

# 1.7. COVERING MEAL BASICS UNDER CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES

## JAMYANG FOUNDATION INDIA AND BANGLADESH



How this story represents an international-local faith partnership in MEAL



### International element

International Buddhist faith-based organisation specialising in women's and girls' education



### Local faith element

Partnerships with local Buddhist nuns; education programmes, including secular and faith elements, aimed at local Buddhist women and girls



### Project country

India and Bangladesh



### Website

<https://www.jamyang.org/>



### The organisation and activities

The Jamyang Foundation is a Buddhist faith-based organisation, which is directed from the US and runs programmes in India and Bangladesh. The foundation supports innovative education projects for indigenous girls and women in some of the most in need and remote parts of the world, including the Indian Himalayas and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The projects foster women's learning potential by combining general education for the modern world with traditional Buddhist wisdom and practice.

Students in the Jamyang Foundation programs study languages, math, health and hygiene, social studies, environmental awareness, and Buddhist philosophy and meditation. After completing their studies, the students have the opportunity to go onto higher education and eventually work as teachers, health care workers, community workers, and mentors to others. The programs also help preserve and revive Buddhist cultures in areas where they are threatened by consumerism, cultural encroachment, and economic hardship.

Students from diverse nationalities and ethnic

backgrounds—Tibet, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Mongolia—have benefitted from the programs by developing community development skills, a strong sense of cultural enrichment, and empowerment. There are currently 12 Jamyang Foundation study programs in the Himalayas. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Jamyang Foundation has founded three primary schools for girls from indigenous communities. Two pioneering projects in India and one school in Bangladesh are now self-sufficient, fulfilling Jamyang Foundation’s mission of empowering women and creating sustainable communities run by women themselves.

### MEAL rationale

According to the director of the Jamyang Foundation, there are two broad traditions with regards to MEAL within Buddhist communities.

1. The first does not see any need for formal MEAL, not even in its most basic forms. In many Buddhist-majority countries, donations are given to monasteries, monks, and nuns, as acts of good will. Donations are considered a gift from the heart, and neither donors nor recipients would consider issuing or asking for a receipt. Giving in itself is seen as an act of generosity, with no need to have or keep any record of this donation. Some even believe that giving a receipt turns what is supposed to be a selfless act into a business-like transaction and would be surprised if one even asked for a record of donations to be kept. In some contexts, nuns and monks are not expected to thank a donor for donating, such as in some faith communities in Thailand where it is believed that saying thank you erases the good karma of one’s donation. Many devout Buddhists

in South East Asia therefore donate without ‘any expectation of reward or recognition’, as phrased in a widespread expression. Even if one does not subscribe to this perspective, asking for receipts or accounts to be kept can raise issues around trust, with people feeling that their integrity is in question.

2. On the other hand, some Buddhist groups support record-keeping and external, more formal forms of accountability. In some cases, this is rooted in local practice, such as in those Buddhist-dominated countries where the names of donors for a temple or monastery are included on a wall or plaque on the premises. Moreover, there is a habit of giving receipts in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, which may have emerged during exile in India. Since the beginning of the exile, more than 400 new monasteries were built in India, which came with a considerable cost and was therefore dependent on the generosity of Tibetan lay people and foreign donors who may find the custom of handing over funds without any written record disagreeable. Moreover, many foreign donations were coordinated by NGOs who are subject to financial regulations in their home countries. Western-based Buddhist organisations in particular have been faced with considerably higher levels of scrutiny than their Christian or secular counterparts. This experience is shared by many Islamic faith-based organisations, as outlined in the first part of this compendium. MEAL may also be supported by those concerned about increasing levels of corruption, including in the Buddhist world. A lack of systems and procedures aimed at documenting financial income and expenses and supported by regular checks, poses a significant risk in this context. The potential ramifications of

corruption amongst faith actors are significant, as it can lead to individuals feeling alienated from faith communities or even question faith as such. According to this point of view, there are no faith barriers to more formalised forms of MEAL. On the contrary, advocates of this approach believe that the integration of MEAL into operations is in line with the ethical principle that money should be used for the purpose it was intended, and that it is supported by the prohibition of lying and cheating in Buddhist teachings.

