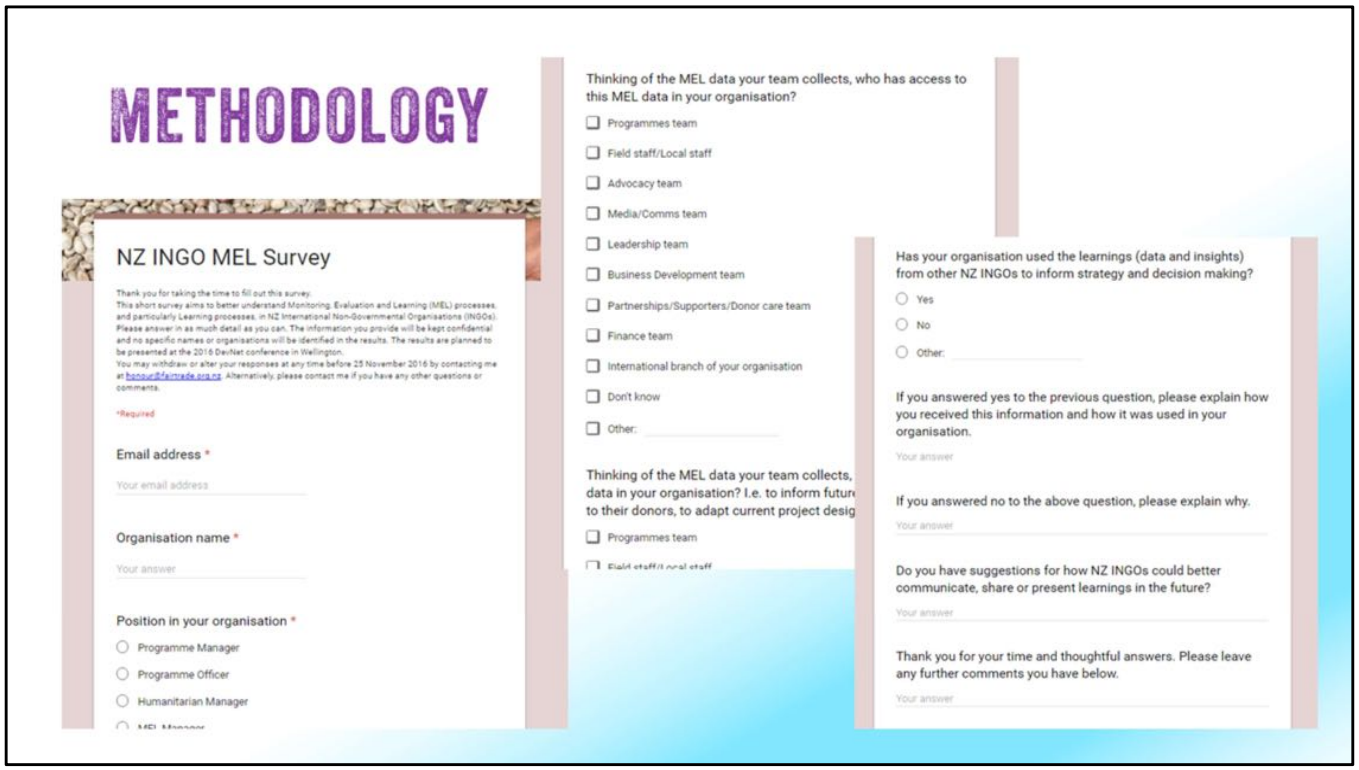
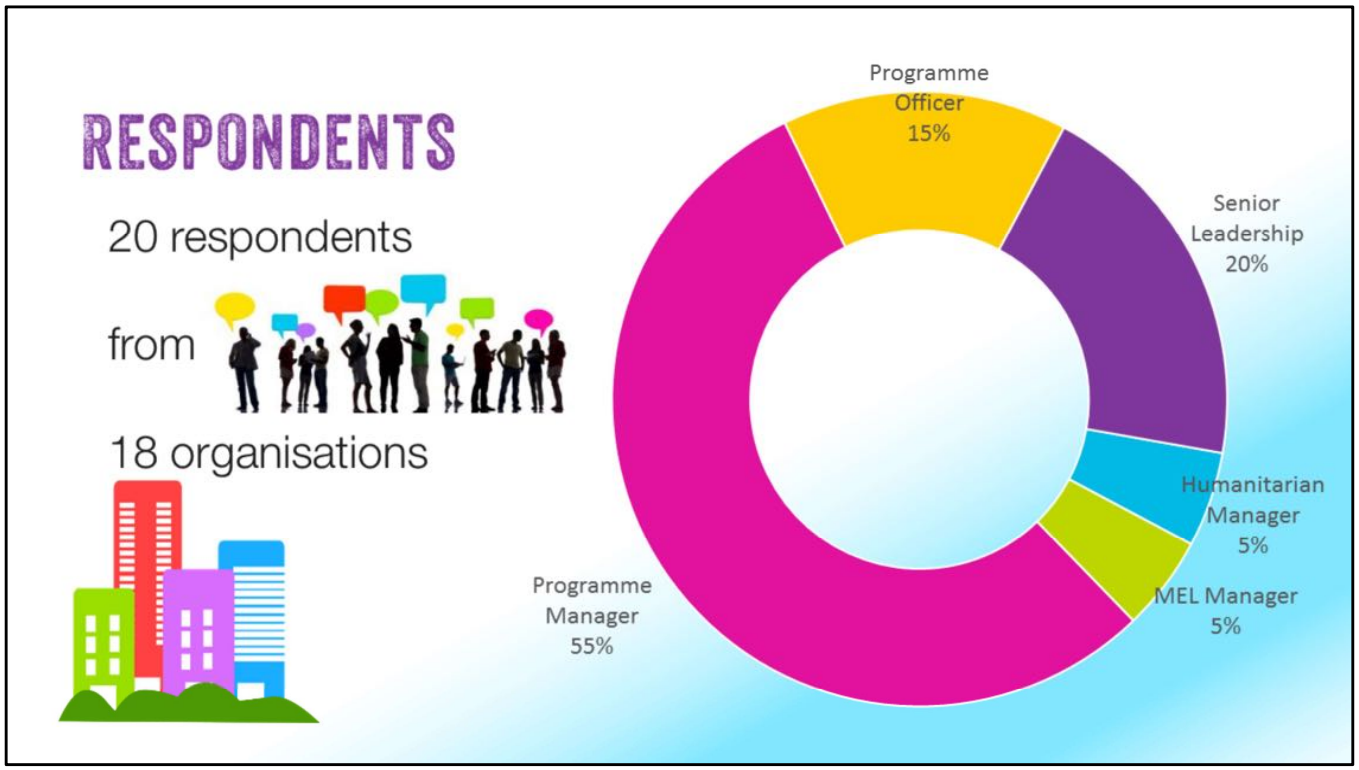



