PROGRAM CYCLE

How-To Note: Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan

Introduction

This How-To Note supplements ADS 201.3.4.10, provides an overview of what is typically included in an Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Plan, and outlines practical steps for developing, reviewing, and managing one. The primary audience includes Contracting Officer's Representatives (CORs) / Agreement Officer's Representatives (AORs) and implementing partners. Additional users of this Note include monitoring and evaluation points of contact (M&E POCs) in Mission technical or program offices, and learning advisors where they exist.

Typically, the implementing partner writes and maintains the Activity MEL Plan and the COR/AOR reviews, comments on, and approves it, often in conjunction with an M&E POC or the Program Office. In some cases, such as for government-to-government (G2G) agreements, CORs/AORs or Government Agreement Technical Representatives (GATRs) may be responsible for drafting and maintaining an Activity MEL Plan.

Background

Per ADS 201, "an activity carries out an intervention, or set of interventions, typically through a contract, grant, or agreement with another U.S. Government agency or with the partner country government. An activity also may be an intervention undertaken directly by Mission staff that contributes to a project, such as a policy dialogue."

The Activity MEL Plan serves multiple purposes, but primarily describes how USAID and the implementing partner will know whether an activity is making progress toward stated results. For USAID, it ensures adequate information is available for activity management and that data collection is consistent with data and learning needs of the Project MEL Plan, the Mission's Performance Management Plan (PMP), and the Mission's annual Performance Plan and Report (PPR). For the partner, the plan describes the process for monitoring, evaluating, and learning from implementation to adapt and achieve results. Documenting and sharing the plan increases buy-in from the COR/AOR who uses the information, as well as any partners who contribute to data collection.

When an activity is implemented by a partner country government, the Activity MEL Plan is the best way to gain consensus on what information will be collected and in what manner, how information will be used, and how implementation will be adapted to ensure its usefulness to the partner country and USAID. [1]

Recommended Format and Content

Although the process varies by award, most activities are required to complete an Activity MEL Plan within 90 days of signing, and must have it approved by the COR/AOR before initiating implementation. The timing for developing the plan is important since the partner needs enough time before implementation to determine the appropriate performance indicators and collect baseline information for them. This has implications for the work plan. Once approved, the Activity MEL Plan should be updated as needed through the life of the activity, with review and approval from the COR/AOR.

There is no required format for an Activity MEL Plan, although some Missions have created templates and USAID's Monitoring Toolkit includes an optional template. The following sections describe commonly used and recommended components of an Activity MEL Plan. Each component should be concise and some may be more appropriate as annexes, separate documents, or databases (for example, performance indicator tracking tables).

> ## PMPs, Project MEL Plans, and Activity MEL Plans
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> **Performance Management Plan (PMP)** is developed by a Mission following CDCS approval to monitor, evaluate, and learn from the strategy.
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> **Project MEL Plan** is developed by a USAID team during project design to monitor, evaluate, and learn from a USAID project.
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> **Activity MEL Plan** is typically developed by an implementing partner following award to monitor, evaluate, and learn from a USAID activity.
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> Each plan serves a distinct management purpose, but they are related and should be congruent, with some information appearing in multiple plans. For instance, a performance indicator may have relevance for, and appear in, all three plans; an evaluation planned during project design may appear in both a Project MEL Plan and the PMP; or learning questions that emerge during CDCS development may appear in all three plans. Information should not simply be duplicated in all plans, but should only be included as necessary. For example, an indicator that is useful for a project and an activity does not need to appear in a PMP.

When working directly with a partner country government under a G2G agreement, one way USAID supports donor harmonization, local ownership, and mutual accountability is by aligning monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts with host country priorities and systems. This supports optimal allocation of resources, including personnel time, to focus on implementation, collaboration, data collection, and analysis. In particular, USAID should integrate the partner government's existing monitoring and reporting plans and systems to the extent feasible. This will help to avoid creating parallel processes.

Even when not working directly with a partner government under a G2G agreement, the COR/AOR and the implementing partner are encouraged to consider data collected by the government. Considerations for using such data include, suitability of the data available, and how the data meet key quality standards, with particular attention to the reliability and timeliness of the data.

