



A Heuristic Tool for Building a Balanced D-MERL System in a Post response Recovery

About this tool

Given the emergent nature of programming in a post response recovery transition period, D-MERL plays a vital role in evolving program strategy and enabling collaboration, learning and adapting. In such contexts, D-MERL systems should be flexible to accommodate the program's needs for urgent action and allow for iterations of major D-MERL products to take place over time as conditions change. For example, aspects of the D-MERL system may need to change or be iterated, after review of initial program results or once new partners or program components are added on. However, D-MERL "stakes in the sand" need to mark each stage, so that implementation and other D-MERL activities can proceed without delays in planned and coordinated ways and not ad-hoc.

The purpose of this document is to help USAID staff plan for and implement effective and efficient programs and MERL systems in a post response recovery. This heuristic tool is quick reference document developed to assist program managers and MERL practitioners navigate the process of building the balanced D-MERL system in this evolving context.

Six Building blocks of a balanced D-MERL system and their components

The following are the six building blocks of a D-MERL system and corresponding framing question faced by staff:

Building block 1: Partners and collaboration

- *How can successful partnering and collaborating integrate MERL and adaptive management?*

Building block 2. Program strategy - the big picture planning

- *Is the program Theory of Change realistically defined and does it reflect the inputs and buy-in of all key stakeholders?*

Building Block 3. Results frameworks and MERL plans

- *Are IP results frameworks and MERL plans appropriately coordinated and harmonized to inform a program-level results framework?*

Building Block 4. Reporting system

- *Does the program reporting system meet information and knowledge needs in the most efficient and effective manner possible?*

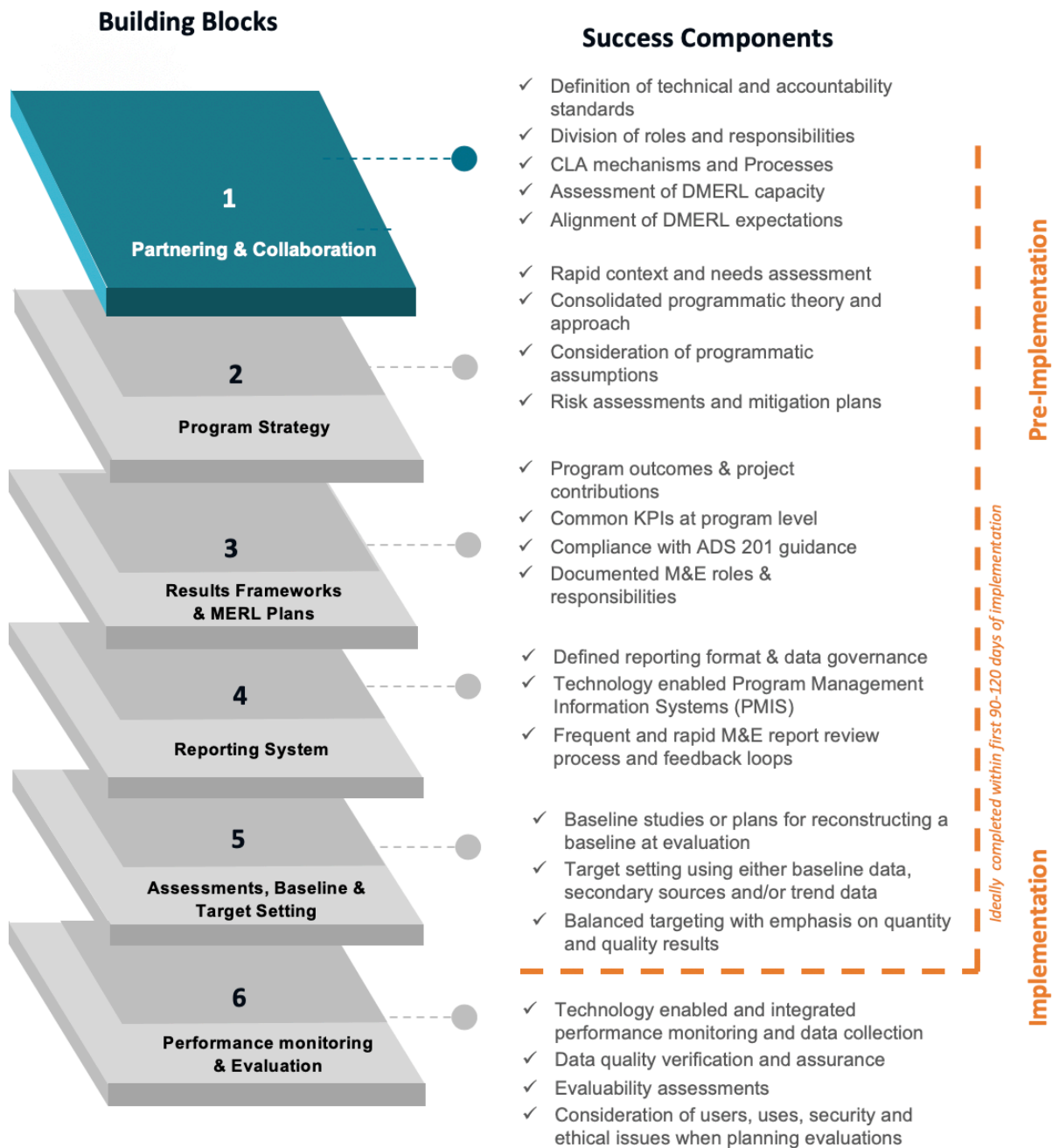
Building Block 5. Data-based target setting