This presentation looks at Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) practices within NZ international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). I, Honour Musuku, Fairtrade ANZ Producer Support Officer, presented the findings of this work at the 2016 DevNet conference in Wellington. I hope that this small piece of research can stimulate further discussion in NZ INGOs and partner organisations for how we can better work together in the future.

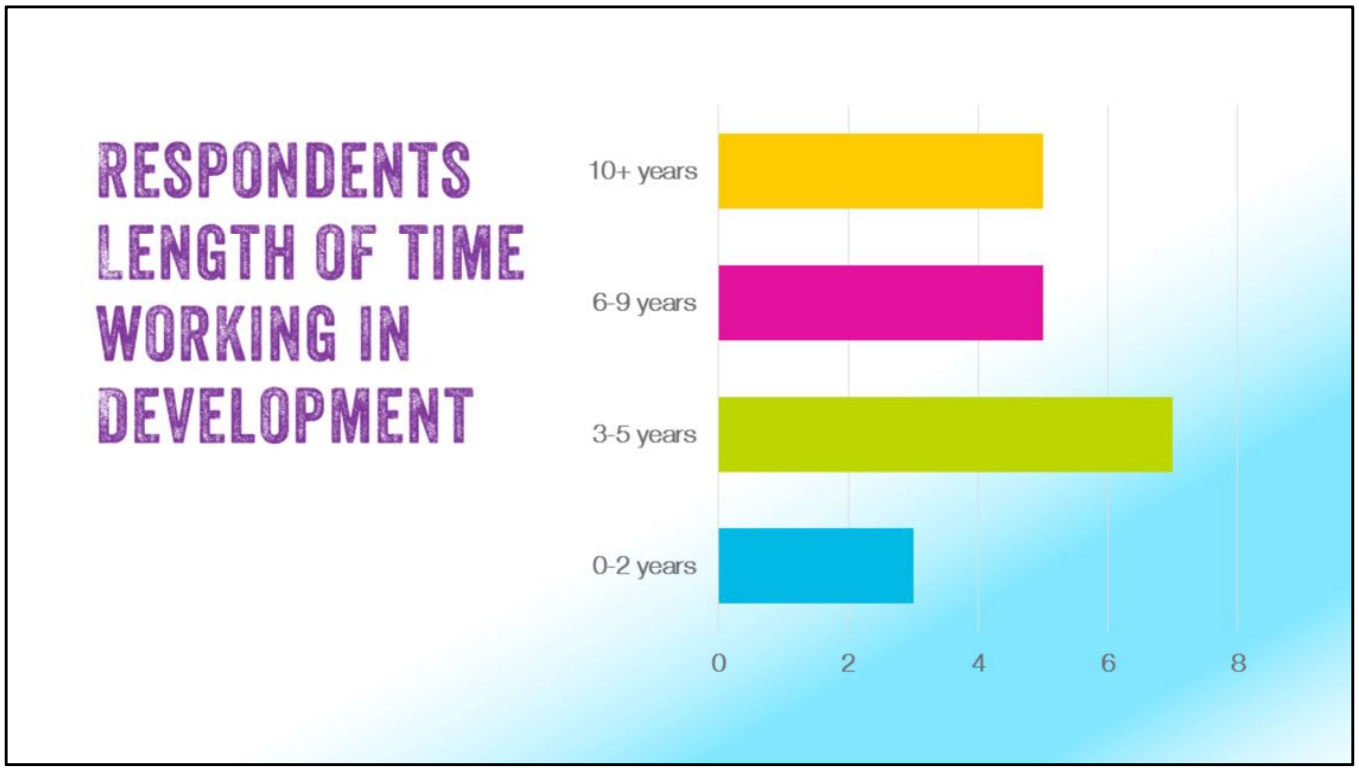
In June this year Fairtrade ANZ completed a 2 & ½ year programme about ICT in PNG. I wanted to see what our organisation could do to share our learnings apart from write an article for our website or make a Facebook post. We had all this rich data, an epic closing report and a lot of institutional knowledge but no outlet to share it. So, I started to look up how other organisations shared their programme learnings and I couldn't find much information about that either. In the development world and especially in NZ, inevitably, a lot of the work we do overlaps and yet we don't seem to know that it does. So I decided to look a little deeper at what goes on within NZ INGOs and how/if we share programme learnings.




