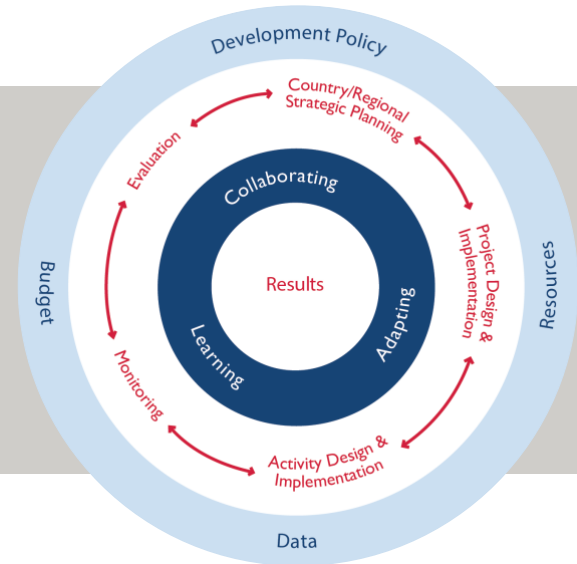


PROGRAM CYCLE

Discussion Note: Designing Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Platforms



This Note shares practical approaches for designing monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) platforms, the portfolio of institutional support mechanisms designed to build capacity within USAID Missions to collect, analyze, and use high-quality data for strategic decision-making and management functions. Although intended for USAID staff, others may benefit from its recommendations.

Discussion Notes explore principles or methods related to the Program Cycle and are intended to prompt inquiry. This Note was developed by the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL).

Introduction

This Discussion Note complements [ADS 201](#) and shares considerations for designing monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) platforms that support Missions to implement the Program Cycle. It does not endorse a particular design, nor does it endorse the practice of designing and contracting platforms to perform MEL functions (i.e., practices, processes, and requirements) versus Mission staff implementing the functions directly. However, since many Missions are electing to design and manage MEL platforms, this Note, along with the companion [Discussion Note: Managing MEL Platforms](#), synthesizes learning drawn from interviews with staff and partners of USAID's Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research in the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL).¹

The Note can be used during the design process as it outlines considerations for what to include in a Statement of Work (SOW), Performance Work Statement (PWS), or Statement of Objectives (SOO) for a MEL platform. This Note is organized around a set of decision points and in three sections:

Section 1: Starting the MEL platform design process addresses common motivations for procuring a platform and identifies processes for organizing stakeholder and user needs assessments.

Section 2: General design considerations provides a framework for making critical decisions around a set of decision points for any type of platform.

Section 3: Design considerations by MEL function identifies options and trade-offs specific to monitoring, evaluation, and/or collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) practices, processes, and requirements (hereafter referred to as functions).

Section I: Starting the MEL Platform Design Process

The design of each MEL platform depends on many factors that vary from Mission to Mission. While there is no ideal design, this Note offers considerations to address challenges and incorporate lessons learned to inform platform design. The Note is not exhaustive in potential solutions and is meant to spur discussion and new ideas.

COMMON MOTIVATIONS FOR DESIGNING A MEL PLATFORM

Common reasons for designing a MEL platform have included: the need to support MEL functions that are not met with existing Agency staffing; insufficient USAID and activity implementing partner (IP) capacity; the challenge of monitoring in non-permissive environments (NPEs); and the opportunity for cost-effective, quick turnaround of MEL functions.

MEL platforms have provided:

- Tailored, context-specific, institutional support to Missions;
- Increased flexibility (and efficiency) to contract or partner with external specialists with specific expertise for discrete tasks;
- Specialized skill sets for rigorous data collection, analysis, and knowledge products;
- Operational and logistical assistance for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and/or CLA functions; and
- Capacity development assistance to Mission teams and IPs for data collection and analysis tasks, and institutional learning and strategic decision-making processes.

PLANNING FOR THE DESIGN PROCESS

When designing a MEL platform, a participatory and inclusive planning and design process is important. For the platform design team, collaboration with other USAID staff members helps create a sense of ownership and value throughout the Mission to ensure the platform is designed to meet needs, thereby increasing its ultimate success and utilization. Ideally, Mission staff with technical skills in monitoring, evaluation, and CLA lead the design process. Similar to designing any activity, designing and planning for a platform is informed by continuous learning. Key stakeholders to involve in the design process include:

- Senior Mission leadership and management;
- Technical offices, Development Objective teams, and Contracting Officer's Representatives and Agreement Officer's Representatives (CORs/AORs);
- Procurement and legal advisors (Office of Acquisition and Assistance [OAA] and Regional Legal Advisor or Regional Legal Officer [RLA/RLO]);
- USAID/Washington staff (MEL points of contact [POCs], PPL, etc.); and
- Local partners (local MEL experts, government counterparts, etc.)

Definitions of key roles referenced in this Discussion Note

Mission users: The USAID staff who receive M&E or CLA services from the platform.

Platform staff: The staff of the entity implementing the platform award.

Platform home office staff: The staff of the entity implementing the award based in the headquarters for the entity.

Activity Implementing Partner (IP): The executing agency or implementing entity that carries out programs with U.S. government funding through a legally binding award or agreement.

Table I presents process tips and related considerations for gathering stakeholder perspectives.