- *What matters and how much is needed to measure timely progress toward results?*

Building Block 6. Performance monitoring, evaluation and learning

- *What opportunities are there for learning and adaptive management?*

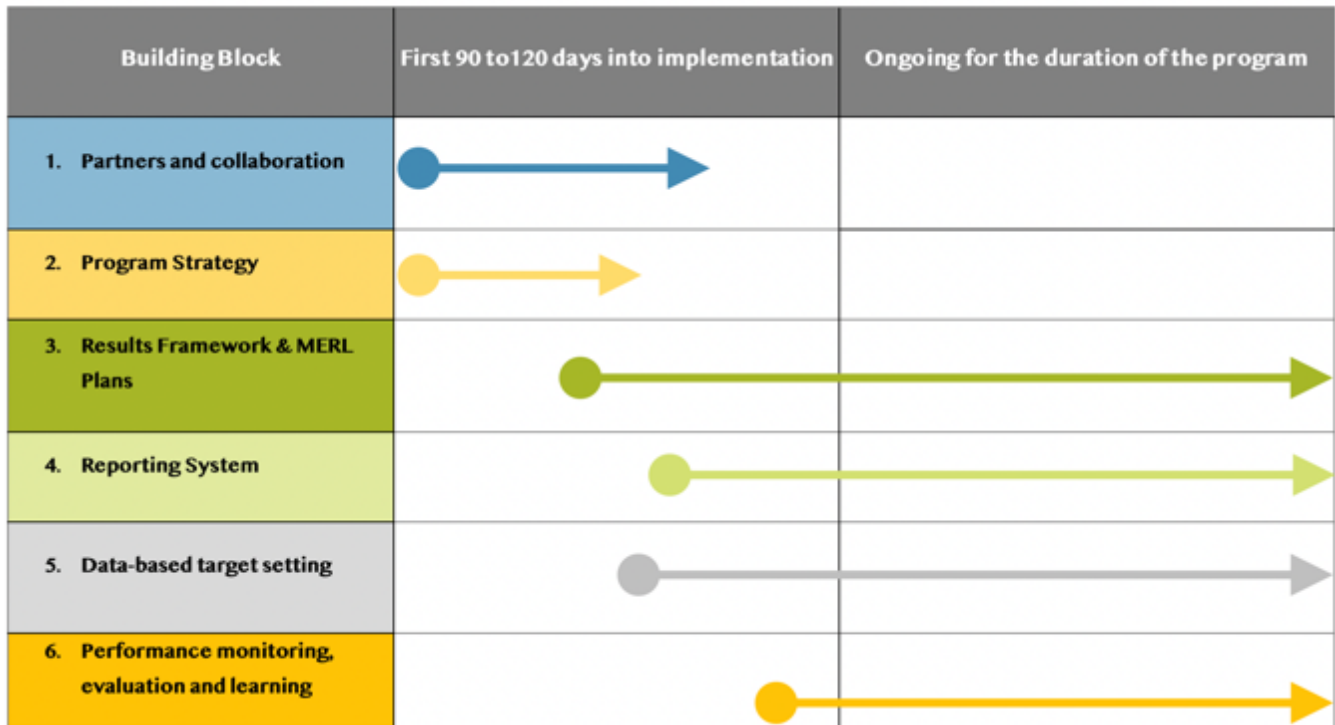
Each of these blocks requires implementation of multiple components that are necessary for successful completion. The following figure presents specific subcomponents of each building block against the general implementation timeline.



A pathway through implementation of building blocks

In the sequencing progression of D-MERL building blocks, some subcomponents can take place concurrently. In order to do so successfully, programs can place D-MERL “stakes in the sand,” so that D-MERL activities proceed in planned and coordinated ways, rather than ad hoc. Aspects of the D-MERL system may need to change or iterate after review of program results. However, this is not a reason to delay implementing the D-MERL success strategies.