INTRODUCTION OR OVERVIEW

This section introduces the Activity MEL Plan and describes its structure. If deemed relevant it could also summarize how the implementing partner organizes its performance management system. Although

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[1] Although some information may be relevant for GATRs, the remainder of this document only refers to CORs/AORs as the content is focused on traditional acquisition and assistance awards. For information on G2G agreements see "Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for Government to Government Projects and Activities" in the Monitoring or Evaluation Toolkits on USAID's Learning Lab.

a logic model is not required, it is considered good practice to include a visual depiction of the activity's logic model, if one exists, in order to support monitoring, evaluation, learning, and adaptive management processes as they relate to activity implementation. Including a logic model helps clarify the relationship

between the activity and the project. USAID does not require a specific type of logic model at the activity level, but any model or framework should align to the project's logic model and results.

MONITORING PLAN

Missions comprehensively monitor the performance of their activities and the context in which they operate. Each Activity MEL Plan must include performance indicators and should include context indicators, but should also look beyond indicators to incorporate other monitoring approaches. Other approaches can provide qualitative insights, data collection on a more ad hoc basis, or more in-depth exploration into the achievement of results. The monitoring plan should explain each monitoring approach used and associate it with specific results from the activity's logic model.

Indicator Summary

Performance indicators, which monitor progress toward intended results, are required elements of the Activity MEL Plan. If any context indicators will be used to monitor programmatic assumptions or understand the operational context, they should also be included. The indicator summary should identify any performance indicators that come from a Project MEL Plan, the Mission's PMP, or the annual PPR.

Some things to keep in mind when selecting indicators:

- Key Results – These are significant outputs and outcomes relevant for management and oversight. They must be monitored using performance indicators, but **not all expected results require indicators**.
- Selected indicators should strike a balance between the costs associated with collecting data for each indicator and the indicator's utility for activity management.
- Selected indicators should reasonably meet USAID data quality standards of validity, integrity, precision, reliability, and timeliness.
- Consider the entire life of the activity, including indicators that are not relevant until near the end of implementation, such as those indicators monitoring higher level results.

A complete set of Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRSs), described below, will meet the indicator summary requirement, but it may be useful to include a summary table for listing the full set or a selection of higher-level performance and context indicators.

COR/AOR: When reviewing indicators in an Activity MEL Plan, be sure that sufficient data will be collected for each key result. It is the COR's/AOR's responsibility to ensure that indicators contribute the data necessary to monitor results, make decisions, and adapt. Work with implementing partners to avoid indicators that are not useful, will not produce data that meet data quality standards, or may require excessive data collection costs.

Performance Indicator Reference Sheets

A PIRS must be completed for all performance indicators reported to USAID. Each one documents all the relevant information necessary for those who collect or ultimately use the indicator data. A well-documented PIRS helps ensure reliable continuity of data collection (particularly important when there is staff turnover at USAID or the implementing partner) and appropriate understanding and use of performance indicator data. A Context Indicator Reference Sheet (CIRS) should be completed for all context indicators reported to USAID.

For USAID indicators that come from a Project MEL Plan or a Mission-wide PMP, the COR/AOR should provide the PIRS to the implementing partner. The partner then contributes to specific fields, such as "responsible party," to reflect the activity. Fields such as "precise definition(s)" and "disaggregated by" are considered final and should never be altered without COR/AOR consent. If a partner creates or customizes an indicator that they will report to USAID, which is therefore included in the Activity MEL Plan, the partner is required to create a PIRS for that indicator. If a partner collects indicator data for their own internal management, but does not report it to USAID or include it in the MEL Plan, the partner is strongly encouraged to develop a PIRS for that indicator for data quality purposes, but is not required to do so. ADS 201 includes a mandatory reference on how to complete a PIRS, and a Microsoft Word version that serves as a recommended template is included in USAID's Monitoring Toolkit.