I made a survey looking at Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) practices across organisations based in NZ who do either development or humanitarian work internationally. I created a Google forms survey with a mix of multiple choice and short answer questions. Surveys were kept confidential with no organisations or individuals identified in the presented findings. This gave respondents the opportunity to be as honest as they wanted which is reflected in some of the short answer questions. I used the Council for International Development's (CID) members list on their website to identify organisations, but tracking down email address of the specific employees within the organisations was a little harder. However, in the end I sent surveys to 36 member organisations.

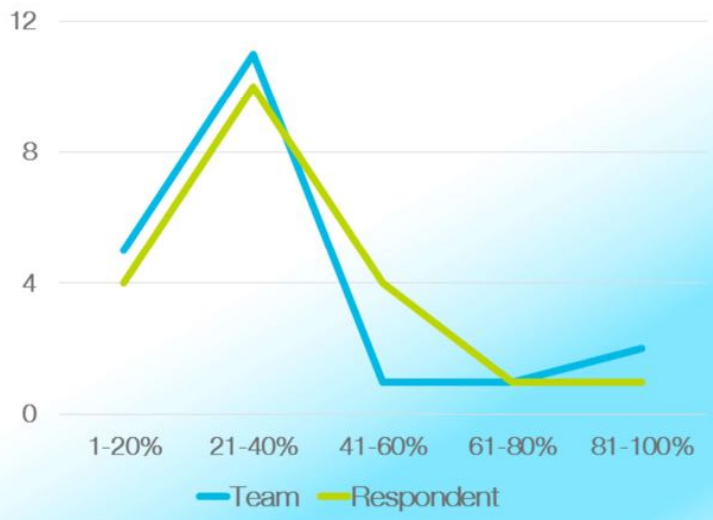



Out of the 36 organisations I contacted, 20 respondents from 18 organisations took part in the survey. This was a 50% success rate which I was very happy about because it included large, established INGOs down to small, single employee INGOs. The 85% of respondents were managers or senior leadership which meant that they would have a good overview of the MEL practices within their team/organisation.




In this question I asked for the respondents length of time working in International Development (ID) or Humanitarian Sector (HS). The 85% of respondents had spent at least three years working in the sector so they would have some form of understanding of MEL.