Table I: Processes for stakeholder consultations for a user-focused MEL platform		
	Process tips for platform design teams consulting with...	Considerations
USAID Internal Stakeholders	Share with likely users of services the agreed-upon parameters set by Mission senior leadership and the managing office.	Develop briefing materials about types of functions that may be included in the SOW (see Section 3).
	Review previous platform mechanism design documents and experiences of those who have rotated through Missions with platform support.	Contact other Missions with platforms for experiential advice. Review the MEL platforms page on ProgramNet for available SOWs. Contact PPL for helpful tips and guidance, or search ProgramNet for peer experiences.
	Conduct a brief survey or interview staff across the Mission or among a selected subgroup of MEL POCs to assess the needs and level of interest in MEL support.	See Box A for key questions to assessing needs.
	Select design team members and Technical Evaluation Committee (TEC) reviewers who are representative of the likely users of platform services.	Incorporate a management structure that fits the needs of the Mission. The Discussion Note: Managing MEL Platforms shares considerations.
External Stakeholders	Gather views from external stakeholders, such as partner government agencies, activity IPs, local M&E service providers, associations, and learning institutions (e.g., think tanks, universities, etc.).	Ask questions about anticipated needs to provide input into considerations of specific functions to include in the design.
	Gather information from the pool of potential bidders about the successes and challenges of MEL support in the context.	Solicit input from potential bidders through a Request for Information (RFI), or a draft SOW or SOO.

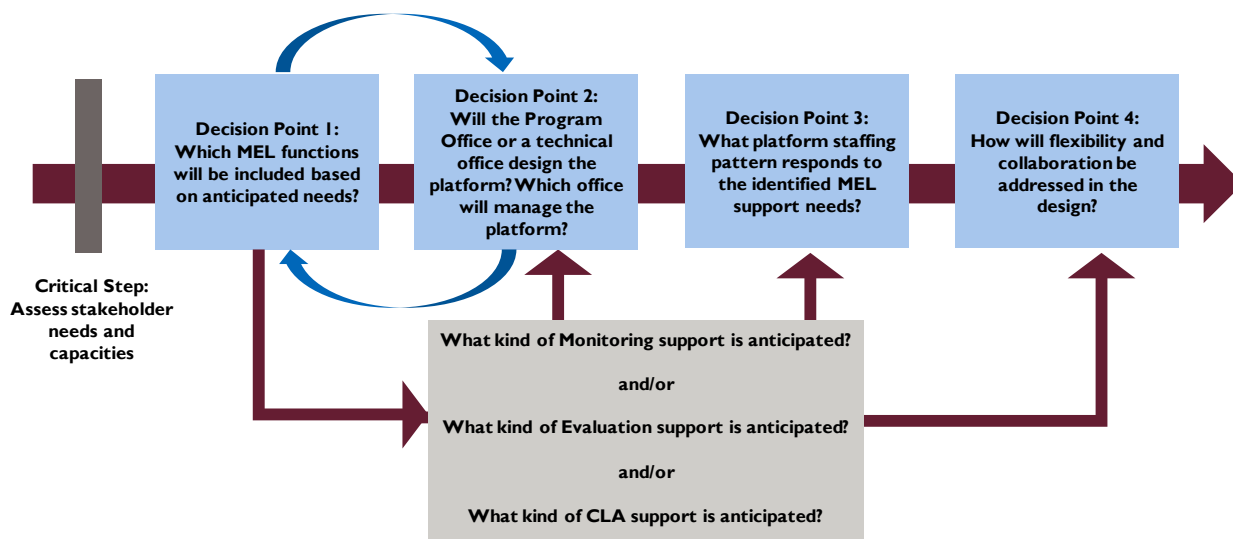
Section 2: General Platform Design Considerations

A MEL platform is a mechanism that outsources selected MEL functions. This presents a set of challenges for both USAID and platform staff. For USAID staff, outsourcing MEL functions can result in less day-to-day involvement in the execution of MEL functions that support adaptive management, project and activity design, and organizational learning. For platform staff, balancing the role of service provider and collaborating with USAID staff can likewise be challenging.

As presented in Figure 1, there are four basic decision points for platform design team members:

1. Which MEL functions will be included based on anticipated needs?
2. Will the Program or technical office design the platform? Which office will manage the platform?
3. What platform staffing pattern responds to the identified MEL support needs?
4. How will flexibility and collaboration be addressed in the solicitation?

Figure 1: Major Decision Points for Designing a Platform



Following the assessment of stakeholder needs and capacities, the platform design team identifies the MEL function(s) to include, for example, “evaluation,” which identifies which office will manage the platform (decision point 2). This office can then work with the design team to identify the specific considerations for each function and the staffing patterns (decision point 3). Decision point 4 addresses flexibility and collaboration in the structure of the solicitation. At each decision point, the functions that are included will have implications for the design. Section 3 includes specific considerations by function.

DECISION POINT 1: WHICH MEL FUNCTIONS WILL BE INCLUDED BASED ON ANTICIPATED NEEDS?

This decision point is dependent on gathering perspectives from prospective users, which may include Mission staff, partners (government counterparts and activity IPs), or both, about anticipated needs, analyzing those needs, and reviewing them with Mission leadership. As the platform design team gathers

perspectives from prospective users about which functions to include, the design team should review [ADS 300.3.1.1](#) and [Mandatory Reference 300MAK](#) and consult with the Contracting Officer (CO) to clarify for prospective users what are inherently governmental functions that cannot be included in the solicitation for the platform.