COR/AOR: *For all standard foreign assistance indicators and indicators coming from the Project MEL Plan, provide implementing partners with the relevant PIRS for inclusion in the Activity MEL Plan. When reviewing an Activity MEL Plan, look closely at each PIRS prior to approval to ensure accuracy. If the PIRS defines an indicator that is being collected by others at the Mission or used to report in the PPR the Mission's M&E POC should also review the PIRS for consistency and accuracy. Approving an Activity MEL Plan inherently approves the PIRS and the approach(es) an implementing partner will take to collect, analyze, and report on data for a given indicator.*

Implementing Partners: *When receiving a PIRS from the Mission, the indicator is likely being collected by at least one other partner. It is encouraged that all partners contributing to the same indicator meet to discuss the PIRS and clarify required fields, such as data source and collection methodology, to ensure joint-understanding and consistency of data collection. This will also be a useful process when it comes time to conduct a Data Quality Assessment (DQA).*

Tracking Table for All Indicators

Performance indicator data should be kept in a tracking table or information system for regular updating and analysis. Such data should not be stored in a PIRS. At minimum, tracking tables should include baseline values and dates, targets and target rationales, and actual indicator values for all performance indicators. These data should also be included for context indicators, with the exception of targets, which are not set for context indicators. Instead, context monitoring triggers may be identified if relevant. More information about how to collect baseline data and information about setting targets and defining target rationales is available in the Monitoring Toolkit. Also available in the Toolkit, is a sample indicator tracking table.

EVALUATION PLAN

If an implementing partner intends to conduct an internal evaluation using its own staff or a contractor, the Activity MEL Plan should include an evaluation plan.[2] This plan should identify all evaluations that the partner will manage over the life of the activity, and should include information on the type of evaluation (performance or impact), purpose and expected use, possible evaluation questions, estimated budget, planned start date, and estimated completion date. The evaluation plan should be clear about the expected level of USAID involvement, such as reviewing an evaluation statement of work (SOW) or a draft report. For resources to help design and manage an evaluation, see the Evaluation Toolkit.

The evaluation plan should also include any plans for collaborating with any external evaluations planned by the Mission or Washington OU. It is USAID's responsibility to inform implementing partners when they will be evaluated externally. This section may explain how the partner will interact with the team to support the evaluation (for example, providing monitoring data, responding to data collection efforts, or validating findings) and how evaluation findings will be applied to management decisions.

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[2] Per USAID terminology, an external evaluation is commissioned by USAID and must be managed by the Mission Program Office, while an internal evaluation is one commissioned and managed by an implementing partner.

COR/AOR: Full details on external evaluations of the activity and/or parent project should be included in a Project MEL Plan with relevant details included in the Activity MEL Plan, as applicable. Once it is determined that an external evaluation will occur and will include the activity, the COR/AOR should notify the implementing partner for that activity. For information on when external evaluations are required, see ADS 201.3.5.13.

LEARNING PLAN

Learning is emphasized throughout the Program Cycle, and the learning plan helps ensure that the COR/AOR/GATR and the project team are able to learn from implementation and adapt the activity accordingly. This section may identify learning questions that relate to activity or project logic models, or potential gaps in the theory of change or technical knowledge base. The learning plan may also indicate how the activity will address learning questions or knowledge gaps and identify ways to allow for adjustments as circumstances change or learning evolves.

USAID encourages partners to reflect regularly on implementation progress. These opportunities may take the form of after-action reviews or be incorporated into existing processes, such as work planning or quarterly reporting. Such reviews or reports may focus on challenges and successes in implementation, changes in the operating environment or context that could affect the activity or the related project, opportunities to better collaborate, or other relevant topics. The learning plan should detail the frequency with which learning and reflection occur and who will be involved, in alignment with the activity work plan. The COR/AOR is encouraged to participate in learning and reflection activities.

This section of the Activity MEL Plan should also describe how knowledge and learning will be gained from implementation, evaluation findings, and monitoring data, among other sources, to adjust interventions and approaches, as needed.

A PLAN FOR MANAGING DATA

A section on managing data is an opportunity for the implementing partner to explain how it intends to manage data at all stages, from collection to reporting. If several organizations are jointly managing the activity, this section of the Activity MEL Plan should touch on how data will be consistently handled across the partners to ensure a high quality of aggregated data.