# AVERAGE TIME SPENT ON MEL

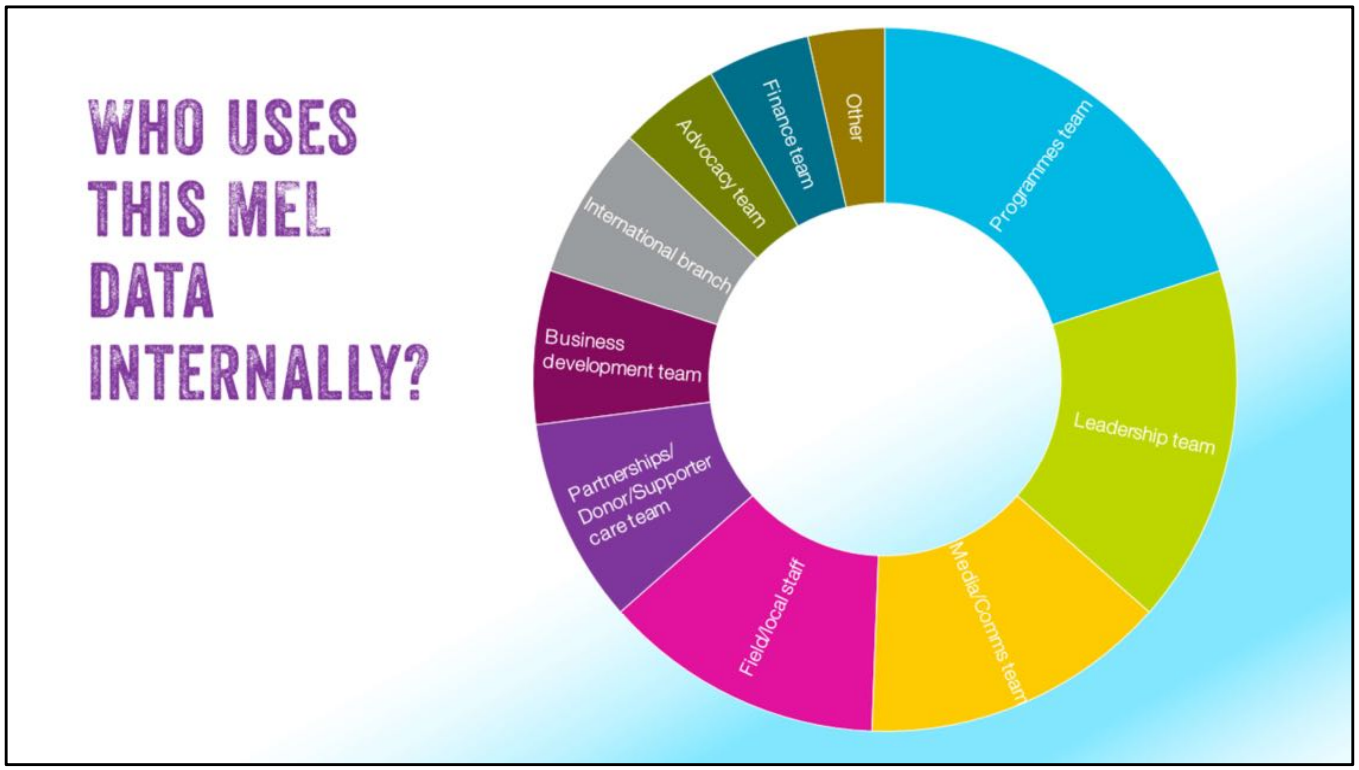



- In a month, how much time does **your team** (ID or HS) spend on MEL? I.e. Data collection, report writing, programme evaluations, communicating/presenting learnings etc.
- In a month, how much time do **you** spend on MEL? I.e. Data collection, report writing, programme evaluations, communicating or presenting learnings etc.

I wanted to know how much time the respondent and their team spent on MEL. The majority of respondents said that they and their team spend 20-40% of their time on MEL activities. The answers to this question show that MEL plays a significant role in the day to day work of all surveyed. This survey didn't ask questions to break down time spent on M, E or L specifically nor did it ask people's background in MEL which could've given better insight into their MEL abilities.

- Thinking of the MEL data your team collects, who has access to this MEL data in your organisation?

Then I wanted to know that within an organisation who has potential to use this information. This graph is not a percentage graph rather the biggest square shows that this got the largest number of respondents. In this instance 17 respondents said that the programmes team have access to MEL data while only 7 respondents said that the advocacy team has access to this information. This shows us two things, firstly it is important to note that not every organisation has all of these team so they would not check this answer. For example where only 5 respondents said that the business development team has access to MEL data probably because most organisations did not have a business development focus/team. The second thing this graph does show us however, it that programmes teams and leadership teams are more likely to have access to this data than anyone else.




- Thinking of the MEL data your team collects, who uses this MEL data in your organisation? I.e. to inform future planning, to report to their donors, to adapt current programme design etc.

So apart from having access to data I wanted to know who actually uses this information as having access does not equate to using. The answers here mostly mirror those in the previous question, with those having more access to data being those more likely to use it.

## WHO HAS ACCESS TO YOUR MEL DATA EXTERNALLY?

- Thinking of the MEL data your team collects, who has access to this MEL data outside of your organisation?

Turning to thinking about who uses this information externally we can see that by in large institution donors and programme partners had access to MEL data, probably due to reporting requirements (donors) and data collection techniques (programme partners). It was also interesting and somewhat saddening to note that programme beneficiaries only had access to MEL data in 25% of the cases. This demonstrates that while it is deemed best practice in development, there is probably not any clear process for sharing learnings with programme beneficiaries in NZ INGOs. Also somewhat unnerving was that three respondents did not even know who had access to this data outside of their organisation. This further demonstrating the lack of process by which NZ INGOs may share MEL data externally.

- Now, thinking about Learning in particular, what does Learning mean to you?

This next section focused primarily on learnings and how they were/were not used in different organisations. First, I wanted to see what respondents defined as learning. I received a range of different answers which covered the different aspects of learning. It seems that NZ INGOs have a good idea about the potential for learning.

# A DEFINITION OF LEARNING

"the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches including monitoring and evaluation to inform strategy and decision-making"