Gathering stakeholder perspectives requires time and effort. By gathering these perspectives, the design team will be better equipped to build consensus around the MEL functions that should be included (and emphasized), given available resources and needs. If there are significant unknowns, then more flexibility may be needed in the design (see decision point 4).

Process Tip: Ownership of the design process is important. Depending on Mission senior leadership perspectives and the anticipated MEL needs, assigning a point person or team can keep the early design process moving forward. The assignment may need to change based on the stakeholder engagement (see decision point 2). Box A includes guiding questions for the information gathering process.

Box A. Decision point 1: Which functions will be included in the platform?

While services across every conceivable MEL function may be helpful in an ideal world, the platform design team will need to set boundaries for the platform scope given available resources. Reaching consensus on the following questions will help articulate in the solicitation documents the Mission's anticipated needs:

- What is the primary **purpose** and the identified or anticipated **use** of the platform for monitoring, evaluation, CLA functions, or a combination?
- Which functions are already relatively well-staffed in the Mission and how are they incorporated into ongoing Mission processes?
- Are external evaluations a significant demand for the Mission?
- Is support for monitoring functions in demand by the project and/or activity teams? Will the platform be doing data collection?
- Will the platform provide support to the Mission, build the MEL capacity of partners, or both?
- What are the organizational learning and strategy decision-making needs given the Mission's portfolio?

After deciding whether to include a function, determining the right mix and balance among MEL functions is important. The platform design team should take into consideration potential unanticipated results of the interactions of functions. There are several questions to consider:

- Has the design team clearly articulated a compelling rationale for including specific functions in the platform design? If not, revisit the Mission's (or region's) needs and likely the utilization of the platform.
- Have any and all potential problems stemming from platform staff engaging with USAID staff or activity IPs on both performance-focused tasks and learning activities been considered? Is there a value in separating functions? If yes, then consider having more than one platform.

- If a platform is to be tasked with a large variety of MEL functions, is there enough flexibility in the design to quickly change and adapt to demands and expectations? If not, then reconsider the scope of assigned functions and revisit (see decision point 4).

Once the general MEL functions to be included in the solicitation are identified, there are specific design considerations, which are addressed by the function in Section 3 of this Note.

DECISION POINT 2: WILL THE PROGRAM OR TECHNICAL OFFICE DESIGN THE PLATFORM? WHICH OFFICE WILL MANAGE THE PLATFORM?

The office that will design and manage the platform is an early decision to make. Meeting with senior Mission leadership is a critical step in this decision-making process. While MEL platforms have most commonly been managed by the Program Office, Box B presents several considerations for the platform design team.

Box B. Decision point 2: Will the platform be managed by the Program Office or a technical office?

Insights from USAID staff who have designed platforms offer four key questions:

- *Is demand for MEL based on bilateral, regional, or office needs?* If more than one office can benefit from shared data and analysis, then the platform may best be managed by the Program Office. If the MEL needs are specific to one office, then the platform may best be managed by that office.
- *Is the platform mainly to provide evaluation services or Mission-wide monitoring, CLA support, or a combination?* If yes, then the platform may best be managed by the Program Office, provided staff resources in the Program Office are sufficient.
- *Is the Mission portfolio dominated by a centrally-funded initiative (e.g., PEPFAR, PMI, Global Food Security Strategy)?* If yes and if the office(s) managing the programming has significant MEL support needs, then consider placing a platform in the respective technical office.
- *Where are the MEL staff capacities in the Mission? In the Program or technical offices?* If the desired office does not have the capacity to manage the platform, then consider if there is an office that does.

DECISION POINT 3: WHAT PLATFORM STAFFING PATTERN RESPONDS TO THE IDENTIFIED MEL SUPPORT NEEDS?

With sufficient clarity about the M&E or CLA functions to be included (decision point 1), and which office will be managing the platform (decision point 2), the next decision point is to establish a platform staffing pattern. MEL platform staffing design considerations broadly include understanding required specialized skills, contextual knowledge, and the available pool of MEL expertise. Box C presents questions and considerations for different staffing patterns.

Box C. Decision point 3: What platform staffing pattern responds to the identified MEL support needs?