The following graph highlights a timeline of a hypothetical two year-long program post response recovery program. It illustrates general heuristics to show which building blocks start when and demonstrates possible overlaps.



For each building block, the summary tables below present additional details that include:

- Timeline for when each building block takes place
- Interdependencies that illustrate the connections between these building blocks and how some are prerequisite to others
- Trade-offs which represent the consequences that USAID staff might anticipate if this building block is not addressed, and
- Information needed to build the block successfully

Icon Legend:



- Timeline;



- Interdependencies;







- Trade-offs;



- Information needs





Building Block 1. Partnering and Collaboration

The success of post response recovery interventions depends on D-MERL systems-based solutions that address and integrate both short and longer-term development objectives.

	<p>Address components of this building block within the first 3 months of implementation</p>
	<p>This building block is foundational to all others so there are no dependencies.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning cannot be consolidated across components of or the whole program unless it is proactively planned and executed. Opportunities for needed changes to the program may be missed. • Without alignment of D-MERL expectations, understanding of capacities, along with articulation of D-MERL roles and responsibilities, CLA may be ad hoc and disorganized. This would reduce its efficacy and reach.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D-MERL competence and knowledge management capacity. • Expected key roles and dedicated MERL staffing for the program. • Learning topics and agenda for the program.

Building Block 2. Program strategy-the big picture planning





Partners need to elevate planning to the big picture level. In order to do this, all stakeholders must define the Theory of Change (ToC) with realistic inputs and achieve buy-in. Effective post response requires clearly defined, yet flexible, program strategies.

	<p>Complete all elements of the initial program strategy within the first 90-120 days of implementation. This includes consolidated program approach, assumptions and risk assessments and mitigation strategies. Program strategy can run concurrently with partnering CLA activities. To further expedite the planning and implementation, partners already operating on the ground should be included in CLA efforts, to incorporate their learnings and help them adapt as new information becomes available. Once an agreement is reached on the ToC among partners and key stakeholders, building results frameworks and MERL system can begin and run concurrently with the remaining activities within this block.</p>
	<p>Program strategy is foundational to all other design and MERL activities. Efficiency of the process and development of synergies across projects within the program depends in part on the relational dimensions of the partnership and levels of collaboration established by this point.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without a consolidated program ToC, the outcome indicators to which all implementing partners contribute are compromised. This may result in missed opportunity for baseline measurement, use of invalid indicators, and subsequent reporting, learning and performance evaluation challenges. • Without assumption and risk analysis, important clues into the program drivers behind efficiency and relevance may be missed and not sufficiently monitored, resulting in subsequent challenges to adaptive management and performance evaluation.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant or similar programs, both past and current, implemented in a similar context. • Needs and vulnerabilities of direct beneficiaries, with consideration to gender and social dynamics.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drivers affecting levels of resilience. • Institutional, communal and human resources available, including social, financial, and natural capital that the program can leverage. • Relevant secondary and trend data.
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Building Block 3. Results frameworks and MERL plans


The foundation for performance monitoring systems is a results framework. Planning should answer three questions: *Are we doing the right things? Are we doing things right? How do we know?*

	Once the program outcomes and outputs are defined, work can commence on defining the KPIs at the program level. Ideally most KPIs will be defined and referenced (PIRS) prior to operationalizing the reporting system.
	This block depends on program strategy. While it is possible to identify many KPIs based on the basic ToC for the program, completion of assumptions and risk analysis is key to articulating a comprehensive results framework and set of indicators, including context monitoring.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If common KPIs have not been established at a program level, then early and valuable insights into the near and medium-term outcomes can be lost, at a minimum. • Different stakeholders may require different reporting. Without a well-articulated results framework, requirements for reporting to some stakeholders may not be able to be met. This is particularly important if potentially disenfranchised stakeholders are key program decision-makers. • Lack of defined KPIs negatively impacts the configuration and implementation of the program's management information system
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing partner strategies and project plans. • Partner and contract requirements for reporting to funders. • Analysis of current systems used for reporting, as well as contextual technology assessment to inform decisions on systems investment. • Data collection resource requirements and other considerations, human, financial and other.

Building Block 4. Reporting system





The goal of performance management systems is to produce trustworthy information and knowledge that partners can employ for Collaborating Learning and Adapting (CLA) and reporting. The reporting system should include accurate, detailed and compliant reporting requirements.