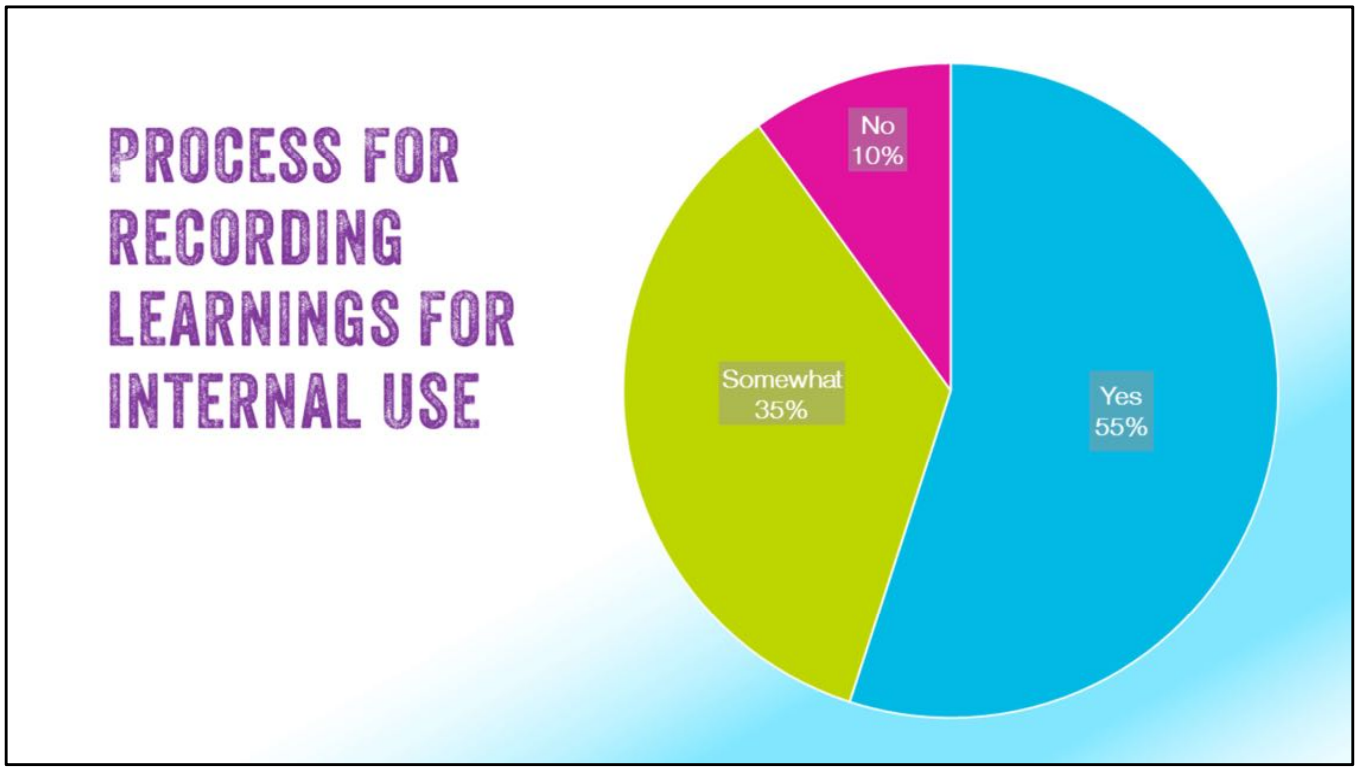
2014, Packard, Guiding Principles and Practices for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, https://www.packard.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Monitoring-Learning-and-Evaluation-Guiding-Principles.pdf

- One definition of learning is "the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches including monitoring and evaluation to inform strategy and decision-making".

I then used a very clear definition of learning to highlight the core components of learning.
Therefore I defined learning as, 'the use of data and insights… to inform strategy and decision-making'.

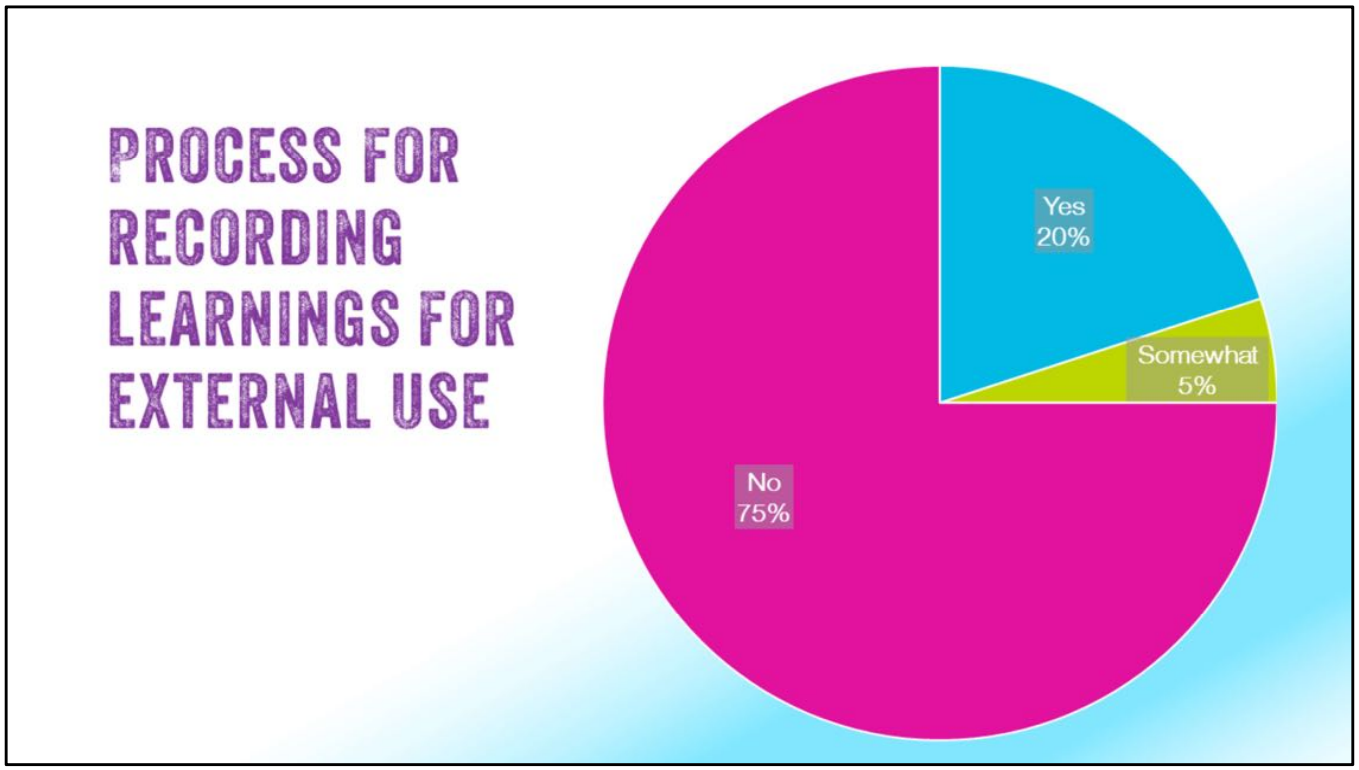
- What does your organisation use data and insights for?