Staffing Questions	Considerations
Which and how many positions should be identified as key personnel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Fewer key personnel will add flexibility.</i> However, having fewer key personnel may deprioritize key roles, responsibilities, and the expertise and skills needed to fulfill functions.
Is a full-time platform presence required in-country? Or are MEL functions best addressed through a series of short-term assignments?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having full-time key technical staff (based in-country) encourages a continuous, engaged, and collaborative relationship with USAID. However, this comes with in-country office costs and management needs. • Flexible staffing using short-term advisors offers specialized expertise, for example for specific evaluations (see Section 3). However, relying on short-term advisors may reduce ongoing collaboration and the ability to apply contextual knowledge. It also requires planning for availability and schedules of short-term advisors.
Are positions or skill sets to be filled with in-country or expatriate staff?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Platforms with full-time requirements are most often staffed by in-country technical specialists.</i> It is important for Missions to review the expertise and capacity of MEL specialists to gauge if positions can be filled locally. Offerors have access to the same labor pool as USAID when contracting locally. • In-country specialists offer a greater understanding of the context and provide access to expertise drawn from their professional networks. However, international expertise may be necessary for unique MEL requirements.
Are new skill sets required?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>MEL specialists can bring specific technical skills, such as in rigorous evaluation design and data collection methods.</i> In addition, platforms often benefit from a staffing structure that includes a combination of capacity-building skills, facilitation, communications or knowledge management requirements for M&E or Learning Specialists. Other specializations, such as data visualization or data management may also be included.
How much should be prescribed about staffing in the SOW?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prescriptive, intentional, and detailed skill sets expected in platform staff may provide a good match with anticipated utilization of services. However, overly prescriptive requirements may challenge the ability of the platform awardee to respond to changing Mission needs (see decision point 4).
Should (or can) platform staff be based in the Mission?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having platform staff based in a Mission increases the interaction between platform and Mission teams, which can contribute to greater opportunities for capacity building and understanding of needs. However, most Missions face space limitations and the security clearance process can bring additional delays.
How should quality control be delivered?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MEL platforms support core Program Cycle functions; therefore, a clear plan for how platform staff gain a clear understanding of USAID requirements for M&E and CLA (as they evolve over time) is important. A general design consideration is to consider technical assistance from the platform home office that can be accessed quickly, reliably, and flexibly to manage quality control.

In addition, the [Discussion Note: Managing MEL Platforms](#) may provide platform design teams with tips for anticipating the eventual management challenges and opportunities in the design.

DECISION POINT 4: HOW WILL FLEXIBILITY AND COLLABORATION BE ADDRESSED IN THE DESIGN?

Decision points 1 through 3 encourage an inclusive and intentional design process. Collaborating with the CO early in the design process will allow for all of the information gathered from stakeholders and developed by the design team to be incorporated into a cohesive and clear solicitation.

There is no best solicitation or mechanism type for a MEL platform. The optimal situation is for there to be consensus and clarity about all of the requirements (and their schedules). When this happens, the SOW can be drafted with specific deliverables and an approach outlined. However, this is often not the case; rather, understanding the needs to be addressed and type of flexibility required will help in the choice of instrument and the development of the SOW (or instrument-specific document).

To prepare for working with the CO, there are several resources the design team can reference:

- Experience from other platforms, for example, there are more than 50 active platforms managed by Missions and offices (see the [MEL platforms page](#) on ProgramNet).
- USAID’s [ProgramNet](#) (for internal users only), [Learning Lab](#) and the [Agency website](#) provide valuable resources (e.g., tools, Additional Help guidance, How-To Notes, Discussion Notes, Technical Notes, case studies, examples, etc.).
- Regional bureau M&E POCs and PPL staff can provide assistance or additional considerations for the overarching design.
- The [implementing mechanism matrix](#) provides a summary of different types of mechanisms.

Box D presents several common scenarios and considerations (with some trade-offs) to discuss with the CO when identifying the appropriate level and type of flexibility required in the solicitation.

Box D. Decision point 4: How will flexibility and collaboration be addressed in the solicitation?

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Considerations</i>
Platform is managed by the Program Office.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify clear processes about the lines of communication between Program and technical offices.
There is no clarity about current and future requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid overly prescriptive deliverables and approaches. Include clear processes for annual work plan approval and management that allow for flexibility and regular engagement to define needs with Mission teams and partners. These processes may include options for an objectives-based approach and collaborative work planning among key Mission and platform staff.

Box D. Decision point 4: How will flexibility and collaboration be addressed in the solicitation?

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Considerations</i>
Flexibility in the requirements is necessary (due to the operational or programmatic environment).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider task order-based mechanisms as a flexible way of managing ad-hoc requests for service delivery. A Mission-based, single- or multiple-award indefinite-delivery/indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract is such an option. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A single award offers continuous services but may limit access to the technical expertise to a single awardee. ○ A multiple-award IDIQ may increase access (and competition) but can increase the management burden for both USAID and the platform due to the time associated with procurement-related tasks for each task order.
Both flexibility and continuous support are required.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure continuity of monitoring, evaluation, or CLA support, it may be advantageous to design a platform that features the ability to carry out routine tasks under a single multi-year task order and use discrete task orders for efforts that may be less defined or larger.

The platform design team can also refer to the general tips for designing adaptive mechanisms (see [Discussion Note: Adaptive Management](#)), specifically:

- Engage early and often with the CO;
- Consider an outcome-based statement of work or program description to maximize flexibility;
- Include learning opportunities in the SOW and a budget for them; and
- Use work planning processes as a tool to adapt to changing circumstances.

Section 3 of this Note provides specific questions to raise at this decision point, depending on which monitoring, evaluation, and/or CLA functions are included.

Section 3: Platform Design Considerations by Function

This section summarizes the design considerations that are unique to each function to supplement the considerations described at each of the four decision points in Section 2.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR MONITORING

Monitoring is the ongoing and systematic tracking of data or information relevant to USAID strategies, projects, and activities. Mission technical offices are responsible for monitoring throughout the Program Cycle ([ADS 201.3.5.3](#)). Mission Program Offices, as well as USAID/Washington bureaus and offices, provide support through the promotion of good practices, knowledge dissemination, policy and standards compliance, and coordination to better use data for adaptive management at the strategy, project, and activity levels (e.g., setting the agenda for periodic portfolio reviews or stocktaking exercises). The [Monitoring Toolkit](#) provides additional background, tools, and resources.