COR/AOR: Pay particular attention to the context of the activities and the countries/regions where they are operating. For example, stricter data security measures may be necessary for work with vulnerable populations, including anonymizing or not collecting personally identifiable information. Also, verify that this plan for monitoring data is in line with similar plans for other activities reporting on the same data within the Mission.

Potential topics to cover in this section include the following:

- **Data Collection** summarizes the data collection methods included in the PIRSs or evaluation plans and explains the methods and frequency with which data will be gathered, including potential limitations or challenges. This section should clarify disaggregation needs and whether data collection methods will result in disaggregated data. If multiple partners are involved, discuss how and when data will be shared and reviewed. It may be useful to include data collection instruments in an annex to the Activity MEL Plan.

> **Non-Permissive Environments**
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> For programming in non-permissive environments (NPEs), it is useful to consider alternative means of data collection for M&E than may be commonly used in traditional activities. For more information about monitoring and evaluation in NPEs, see the guidance available in the Monitoring Toolkit.

- **Data Quality** for indicators should reasonably meet USAID's five data quality standards of validity, integrity, precision, reliability, and timeliness. USAID is required to conduct a DQA for all Mission or Washington Operating Unit (OU) indicators reported externally, with the findings of the DQA documented in the PIRS for each indicator. For all data reported to the Mission or Washington OU, USAID should make sure partners are aware of USAID's data quality standards. There is no prescribed method for conducting a DQA, but a recommended checklist and guidance document are available in the Monitoring Toolkit. The Activity MEL Plan should include findings from DQAs and note whether any mitigating actions are being taken to improve data quality.

- **Data Storage** sections detail the formats in which data will be held and shared within the implementing partner's facilities. This includes file types (for example, Microsoft Word, Excel, paper copies), larger storage units (for example, a private server, a cloud-based system, file cabinets), and processes for sharing knowledge internally and externally. For guidance on data storage, see the guidance document in the Monitoring Toolkit. For more information on USAID's Development Data Library, see ADS 579.

- **Data Security** protocols for every activity should meet a basic threshold of restricting access to key offices and workspaces, preventing unauthorized computer access, and safeguarding data during both storage and transfer. This section should detail data security protocols, with CORs/AORs ensuring that USAID expectations are being met and that information is being transferred securely between USAID and the implementing partner. In particular, personally identifiable information (PII) must be protected. Additional protocols may be necessary for activities in non-permissive environments or those engaging with vulnerable populations. For more information on data security, see the guidance document in the Monitoring Toolkit.

- **Data Analysis and Use** details how USAID or the implementing partner will analyze and use data. Beyond tracking whether performance targets are being met, data should be reviewed and discussed to identify opportunities for adapting interventions. If specific software will be employed for this purpose, it may be useful to identify it by name or function. When reviewing this section, CORs/AORs should ensure that all data will be adequately analyzed using methods appropriate for the Mission's data needs.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A roles and responsibilities section provides a schedule of individual and recurring tasks during the activity. This may be a simple matrix outlining responsible parties and timing, or a more detailed narrative, including anticipated involvement from USAID.

If multiple partners are implementing an activity (such as one prime partner with one or more sub-awardees), this section should include specific tasks and identify each partner's role and responsibility. The Activity MEL Plan should be shared with all partners implementing the activity.

COR/AOR: *Verify that this section includes all expected content with sufficient time included for COR/AOR approval, as necessary. CORs/AORs may request that timelines identify their roles and responsibilities.*

Recommended Steps for Developing an Activity MEL Plan

This section provides step-by-step recommendations for developing an Activity MEL Plan, from initial meetings between implementing partners and USAID, to drafting the plan.

BEFORE GETTING STARTED

Before the implementing partner develops the Activity MEL Plan, a meeting should be held to discuss monitoring, evaluation, and learning for the activity. This meeting may be part of a post-award meeting, an activity launch process, or a separate meeting. It should occur after the award but before the Activity MEL Plan is drafted, and should include the COR/AOR, the program and/or technical office M&E POC, and a learning advisor if one exists. As a result of the meeting, the implementing partner and the COR/AOR should share a clear understanding of what indicators are needed for accountability and learning, what evaluations are planned, and what learning questions are appropriate.