With this simple definition I wanted to know what specifically data and insights were used for in different organisations. Respondents came up with a range of answers that outlined the work that their team did as well as the work done in their wider organisation. Some respondents were also very candid about the use of data and insights within their organisation stating that they "underutilise their data" and that they have "significant room for improvement". These same statements can probably be echoed by any NZ INGO.




- Does your organisation have a specific process for recording and compiling programme learnings so that they could be used by your organisation?

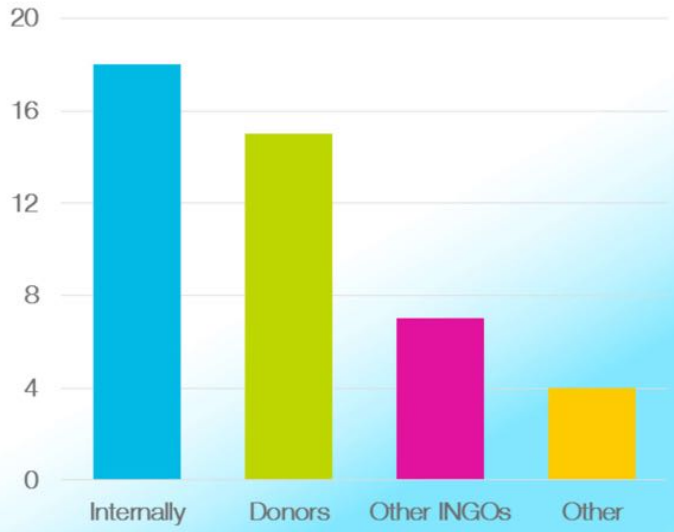
Following on from understanding what data and insights are used for I wanted to know if there were specific processes for dealing with this information so that others within the organisation could use it.
The results of this question were mixed. 55% of respondents answered that their organisation did have a specific process for recording learnings for internal use. This question did not ask if these processes were followed which may have provided a more telling answer to this question. 35% responded somewhat, adding extra comments that although there was some sort of process it wasn't always understood or followed.




- Does your organisation have a specific process for recording and compiling programme learnings so that they could be used by others outside your organisation?

Looking to sharing learnings externally, 75% of all respondents said that their organisation does not have any specific process for recording and compiling programme learnings so that they could be shared externally. This would be grouping learnings together in a way that removed confidential information while still enabling external parties to see, for example, the approach, strengths, challenges and lessons learned of a programme

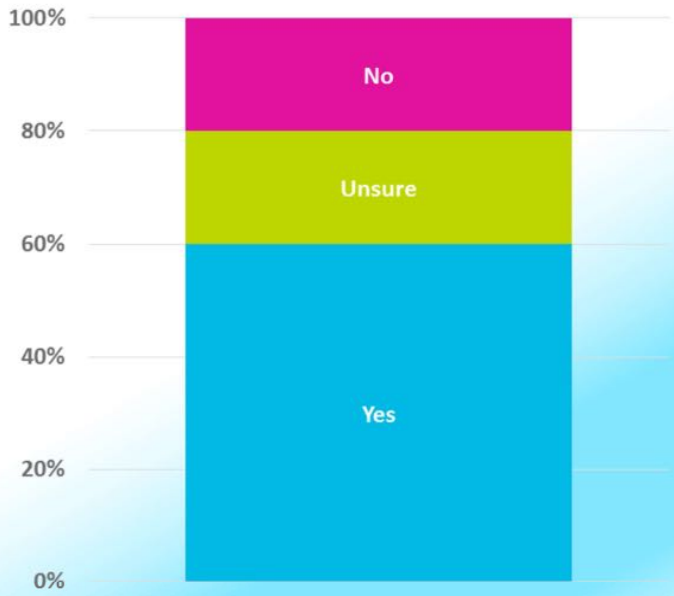
## COMMUNICATING, SHARING AND PRESENTING PROGRAMME LEARNINGS




- Who does your organisation communicate, share or present programme learnings to?

As part of my original question around what NZ INGOs do with their learning I wanted to know if these learnings were shared in any sort of systematic way. Nearly all organisations share their programme learnings internally (in some shape or form), while learnings are also shared with donors. Only about 1/3 of respondents said they share learning with other INGOs. This demonstrates that most programmes learnings are compiled for internal and donor use and reinforces the previous answers stating that most organisations have no process to share learnings externally.