Monitoring at decision point 1: What type of monitoring support should be included and what kinds of support?

Table 2 identifies types of support for monitoring across the Program Cycle that may be included in the platform SOW. The inclusion of these tasks in a platform SOW does not diminish Mission staff roles. Several MEL platforms have included third-party monitoring in the scope. Third-party monitoring within the USAID context generally means that a party other than the activity IP is carrying out data collection and analysis for monitoring. This could be done by the MEL platform, or by another entity.

Table 2: Mission Program Cycle monitoring functions and potential platform support	
Monitoring function	Examples of platform support functions
Mission-wide Performance Management Plan (PMP) development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate support to Program and technical offices on Mission-wide PMP development. Facilitate stakeholder meetings. Review draft sections for clarity of text and approach to monitoring assumptions. Assist in data collection for monitoring and review of emerging trends of importance to USAID programming. Conduct data collection, analysis, and dissemination of strategy-level assessments (e.g., gender or political economy analysis).
Activity MEL Plans development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide technical assistance for developing monitoring approaches responsive to users' needs. Provide technical assistance to partners (e.g., activity IPs or partner governments) in the development of theories of change and the refinement of activity logic models. Facilitate the identification of indicators, standardization of definitions, and assist in establishing common reporting processes. Review and recommend refinements of Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRS). Provide facilitation and capacity-building assistance, and develop tools for Mission staff reviews of Activity MEL Plans. Analyze data for baselines and facilitate discussions toward setting appropriate project or activity targets.
Implementation of the Mission PMP and Activity MEL Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PMPs: Review and refine PMPs following portfolio reviews. Project-level data: Collect, review, clean, and compile data not collected by activity IPs and incorporate data into PMP. Activity MEL Plans: Review, clean, and compile IP data.
Data Quality Assessments (DQAs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide support to USAID teams on DQAs, such as capacity building assistance, reviewing data, and tool development.

Table 2: Mission Program Cycle monitoring functions and potential platform support	
Monitoring function	Examples of platform support functions
Site Visit Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop tools for systematic site visits across a range of contexts, geographies, and beneficiary types. • Assist in the selection of appropriate sites for visitation (e.g., number of sites, which sites, when and how often).
Third-Party Monitoring or Verification and Remote Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect data for baselines and facilitate discussions toward setting appropriate activity performance targets. • Conduct site visit monitoring or logistical support for a specific intervention or in NPEs, where USAID staff access is restricted. • Provide specialized monitoring and verification support for inter-agency, Government-to-Government (G2G), or whole of government programming (e.g., PEPFAR or environmental mitigation compliance monitoring). • Provide indicator data verification, especially in NPEs.

When soliciting feedback from Mission and partner stakeholders, the scope of monitoring tasks may include any (or all) of the two types of program monitoring as defined in the [ADS 201.3.5.4](#).

Box E. Monitoring types and considerations when soliciting feedback

Monitoring type	Considerations when soliciting feedback
Performance monitoring	Identify a process for indicator reporting by activity IPs to the platform when the platform will review, clean and compile IP data. Expectations about schedules must be clear and will likely require language in the platform SOW and in activity awards.
Context monitoring	Identify data types and sources activity IPs and Mission technical teams use to monitor the operating environment. The SOW or SOO can then include how platform support might be used to improve systems for context monitoring.

Considerations for describing monitoring support needs

Two potential approaches (that need not be mutually exclusive) to gather information to describe the requirements include:

Approach I. Use [ADS 201](#) monitoring principles as prompts to identify (and describe) challenges:

- **Early planning:** How are staff planning for and executing monitoring functions?
- **Collaboration:** How are beneficiaries, partners, activity IPs, other donors, and other USAID and US Government entities involved in Mission monitoring efforts? How might additional or revised

collaboration efforts improve data collection and its use in Agency planning processes? To what degree will platform staff be working directly with activity IPs?

- **Resources:** How might a MEL platform provide additional resources (i.e., budgets, staff time, or positions), while balancing the need for USAID and activity IPs to fulfill their monitoring responsibilities?
- **Practicality:** How can a MEL platform support decision making?
- **Transparency:** How are monitoring data shared and utilized? How can a MEL platform improve related processes?

Approach 2. Survey staff on their appreciation, challenges encountered, and ideas as they apply to the monitoring functions outlined in Table 2 related to a specific Mission’s context.

By synthesizing stakeholder views across these specific principles (and encouraging users to think about performance and context monitoring), the platform design team will better learn what Mission and partner staff find useful and what functions may be included in the platform SOW or SOO.

Monitoring at decision point 2: Which office manages the platform?

When managed by the Program Office, monitoring support may include reporting on the Mission-wide PMP and supporting technical offices. If it is not known at the design phase which technical teams will more actively utilize platform support, then flexibility may be required. When a technical office manages the platform, the requirements for the platform staff skills can include specialized sector-based experience (see decision point 3).

Monitoring at decision point 3: What staffing pattern responds to the identified monitoring needs?

Support for monitoring generally requires consistent support based in-country (with the ability to travel to and engage with activity IPs). If site visit support or regular data collection is included, then long-term, full-time staff will be important. If monitoring support is for specific data collection periods (baseline, midline, or DQAs), then short-term technical assistance support may be appropriate. Once monitoring tasks are defined and staffing requirements identified, the design team can compare the requirements with the evaluation and CLA needs of the Mission to inform platform staffing.

