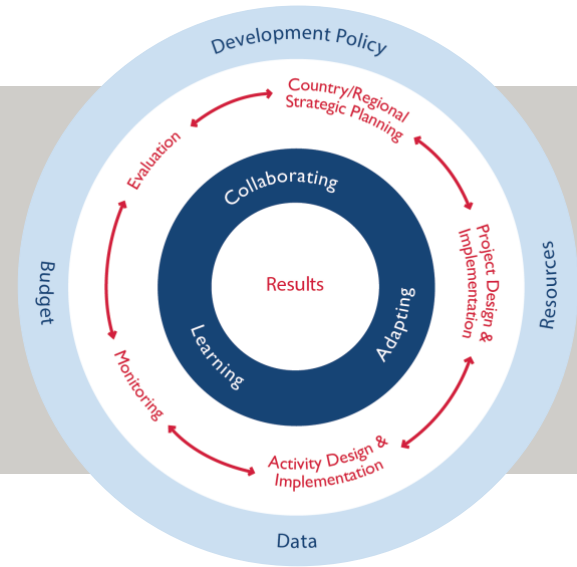# PROGRAM CYCLE

Discussion Note: Managing 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 managing monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) platforms that support Missions to implement the Program Cycle.

Increasingly, USAID Missions have established MEL platforms to support MEL functions (i.e., practices, processes, and requirements) that support Program Cycle implementation. MEL functions encompass the development and use of tools and practices for: monitoring (including data management), evaluation (including other studies or analyses), and Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA). Although most MEL Platform functions are geared toward supporting MEL processes internal to USAID and its immediate implementing partners, MEL Platforms also can be used to build the capacity of local government partners local institutions to improve their management of MEL systems, increase their production and use of evidence, and to foster a culture of learning.

This Discussion Note does not endorse a particular design, nor does it endorse the practice of designing and contracting platforms to perform MEL functions 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: Designing 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. [1]

This Note is divided in four parts. The first part highlights general considerations and tradeoffs for managing across monitoring, evaluation, and CLA functions. The subsequent three parts summarize key considerations by function: monitoring, evaluation, and CLA.

Part 1: Managing MEL Platforms

MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Platform Contracting Officer's Representatives (CORs) play a critical role in the effective use and engagement of the services that platforms provide to Mission offices

Whether based in a Program Office or technical office, effective management of MEL platforms requires a different management approach than a traditional activity because of (1) the nature of collaboration between the platform and USAID staff, and (2) the cross-cutting nature of monitoring, evaluation, and CLA services across the Program Cycle. A platform COR will:

- Manage requests, facilitate conversations, and provide technical oversight;
- Conduct oversight and quality control of the services provided under the platform; and
- Fulfill a unique role as liaison between platform staff and the users of platform services.

Platform support is better integrated when the platform COR has a background in monitoring and evaluation (M&E), or is an M&E and/or learning specialist, and has had previous experience as a COR or Alternate COR. Another factor for successful management and utilization of a platform is for the platform COR to have relative credibility, seniority, and effective relationships with Mission senior leadership. The platform COR may need to negotiate across teams and offices to resolve competing demands and interests with respect to the functions that the platform undertakes.

The role of managing a platform, facilitating effective access and use of the platform, and building collaboration requires significant dedicated time by the platform COR. The time required for platform COR responsibilities is often underestimated. Significant time is required for facilitating conversations between the platform and its users, including technical teams, Program Office staff, and the CORs or Agreement Officer's Representatives (AORs) for Mission activities. It is important for USAID and platform staff to clarify expectations and to demonstrate the flexibility to adapt to shifting priorities and needs.

Definitions of key roles referenced in this Discussion Note

Platform Contracting Officer's Representative (COR): The designated USAID staff member fulfilling the COR role for 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 organization.

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.

Users: The USAID staff or Activity IP staff who receive M&E and/or CLA services from the platform.

An Activity Manager can support a platform COR to manage a MEL platform

Placing the entirety of platform oversight responsibility on a single individual can lead to difficulties, especially if that individual leaves the Mission or goes on extended leave. It is important for the managing office to establish systematic management processes for communication, access, and product review.