COR/AOR: Use this meeting to ensure that the Activity MEL Plan will align with the Project MEL Plan and the Mission-wide PMP in terms of measuring outputs and outcomes that relate to expected project results. Provide the implementing partner with a copy of the project logic model or any other relevant logic models such as the CDCS Results Framework. This is the opportunity to clarify ADS requirements that may be new to implementing partners and outline any specific features of the plan USAID would like to see (for example, specific sections, topics, learning questions, or indicators that must be included).[3]

Implementing Partners: If no meeting of this sort is scheduled, request one. This meeting is a chance to get a better perspective on what the Mission hopes to learn from the activity and how information will be used, which may affect how data are collected and reported or how the partner interacts with the Mission.

For partner country government agreements, the Mission and the host-country government entity should use this meeting to jointly agree on the monitoring, evaluation, and learning approach, including which performance indicators will be used, before the agreement is signed. There should also be joint agreement on these items for awards to public international organizations (PIOs) or situations where implementing partners may have to report on indicators to a number of international donors, in which case specific indicators for USAID might not be a viable option.

DRAFTING THE ACTIVITY MEL PLAN

The process of creating an Activity MEL Plan will vary, particularly as each plan is customized to the needs of the specific activity, COR/AOR, and implementing partner. Even so, the following are recommended steps to take when developing the plan. Several steps are meant to be undertaken collaboratively by USAID and the implementing partner and may be covered in a meeting that focuses on monitoring, evaluation, and learning, following activity award.

1. **Review the activity's logic model, as applicable.** Ensure the accuracy of the logic model and clarify how it relates to implementation and contributes to the achievement of the project.

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[3] USAID should provide partners with a PIRS for each required or recommended indicator before Activity MEL Plan development.

Make any changes to the logic model before developing the Activity MEL Plan. This review may also identify knowledge gaps and learning questions.

2. **Determine the appropriate performance and context monitoring approaches.** After reviewing the logic model, revisit the utility of illustrative indicators from the proposal. If they no longer apply then remove or adapt them and document the final set of performance and context monitoring indicators. The Activity MEL Plan should also include applicable standard foreign assistance indicators for which the activity is responsible, relevant indicators from the PMP and Project MEL Plan, and all other performance and context monitoring approaches.

3. **Complete PIRS, test data collection instruments, and set baselines and targets.** Every indicator that is reported to USAID must have a PIRS. Data collection instruments should be developed and tested based on the information in the PIRS to ensure they provide useful, high-quality data. Use these instruments to collect and document baseline data and set targets.

4. **Complete the evaluation plan.** If an internal evaluation is planned, then the Activity MEL Plan should include an evaluation plan detailing all relevant information for that evaluation. If the implementing partner is aware of a planned external evaluation, they may choose to include limited information in the evaluation plan on how they will interact with the external team.

5. **Complete the learning plan.** The learning plan identifies how the implementing partner and activity will use available information to learn and adaptively manage activity implementation. Specific learning questions derived from the activity or project logic models should be identified here, as well as planned learning activities.

6. **Complete any additional sections.** If the COR/AOR has requested additional sections, or the implementing partner feels additional sections may add value (such as roles and responsibilities or a plan for managing data), these sections should be completed at this time.

Using and Updating an Activity MEL Plan

As a living document, an Activity MEL Plan is never truly final. Once developed, the plan should be shared with any partners or stakeholders, such as sub-awardees, for their input and general agreement. The document must also be shared with USAID for feedback and approval. After approval, the plan should evolve as the implementing partner learns and adapts during the life of the activity. When changes to the Activity MEL Plan become necessary, the implementing partner should discuss proposed modifications with stakeholders, including USAID, before submitting the revision for approval. Note that the Activity MEL Plan does not have to be submitted annually for review or approval, but rather only when changes need to be made.