Monitoring at decision point 4: How will flexibility and collaboration be addressed?

At this decision point, the design team will share its analysis with the CO about the flexibility required in the platform award. The specific questions to answer for monitoring functions include:

- Are monitoring needs during a set period of time (e.g., development of the PMP), or on an ongoing basis (e.g., technical assistance to activity IPs that includes regular capacity building)?
- Will the platform be responsible for collection of monitoring data at the activity level, such as third-party monitoring? Or conducting verification of monitoring data?
- Are the number of activity IPs to be supported by the platform known? Or might they change over time?

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR EVALUATION FUNCTIONS

[ADS 201.3.6.5](#) and the [Evaluation Toolkit](#) provide guidance on evaluation requirements and services. Key motivations for including evaluation in a MEL platform have included:

1. Ability to have quick access to technical evaluation design and implementation expertise, and in some cases contextual knowledge, to conduct evaluations, specialist studies, and assessments;
2. Ease of engaging a single contractor (as opposed to multiple procurements); and
3. Limited staff, time, and capacity within USAID.

Evaluation at decision point 1: What evaluation tasks to include?

When including the evaluation in the MEL platform, it is important for the SOW or SOO to identify the type of evaluations to be conducted. In [ADS 201](#) there are two types of evaluations:

1. **Performance evaluations:** These encompass a broad range of evaluation methods. They often incorporate before-and-after comparisons but generally lack a rigorously defined counterfactual. Performance evaluations may address descriptive, normative, and/or cause-and-effect questions. As performance evaluations do not contain a rigorously defined counterfactual, they should not answer questions about the amount of change attributable to an intervention, where other factors are likely to have influenced the variable in question.
2. **Impact evaluations:** Impact evaluations measure changes that are attributable to a defined intervention, program, policy, or organization. Impact evaluations use models of cause and effect and require a credible and rigorously defined counterfactual to control for factors other than the intervention that might account for the observed change. When USAID needs information on whether an intervention is achieving a specific outcome, USAID prefers impact evaluations over performance evaluations.

After deciding what type of evaluations will be conducted, determining how platform staff should participate in or facilitate the development of an evaluation SOW is a key decision point. The decision will depend on how the evaluation function is staffed in the Mission, the Mission's staff capacity, and the level of the platform's participation in the development of evaluation SOWs.

Another consideration is if the Mission's PMP has requirements for significant household surveys or other data collection related to evaluation. If so, then potential cost savings may exist from a single contractor collecting data across several evaluations or monitoring efforts. Potential evaluation services that may be included in a platform are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Potential platform functions by evaluation stage	
Evaluation function	Examples of platform support
Evaluation planning and SOW or SOO development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate discussions on SOW development. Contribute to SOWs based on Mission staff input on the evaluation purpose, use, and evaluation questions. Provide feedback, comments and suggestions on SOWs, such as data collection, analysis and evaluation questions. Support the partner government in evaluation activities.
Evaluation implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct evaluations. Provide logistics, such as meeting space, lodging and transportation arrangements, or office support (e.g., desk space, internet access, or printing). Review evaluation report drafts. Facilitate, create, or manage evaluation utilization.
Baseline, mid-term or final data collection for evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan and conduct data collection, including managing data collection teams and implementing quality control measures. Subcontract survey firms with oversight from USAID. Identify and train data collection teams. Develop or identify population or areas of interest for data collection. Manage data entry, cleaning, coding, and analysis. Draft and/or review and disseminate report.
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct meta-evaluations. Synthesize findings from across evaluations for prioritized sectors or periods of time. Examine sustainability and local ownership.

Evaluation at decision point 2: Which office manages the platform?

USAID policy has specific requirements for evaluations that have implications for which office manages the platform. According to [ADS 201.3.6.6](#), to mitigate the potential for conflicts of interest, required evaluations “must be external i.e., led by an expert external to USAID who has no fiduciary relationship with the implementing partner.” Evaluation teams for required evaluations can include [USAID staff](#), partners, and/or government counterparts under the direction of the external team leader. If the platform will conduct required evaluations, then the Program Office will likely manage the platform.

Evaluation at decision point 3: What is a staffing pattern that aligns with the support needs identified?

The kinds of evaluation support anticipated will influence platform staffing patterns to respond to anticipated MEL needs. As presented in the general decision points for this Discussion Note, a key staffing consideration is whether or not to have full-time, in-country staff for the evaluation function. Factors to consider for the evaluation function:

- *If the Mission decides to utilize a platform to develop SOWs and evaluations require significant data collection, then it is good to specify these as a requirement for a full-time team. The lack of an in-country presence tends to de-emphasize collaboration between the platform team and the Mission.*
- *If Mission staff have the capacity to facilitate evaluation SOW development and define the evaluation methodology, then an in-country staff presence may not be required. This may reduce the operating cost of a platform, but it presents other tradeoffs. For example, mobilizing large evaluation teams without an in-country presence can be problematic.*
- *If the Mission staff either do not have the capacity to develop the SOWs or there are insufficient evaluation skills in country, then an in-country team that conducts evaluation capacity building may be the best option. The trade-off is that an in-country team may not offer the variety of skills when the evaluations necessitate highly specialized and unique expertise.*