According to [ADS 201.6](#), an Activity Manager may be designated by COR/AOR to "assist with post-award administrative oversight and monitoring" including technical oversight of an activity. Designating an Activity Manager for specific tasks to be implemented by the platform contractor may expand the support the platform can provide, as well as be helpful particularly when a platform serves a Regional Mission. An Activity Manager is <u>not</u> authorized to provide technical direction to the platform contractor or any other action that binds the government based on the COR/AOR designation letter for the platform. Activity Managers in the context of platform management can provide day-to-day oversight and support for discrete tasks, while identifying issues for consideration to the platform COR. The platform COR will want to determine the usefulness and scope of an Activity Manager's assistance and communicate clear expectations to the platform.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Relationships between various Mission users of a platform, as well as the relationships between users and platform staff require careful management. The key factor is facilitating access to the platform in an institutionalized way that recognizes available resources (e.g., budget and platform staff time), Mission priorities, and the mandate of the platform's Statement of Work (SOW).

Collaboration is the cornerstone to a successful relationship between the platform and USAID

A relationship characterized by collaboration, open communication, and trust between the Mission and platform, beyond the simple fulfillment of contractual deliverables, is a key determinant of the successful use of resources.

BUILD BUY-IN OF PLATFORM USERS

Engagement with potential users is a challenge to coordinate and sustain. Processes for accessing the platform should be well documented and communicated in outreach to potential users. The platform COR and platform staff can facilitate conversations with Mission technical teams to set clear expectations regarding the time and resources required to produce high quality MEL products or facilitated discussions.

Box 1: Highlighted case: Regional Mission's proactive engagement with users

A Mission takes a proactive approach to sharing information about platform services with potential users or Missions across the region. For example, the platform COR and/or Alternate COR routinely reach out to staff from Missions served by the Regional Mission, engage with these staff when they visit the Regional Mission, and coordinate in-person meetings with the platform. In addition, the platform COR attends conferences and trainings organized by the Mission to share information about platform services.

MANAGE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PLATFORM AND ACTIVITY IPS

USAID's role in facilitating communication and interaction between platform staff and activity IPs is important. Depending on the configuration and functions of a platform, platform staff may have regular interactions and an established working relationship with activity IPs, which can have its own set of management considerations. Boxes 1 and 2 provide examples of how Missions are managing these relationships.

Box 2: Opportunities for facilitating the relationship between platforms and IPs

Contract/Award Language. Missions can choose to communicate the relationship formally by including language in IP contracts or agreements explaining the role of a platform and formalizing cooperation with the platform. This can be helpful in setting early expectations with partners.

Post-Award Meetings. For platforms working with activity IPs on Activity MEL Plans or capacity building activities, there is a benefit to having platform staff present in the post-award meeting or hosting a separate meeting with new partners to orient them to the role of the platform and services available. In particular, when an activity is being evaluated or monitored by the platform, it is important for USAID to clearly and formally explain the roles, expectations, and relationship between all parties (IP, platform, and USAID staff). This includes clarifying the purpose of the evaluation (e.g., emphasis on learning, not audit). MEL platform assessment (2016) interviewees, particularly from the platform perspective, noted that activity CORs/AORs should facilitate a formal introduction and ensure the IP is comfortable with answering evaluation or third-party monitoring related requests.

Quarterly Partner Meetings. A way to facilitate informal access is to have platforms present at quarterly partner meetings to familiarize activity IPs with the platform support available to them. Once an introduction is made, partners should feel more comfortable communicating directly and informally with platform staff for the purpose of fruitful collaboration.

UTILIZING PLATFORM SERVICES: MANAGING ACCESS

CONCENTRATING ALL PLATFORM MANAGEMENT, OUTREACH, AND COMMUNICATION TASKS WITH THE PLATFORM COR HAS SOME TRADE-OFFS

While having a single platform COR provides a clear channel of communication and authority, it can also create a bottleneck. To mitigate this, and to remain respectful to the mandated responsibilities of platform CORs, the Contracting Officer (CO) may designate an Activity Manager (see pages 2) or the platform COR may designate a point of contact (POC) for certain platform functions. A platform Activity Manager or POC can then provide day-to-day support relating to, for example, a certain sector or technical team, while keeping the platform COR copied on communications. Regardless of whether there is a formal designation of an Activity Manger or a POC, a platform COR should establish protocols for direct communication between the platform and users for smaller routine tasks, such as document reviews. In all instances, the platform COR should concur with requests of the platform before the platform undertakes any new or expanded service requests.

Table 1: Options for managing access to platforms	
Task requests. USAID staff articulate in an initial request to the platform COR the platform support required (e.g., in a brief concept note). An initial consultation can then take place. The platform COR may choose to bring in other team members (or an Activity Manager) to work closely with the requesting team to think through and describe the purpose, use, and learning objective of the request, or the activity CORs/AORs may handle this process directly.	**Implications:** The platform COR (or designee) must have the time to play a crucial role in facilitating this conversation.
Designate platform staff to serve as POCs for USAID teams. Some Missions have multiple channels for accessing platform services. For example, platform staff members are designated as regular POCs to a technical team. In this role, platform staff should attend weekly meetings and technical teams can approach their platform POC directly with routine requests, such as review and guidance on specific documents, while keeping the platform COR appraised of the ongoing assistance (e.g., copied on communications).	**Implications:** Platform staff need to have easy access (in-person) to USAID staff.