## USE OF THE LEARNINGS FROM OTHER NZ INGOS




- Has your organisation used the learnings (data and insights) from other NZ INGOs to inform strategy and decision making?

As most organisations do not have a specific process for sharing learnings, nor do they share them often, I wanted to find out if NZ INGOs had in fact used learnings from other NZ INGOs. The answer was somewhat surprising, 60% of organisations have used learnings from other NZ INGOs even though there are no specific processes and no regular sharing opportunities to do this.

## HOW THIS INFORMATION WAS RECEIVED AND USED

- *Through being on the CID board*
- *Network with like minded INGOs in NZ and learn from each other*
- *We meet with other INGOs doing similar work in [country] whenever we get the opportunity*
- *Word of mouth…*
- *…it happens sporadically rather than regularly…*

- If you answered yes to the previous question, please explain how you received this information and how it was used in your organisation

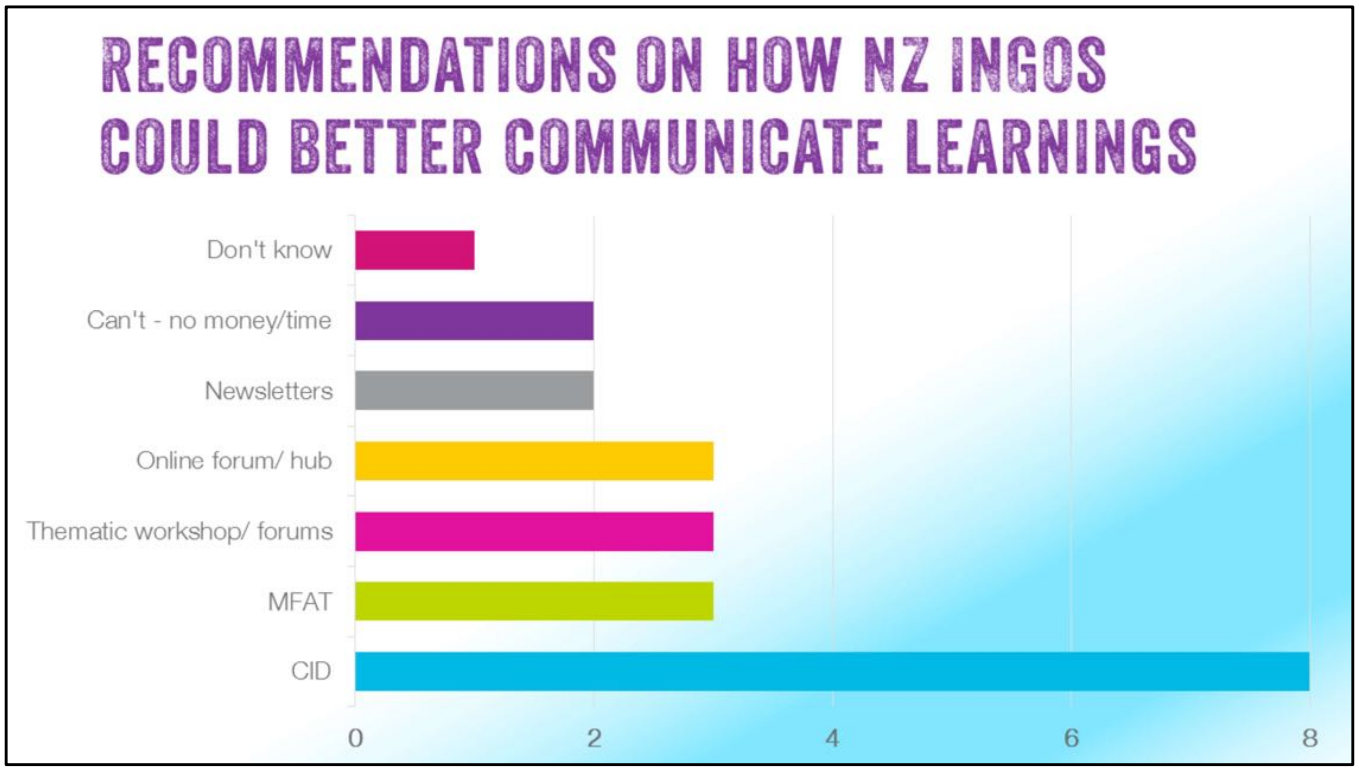
For the 60% who answered yes I wanted to know how they had done so. The answers I selected to show here demonstrate that by in large the learnings used from other organisations came about by sharing in more informal ways, such as through networking. It seems that most sharing of learnings happened perhaps by luck than any specific process within the NZ INGO community.