Other considerations specific to the evaluation function include:

- **Level of detail for position descriptions.** While anticipating needs is helpful, inevitable shifts in platform user demands will occur over time. If position descriptions and labor categories are too narrowly defined, it may be difficult to hire platform personnel with the necessary skills to deliver services as needs arise.
- **Organizational structure for the platform.** How will dedicated platform evaluation staff interface with other platform team members working on other MEL functions? If for example a platform design includes robust evaluation and CLA functions, then the platform design team may consider how the staffing pattern enables or challenges MEL integration. An explicit learning function can connect Mission evaluation roles focused on utilization, evaluative cultures, and organizational learning practices with the design of evaluation SOWs.
- **Type of evaluation expertise to include.** Good evaluation practice that incorporates rigorous designs and analysis to increase the utilization of evaluation reports requires a high level of technical evaluation expertise, as well as data visualization, facilitation, and communication skills.
- **Balancing multiple functions in a single platform.** Platform design teams should also consider how advantageous it is to use available resources to hire MEL generalists who can oversee many tasks across functions. Platform staff who work across functions may not be able to plan and execute evaluation tasks when needed. Working across MEL functions may overburden staff and affect quality in the conduct of evaluation tasks.
- **Impact evaluation expertise requirements.** Impact evaluations often require: (1) specific skill sets to execute experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies; (2) tailored program management expertise; (3) close collaboration and integration between USAID, the activity IP, and the evaluator; and (4) considerable schedule and resource planning. Due to these specific needs, MEL platforms that include impact evaluation requirements may experience challenges in accommodating other evaluation tasks.

Even if all of these considerations cannot be addressed during design, having these conversations and documenting the conclusions will help when managing the platform.

Evaluation at decision point 4: How will flexibility and collaboration be addressed?

At this decision point, the design team will share its analysis with the CO about the flexibility required in the platform award. The specific questions to answer for evaluation functions include:

- How many evaluations are expected each year and during the period of performance?
- Will the platform provide evaluation capacity building for partner governments, activity IPs, and/or USAID staff?
- If impact evaluations are anticipated, what are the expected periods for data collection?

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR CLA FUNCTIONS

CLA involves strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management. CLA approaches to development include collaborating intentionally with stakeholders to share knowledge and reduce duplication of effort, learning systematically by drawing on evidence from a variety of sources and taking time to reflect on implementation, and applying learning by adapting intentionally. The [CLA Toolkit](#) provides resources for implementing CLA.

Platforms that support CLA commonly assist Missions with:

1. Coordination and integration of Mission programming with partner government, public and private sector actors, and other donors;
2. Designing programming with a strong evidence base; and
3. An intentional approach to decision making in response to new information and changes in context.

Figure 2 depicts the [CLA Framework](#). The right side (enabling conditions for CLA) connects with the left side (CLA in the Program Cycle). Considering opportunities and constraints relating to the Mission's (1) culture, (2) processes, and (3) resources (including staff time) can help the design team think about the current enabling conditions as well as the change required in these areas to support effective Program Cycle implementation.

CLA at decision point 1: What CLA support to include?

Table 6 provides a brief overview of potential support by component of the CLA Framework.

Figure 2: CLA Framework



Table 6: Potential platform support by CLA Framework component

CLA in the Program Cycle	Collaborating (Internal and External)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate logistics with external organizations (e.g., chambers of commerce, civil society groups, partner government ministries). • Manage or support communities of practice (e.g., a MEL community for shared learning across technical or programmatic sectors). • Research stakeholder networks or facilitate stakeholder consultations for project or activity design). • Facilitate discussions with Mission staff and activity IPs on indicator and target selection. • Coordinate or facilitate working group of activity IP staff (e.g., Chiefs of Party, economists, M&E advisors).
	Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide technical expertise or facilitate stakeholder discussions for the development of PMPs and Activity MEL plans, including CLA components or learning plans.

Table 6: Potential platform support by CLA Framework component

	Learning (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the development of Agency-level, Development Objective, Project, and/or activity learning agendas among Mission or OU, Development Objective, Project, and/or activity teams. Support the development and prioritization of learning questions to address evidence gaps. Provide external subject-matter experts or background support for scenario planning sessions. Synthesize monitoring data to encourage use. Synthesize evaluation and assessment findings across portfolios for higher-level managers and stakeholders. Conduct studies and review and update theories of change. Organize site visits (e.g., provide logistical support, assist in appropriate site selection, or provide tools for data analysis, data use, and learning). Facilitate after-action reviews or informal sharing sessions among internal and external stakeholders. Facilitate retreats (e.g., with activity IPs, government officials, private sector partners). Facilitate and coordinate periodic evidence-sharing summits. Support periodic CDCS mid-course stocktaking and/or portfolio reviews.
	Adapting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce methods for periodic reflection exercises (e.g., improving Mission portfolio review processes). Support the dissemination of lessons learned and best practices from after-action reviews, evidence summits, etc. Provide technical assistance in the collection, presentation, and interpretation of rigorous, timely, and relevant data for project or activity managers and decision makers.
Enabling Conditions	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate conversations to identify and improve enabling conditions to support CLA in the Mission. Support the collection and sharing of tacit, experiential, and contextual knowledge for rotating Mission staff.
	Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide translation support for meetings and knowledge products. Draft, maintain, or disseminate products designed to engage stakeholders (e.g., newsletters, press releases, editorials, social media accounts, etc.). Support the logistics for Mission staff to participate in learning events. Support or maintain knowledge management infrastructure. Support the development of innovative knowledge products designed for utilization (e.g., short videos, infographics, dashboards, etc.).
	Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support to CLA champions in the Mission. Serve as technical assistance resources to support CLA for activity IPs.