Potential platform users are not always aware of all the requests made of a platform. The platform COR needs to manage the platform's workflow across all users to ensure the workload is feasible. The platform COR can reallocate resources or amend timelines if there is an unexpected surge in requests, or possibly a decline in requests due to resource constraints or if a requested task is outside the scope of available support. Table 1 identifies two options highlighted by USAID and platform staff for the management structure of platforms and Box 3 shares examples of tools or approaches.

Box 3: Examples of approaches for managing access to platforms

- Distribute summaries of M&E and CLA processes in the Mission, a description of the role of the Mission M&E staff, and summaries of the services that the platform can provide to all new Mission staff.
- Create request forms and templates with typical questions regarding purpose, use, and timelines.
- Distribute one-page summaries about the platform services to users.
- Share summaries about the MEL work undertaken by each technical team in the Mission to the platform staff.
- Keep processes for management consistent across teams.
- Involve an M&E Specialist (from the Program Office or technical teams) in SOW/Statement of Objectives (SOO) and other task request development.
- Specify lines of communication or designate POCs to support the review of technical products.

STAFFING

Platform staffing can take multiple forms based on Mission needs, with an emphasis on specific MEL functions and the context of the operating environment (e.g., country context and Mission culture, processes, and resources). The Discussion Note: Designing MEL Platforms provides guidance on staffing choices, such as which roles are full-time and which are filled by consultants or on a short-term basis.

There are trade-offs when platforms use short-term versus full-time staff. While flexibility may be needed for the purpose of adapting to shifting priorities and needs, there will likely be a consistent challenge of finding highly specialized skills and expertise for short-term technical assistance. Many of the individuals contracted by platform mechanisms are not full-time employees. Shifting timelines may make them unavailable. Understanding this dynamic and making optimal use of the flexible nature of platform support is a key consideration when managing support services. Managing short-term platform staff can be more challenging than working with full-time platform staff, who typically build relationships with the various users in a Mission and gain an appreciation for the aims of the constituent teams.

The logistics of physical location (see Box 4) can also challenge the management of platforms because many platforms are not located in a Mission, and regional platforms may have key specialists located in a different country within a region.

WORK PLANNING AND MEL PLANS

Identifying appropriate performance indicators and targets for platforms can be challenging given the demand-driven nature of the work. This is because MEL platforms are institutional support mechanisms rather than programmatic mechanisms (e.g., contracts and cooperative agreements for activities). For MEL platforms:

- Output indicators such as the number of evaluations conducted, site visits completed, partner workshops held, etc., are fairly straightforward. Appropriate targets for these outputs can be benchmarked to requirements as Missions define in the Performance Management Plan (PMP) or Activity MEL Plans.
- Outcome indicators measuring utilization and quality of products are more difficult to capture because these indicators can be somewhat subjective or dependent on internal USAID processes and culture. Setting targets can also be difficult. For example, utilization by the Mission or the activity IPs can be difficult to predict because the platform contractor will not always have access to procurement-sensitive information about upcoming awards. Furthermore, some of the most useful support available from platforms is in facilitated discussions and operational assistance.

> **Box 4: Highlighted cases for platform logistics**
>
> Several Missions mentioned the benefits of having the platform offices located physically nearby (or even within) the Mission. Physical accessibility was reported as vital in facilitating the close collaboration required between the USAID managing office and platform team.
>
> Interviewees working on regional MEL platforms mentioned the logistical burden of working across multiple countries, including the need for considerable travel. This should be accounted for in the planning and management of tasks.

Setting indicator targets for MEL platform performance monitoring can be complicated. The majority of platforms work is demand driven, and it can be difficult to predict the nature and quantity of requests. Thoughtful work planning, careful communication, and feedback strategies for platform management can help fill some of these gaps (see Box 5).

> **Box 5: Examples of tools and processes for platform management:**
>
> - Annual work plan consultations that could be conducted through staff retreats, the processes of updating the Mission-wide PMP, or sessions with technical teams, etc.).
> - Semi-annual reflection and feedback sessions.
> - Quarterly reviews against work plan and the platform MEL Plan.
> - In-person monthly or weekly meeting.
> - Bi-weekly updates (email or online tracking sheet).
> - Frequent informal phone conversations.