### MEAL approach

#### MEAL challenges

The Jamyang Foundation has faced significant challenges in its attempts to incorporate MEAL systems into its operations. Most of these are related to the geographical, cultural, and political environment the organisation operates in. Access to the foundation's projects has been a key issue. The organisation's projects in India are located in very remote locations, which are inaccessible for six months of the year due to weather conditions and a lack of telecommunications. In other areas, projects



are hardly accessible to those outside of these areas due to the tense security situation. Six-monthly reporting, which is required by some funders, is simply not possible under these circumstances. Another challenge is the multilingual environment the nuns work in. In the foundation's projects in India, they use Hindi, English, and Tibetan, including in their accounting books, which can be a source of confusion for those who are not proficient in these languages. Moreover, until recently, bank accounts were not common in the region where the nuns are working. Money exchange relied on in-person transactions, including for sizable amounts. The organisation is now trying to get a bank system to work in order to rely on bank transfers rather than individuals distributing funds in person. As a very small, self-funded grassroots organisation, the foundation does not have any paid staff to do more advanced formalised MEAL work nor any local staff members who are proficient in English. The organisation recognises that this puts them at a disadvantage of securing international funding, as they do not have the capacity to fulfil most institutional donors' MEAL requirements.

### **MEAL practices**

One of the first MEAL practices the director of the Jamyang Foundation introduced to the nuns in the Himalayas was to keep accounts. This included discussing how in the Buddhist tradition, if money has been donated for a particular purpose, it should be used for that purpose. Once that process started, the director checked the accounts during her annual visits to the project, which are aimed to monitor activities and progress made. The monitoring was of an integrated nature and included a focus on faith practices. For example, the

consumption of alcohol is forbidden in the Buddhist tradition. When the accounts revealed the nuns had purchased alcohol as a hospitality gift to road inspectors visiting the area, as is customary in the region, the director suggested offering them biscuits, lunch, or a photo of the Buddha instead. The Jamyang Foundation runs a volunteer programme, which allows volunteers from a range of faith backgrounds to stay with the nuns and support them in their activities. When the director was not able to visit the nuns every year, she relied on reporting from the volunteers instead. This created a degree of tension, as some of the nuns felt uncomfortable being monitored by the volunteers. Mindful of the need to maintain standards, the director did not stop the practice altogether, but decided not to reveal the names of the people who reported back to her. At one point, the director had also asked the volunteers to check the accounting; however, this proved impractical due to the language barrier, so she continued to check the accounting books when she visited. Once a year, the Foundation issues a newsletter with reports from the volunteers who share their experiences and any issues they encountered.



## Lessons learned

### Diversity of practice within one faith tradition

Most faith communities and their practices are characterized by a degree of diversity. This includes their attitude towards MEAL. While some schools of thought represented within a faith community may be sceptical about even the most basic forms of MEAL, others may be supportive. It is important to be aware of this diversity when working with local faith actors and faith-based organisations.

### Disconnect between large donors and the grassroots

Implementing MEAL is often particularly challenging for small grassroots organisations due to a lack of resources. Institutional donors tend to have strict MEAL requirements, which

many small organisations cannot fulfil. The disconnect between large donors and the grassroots can put smaller organisations with localised knowledge and on-the-ground experience (but insufficient MEAL capacity) at a disadvantage, as it prevents them from accessing institutional funding.

### Higher scrutiny of minoritized organisations

The environment many minoritized groups operate in, such as Buddhist and Islamic faith-based organisations in the West, creates a distinct set of challenges for these groups. Due to increased scrutiny and pressure by government authorities to prove compliance and due diligence (often to higher standards than non-minoritised groups), some groups see MEAL as a necessary but often complicated means of ensuring accountability.

### MEAL, accountability, and faith education

MEAL can be used as a means of accountability and a tool for faith education when monitoring and evaluation reveal practices that contradict faith teachings. At the same time, emphasising that principles such as integrity and accountability underpin the MEAL process, while also being rooted in faith values, can help reinforce an understanding that MEAL and faith are compatible.