There are two key questions for Missions planning to include CLA-support functions in the platform:

- **To what degree can or should CLA processes be outsourced?** CLA is an inherently internally-driven process for both USAID Missions (and USAID IPs). Outsourcing CLA fully hinders programming. Thus, care must be taken when designing the SOW for CLA in a platform.
- **How CLA-specific support is incorporated into a platform that also has monitoring and/or evaluation functions?** Ultimately, M&E systems should support learning and help inform the wider concepts that are represented in the CLA Framework. All platforms that include monitoring or evaluation services incorporate CLA principles. Nevertheless, a platform designed to support M&E or CLA has advantages. A benefit of including CLA with more monitoring and/or evaluation platform services is that it illustrates how the CLA Framework links to them and the Program Cycle. It strengthens the execution of platform services into a more cohesive and useful set of processes that feed into adaptive management and strategic decision making.

There are tradeoffs to including both M&E and CLA in a MEL platform. It can be a challenge managing workflow and ensuring that each work stream is sufficiently resourced with staff, time, and funds. A dedicated CLA support vehicle (separate from M&E functions) can prioritize organizational development to improve Mission and partner enabling conditions for implementing the Program Cycle, assisting in the improvement or formation of feedback loops for collaboration, learning, and adaptation.

CLA at decision point 2: How is CLA support best organized and managed?

Related to the overall decision point 2 concerning which office will design and manage the platform, the platform design team should consider how CLA support will be delegated and managed. Will CLA functions be directed to a specific team (e.g., a technical or Development Objective team) or be coordinated out of the Program Office that may be managing other MEL functions? Consider this dynamic and the appropriate management arrangements so that CLA support is tailored closely to the needs of the team(s) assisted and the programming supported.

CLA at decision point 3: What is a staffing pattern that aligns with the CLA support needs identified?

The four primary considerations for identifying staffing plans for platforms that include the CLA function are:

- **USAID staff resource capacity.** Too often, Mission staff do not have the time to pause, reflect, and adapt, or conduct periodic stock-taking exercises beyond the required portfolio reviews. A dedicated Learning Specialist included in the platform staff may be able to design, facilitate and work with Mission staff to make these processes effective and time efficient. However, Mission staff engagement cannot be replaced. CLA improvement and institutionalization is a demand-driven process. Carving out a role for learning within a platform with no corresponding plan for engagement within the Mission may result in an underutilized learning position on a platform.
- **Ability to identify appropriate skill sets.** There are significant challenges in recruiting the appropriate skill sets for CLA-focused platforms. Skills that may be required include adult learning techniques, organizational development, change management, or event design and facilitation.

- **Location of MEL platform office and staff.** CLA is internally driven. When designing platforms with CLA support functions, the platform design team may consider if platform staff can be based in the Mission. Due to space and security issues (including badging challenges), platform staff typically are not based inside the Mission. Physical separation can restrict the integration of platform staff into a Mission's day-to-day operations, limit the capacity of platform staff to build relationships within the Mission, and diminish the development of CLA practices. Overcoming this constraint requires intentional planning on the part of both USAID staff and the platform contractor, and should factor into design, start up, and task scheduling/planning. The design may consider platform staff access to USAID team meetings, and if platform office space may be used to host events. Bringing USAID and platform staff together can support collaboration.
- **Conflict of interest posed by involving platform staff in project and activity planning, design, and management.** Platform staff do not always feel comfortable providing guidance on adaptive management or procurement-related issues. Some Mission staff may feel that platforms should not be involved in project (if applicable) or activity design. Other teams appear open to platform involvement in design as long as a conflict-of-interest mitigation plan is in place. This is an issue that should be transparent, fully considered, and planned for when establishing a platform staffing pattern.

CLA at decision point 4: How will flexibility and collaboration be facilitated?

CLA requires flexibility because it is internally driven and responsive to Mission needs and changing priorities. Without a defined CLA plan, it is not always easy to predict the nature of the tasks to include in a SOW. For example, predicting the number of learning events is challenging and not advisable. Therefore, when CLA functions are included in the platform SOW, flexibility is critical. Furthermore, close collaboration and facilitation are key to the successful delivery of CLA support. Consequently, processes for working closely with activity IPs and USAID staff are extremely important.

At this decision point, the platform design team will share its analysis with the CO about the flexibility required in the platform award. The specific questions to answer for CLA functions include:

- What is the relative emphasis of tasks across collaborating, learning and adapting?
- What is the balance between working with USAID (internal) and working primarily with implementing partners (external)?

ENDNOTES

¹ Laura Arntson, et al., [Mission-Based Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Platforms](#).

This Discussion Note presents insights from staff and partners of the Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research in the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning. All USAID staff are encouraged to share good practices, insights, and tools on designing MEL platforms. Please visit the [ProgramNet page on MEL platforms](#) for more information (USAID staff only).