	This work can commence once KPIs are defined and completed before the first reporting period and major review of the program.
	Reliable, accurate and timely reporting on program outcomes and contributions depends on a consolidated program strategy and a results framework with KPIs, PIRS, understanding of roles and responsibilities and overall D-MERL competence.
	Reporting can be open to interpretation without detailed PIRS for each indicator and standardized guidance across the program. Unless clear reporting guidance is given from program level managers, implementing partners will start reporting using their own

	templates and formats. Later on this becomes harder to aggregate and integrate for the purpose of program reporting and therefore can require considerable effort to remediate.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data from KPI monitoring. • Clarity on stakeholders and their preferred use of systems and reports. • Systems currently in use and understanding of the implications of changing processes. • User requirements and available budget for a PMIS system.


Building Block 5. Data-based target setting




Establishing clear targets keeps implementing partners focused on what matters. Defining and tracking targets for each indicator focuses attention on results rather than day-to-day management and logistics.

	As KPIs are defined, planning for acquisition of baseline data and establishing targets can commence and with goal of completion before the first major program level review.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline and targetting require agreed upon and well-defined results frameworks and KPIs. • Likewise, establishing baselines, targets and expected milestones brings focus to planned program monitoring, reviews, ongoing risk management and future program evaluations.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some form of a baseline assessment is necessary to understand the status quo of a context at commencement of an activity and subsequent achievements, but may not always require primary data collection. If not done at the onset of the program, reconstructing baselines later on will require additional resources and may introduce biases and limitations. • Targets and milestones ground the performance plans around realistic expectations of achievement and set the stage for learning and inquiring about negative and positive deviance from expected results. In a post response recovery, it is likely that planning and implementation constraints will impact achievements. Realistic and well-informed targets prevent the loss of important reference points.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of context and existing primary and secondary data. • The learning agenda for the program. In other words, what questions does the program want answered? • Methodologies for data collection and analysis plans.

Building Block 6. Performance monitoring, evaluation and learning

Regular performance monitoring continues throughout the entire period of program performance. These mechanisms help program management evaluate the opportunities for learning and adaptive management. Ongoing evaluations determine when mitigation is on track or when a change to the program's direction is required.

	Performance monitoring cannot commence before KPIs are defined and referenced through previous blocks. Ideally completed baselines will also exist, although this is not absolutely necessary. This is an ongoing activity throughout the life of the program and its corresponding projects. Evaluations can occur at various points, most commonly halfway through and/or toward the end, depending on the duration of the period of performance.
	Comprehensive performance monitoring and evaluation is dependent upon all the other building blocks. If done well and comprehensively, it provides the data and information required to

	<p>manage the activity adaptively and therefore can link back to program strategy, results frameworks and indicator definitions, and also inform the efficiency of the reporting system.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is assumed that post response recovery programs, particularly those in protracted crises, are emergent and therefore need adaptive management. This requires efficient performance management systems, an evaluable program and completed evaluations. Without these, learning would at best be retrospective and unsustainable, and would most likely be intuitive, which is one of the least effective methods.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who primary intended users are, their information needs and preferred information delivery mechanisms. Purpose of each evaluation and how they will be used so that exercises can be rationalized to maximize return on resources. Expectations for monitoring and evaluation processes and questions that they need to answer. Timeframe and budget available to support each task as cost of data collection in some programs (such as health) are higher than in others. Who are key informants and how what are the best engagement mechanisms. Limitations of studies and data collection (things outside of program's control).

Illustrative workplan

This illustrated timeline suggests a workplan for building a balanced D—MERL system in a hypothetical post response recovery program of two years or more. Shorter programs should adjust the timeline accordingly.

Building Block	Days into implementation	First 90 to 120 days	Ongoing for the duration of the program
Partnering and Collaboration	Definition of technical and accountability standards		
	Division of roles and responsibilities		
	Alignment of DMERL expectations		
	Definition of CLA mechanisms and processes		
	Assessment of DMERL capacity		
Program Strategy	Rapid context and needs assessment		
	Consolidated programmatic approach		
	Consideration of programmatic assumptions		
	Risk assessments and mitigation plans		
Results Framework	Definition of program outcomes and project contributions		

& MERL Plans	Common KPIs at program level			
	Compliance with ADS 201 guidance			
	Documented M&E roles & responsibilities			
Reporting System	Defined reporting format & data governance			
	Technology enabled Program Management Information Systems (PMIS)			
	Frequent and rapid M&E report review process and feedback loops			
Data-based target setting	Baseline studies or plans for reconstructing a baseline at evaluation			
	Target setting using either baseline, secondary and/or trend data			
	Balanced targeting with emphasis on quantity and quality results			
Performance monitoring, evaluation and learning	Technology enabled & integrated performance monitoring & data collection			
	Data quality verification and assurance			
	Evaluability assessments			
	Consideration of users, uses, security & ethical issues when planning evaluations			



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