## REASONS FOR NOT USING OTHER'S LEARNINGS

- *Haven't looked into it*
- *At full capacity/no time*
- *Information not readily available*
- *Organisation's focus is unique (but wanting to share in the future)*

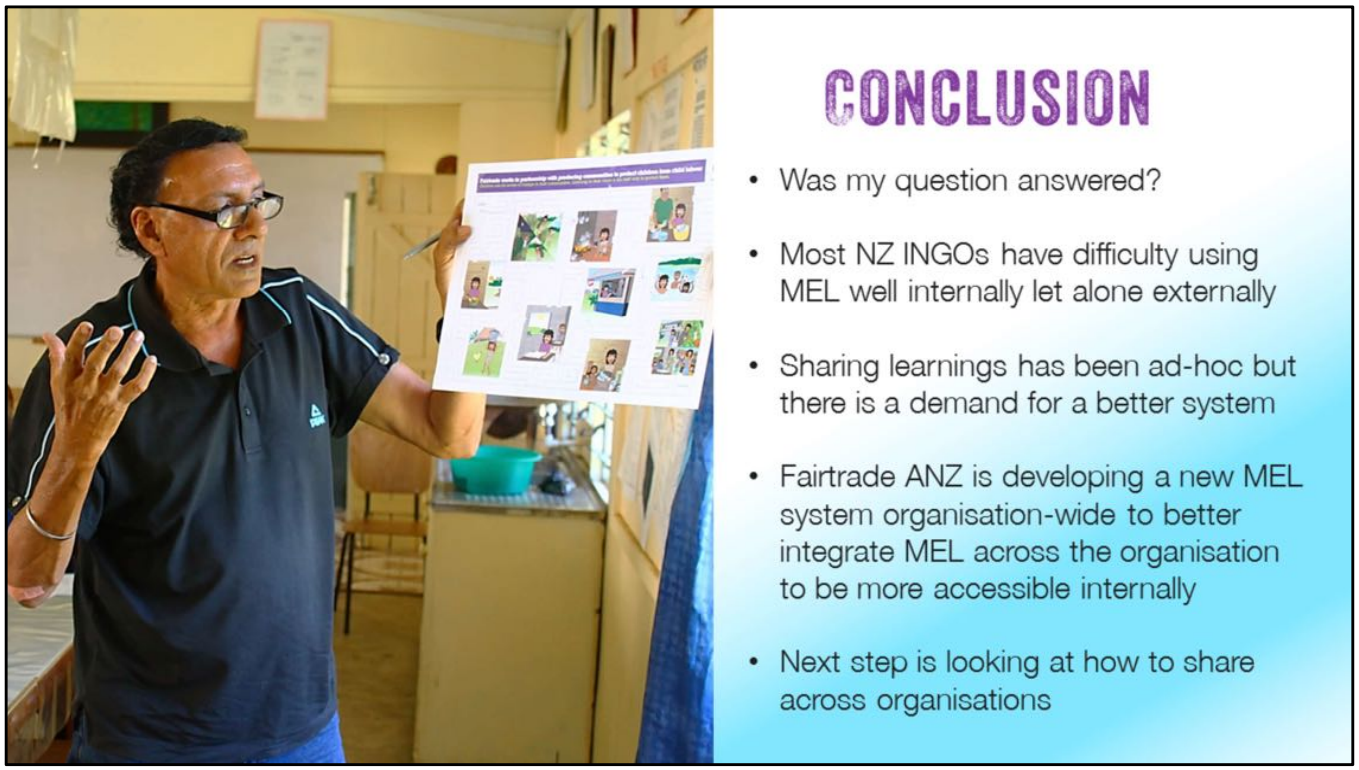
- If you answered no to the above question, please explain why

On the other hand, some NZ INGOs have either chosen to or been unable to use other INGOs learnings. Some organisations felt that doing this wasn't relevant to them, or that they had no ability to do it. Others said that they were unsure on how to go about accessing this sort of information. This indicates that many organisations are stretched for time/budget and investing in this area is not a current focus.




- Do you have suggestions for how NZ INGOs could better communicate, share or present learnings in the future?

This last question was very interesting to see the answers for because it was not a multiple choice question, but rather a short answer question where respondents were free to articulate what they thought could help NZ INGOs better share their learnings in the future.
Eight respondents identified the Council for International Development (CID) as having a key role to play in helping organisations share their learnings across the sector. Some respondents suggested that thematic workshops or forums could do this as well and that while MFAT and CID did occasionally run these they were all based in Wellington but many of the organisations were based in Auckland and unable to attend these.




This brief survey looked at programme MEL practices in NZ INGOs. My original question was wanting to know how NZ INGOs shared project learnings both internally and externally. I wanted to know if in NZ INGOs had specific processes to do this.
My main findings were:

- Most respondents spend 20-40% of their time on MEL
- Generally the programmes and leaderships teams have access to and use MEL data while other teams sometimes have access to it
- Only donors and programme partners tend to have access to MEL data outside of most organisations meaning that other NGOs and the public don't tend to be able to access this data easily (in some form)
- A paper definition of learning is 'the use of data and insights… to inform strategy and decision-making', but in practice most NZ INGOs find it difficult to make the most of their data for their own operations, let alone for sharing externally with very few organisations having a systematic process to share their programme learnings.
- Sharing of learnings has been ad-hoc and while there is no formal way of doing this within the NZ development sector everyone surveyed would like to be able to do this

At Fairtrade ANZ we also have acknowledged the need to improve our MEL processes. We are in the process of developing an organisation-wide MEL system to integrate all the monitoring and evaluation work we do into our organisation-wide strategy. This will enable data and learnings to be more easily accessible to any team internally. Our next step is to think about how we can share learnings better with partners, beneficiaries,

donors, businesses and other INGOs.

# QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this survey or the results please email me – honour@fairtrade.org.nz
Thank you.