Regardless of the approach, it is important to generate reasonable workflow projections, while recognizing that adaptations are likely. Moreover, integration of platform work planning with similar processes for Mission management, such as PMP refinement, activity work planning, and portfolio reviews is likely to yield both better tailored support and greater integration of monitoring, evaluation, and CLA into strategic and programmatic decision-making processes. It is important for all users to have an awareness of the platform, which should be communicated at regular intervals. Box 6 provides examples of how Missions approach work planning.

Box 6: Platform work planning approaches
Type #1: Integrate work planning for platforms into PMP or Activity MEL Plan reviews. Missions can set up the platform work plan to flow directly from the Mission planning processes, such as when teams prepare the Operational Plan. Similarly, integration of the platform into periodic portfolio reviews, after-action reviews, pause and reflect sessions, Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) Mid-Course Stocktaking exercises, etc., can improve the quality of those sessions as well as harmonize platform work streams with Mission priorities.
Type #2: Annual planning to anticipate needs. Missions may choose to have separate annual planning and learning meetings or retreats between the platform COR and potential users. Platform staff may attend this meeting or the platform COR may choose to have a second work planning meeting with the platform staff. Several interviewees from USAID and platforms noted the importance of including the Contracting Officer in the annual work planning and/or semi-annual check-in sessions.
Type #3: Scheduled review and reflection sessions. Platform staff interviewees expressed a desire to have set review and reflection sessions with USAID management and users every six months. Platform staff are eager to hear constructive feedback on a regular, systematic basis, throughout the period of performance, in order to improve and adapt implementation. These kinds of sessions are also an opportunity to revisit and clarify USAID expectations for the platform.

Part 2: Managing the Monitoring Function

REVIEW OF MONITORING SUPPORT AND SERVICES

USAID typically designs and procures platform support for the purpose of improving the Mission's internal capacity to collect, analyze, and respond to high-quality, relevant, and timely data. Some common functions and examples of support tasks are provided in Table 2. The Monitoring Toolkit provides additional background, tools, and resources.

Several platforms have included third-party monitoring in the SOW/SOO. 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: Typical Mission monitoring functions and common types of platform support	
Monitoring function	**Examples of platform support**
Mission-wide Performance Management Plan (PMP) development	– Facilitate support to Program and technical offices on PMP development. – Facilitate stakeholder meetings. – Review draft sections for clarity of text, approach to monitoring assumptions, and causal logic. – 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 integration or political economy analysis).
Activity MEL Plan development	– Provide technical assistance for developing monitoring approaches responsive to users' needs. – Provide technical assistance to partners (e.g., IPs or partner governments) in the development of theories of change and the refinement of activity logic models. – Facilitate the identification of indicators and 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, as well as develop tools for Mission staff reviews of Activity MEL Plans. – Analyze data for baselines and facilitate discussions toward setting appropriate activity targets.
Implementation of the PMP and Activity MEL Plans	– PMPs: Review and refine PMPs following portfolio reviews. – Collect project-level data (data not collected by IPs), as applicable, and incorporate data into PMP – Activity MEL Plans: Review, clean, and compile IP data.
Data Quality Assessments (DQAs)	– Provide support to USAID teams on DQAs, such as capacity building assistance, reviewing data, and tool development.

Table 2: Typical Mission monitoring functions and common types of platform support	
Monitoring function	**Examples of platform support**
Site Visit Assistance	− 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	− Collect data for baselines and facilitate discussions toward setting appropriate activity performance targets. − Conduct site visit monitoring and/or logistical support for a specific intervention or in non-permissive environments (NPEs), where USAID access is restricted. − Provide specialized monitoring and verification support for inter-agency, Government-to-Government (G2G), or whole of government programming. − Provide indicator data verification, especially in NPEs.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

The relative success of a platform's monitoring support is largely dependent on the relationship between the platform contractor, the USAID users (e.g., a Mission Program Office and/or technical offices), and the activity IPs. It benefits from inclusive and effective communication, which requires USAID staff time and effort and clear designations of shared roles and responsibilities. There are several considerations and opportunities to help manage relationships.

FOSTER AN INCLUSIVE, COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP FOR MONITORING

Monitoring support by a MEL platform works best when USAID management prioritizes close collaboration and partnership with the platform contractor. For example, deliverables, such as reports, are ultimately artifacts, while collaborative involvement in the process of carrying out a monitoring task tends to encourage the use of collected evidence in decision-making processes.

IDENTIFY ACTIVITY MANAGERS

It is important not to underestimate the amount of time required to successfully manage a MEL platform. Managing access to platform monitoring support may ultimately rest with the platform COR; however, direct management of all engagement between the platform and USAID technical staff and activity CORs/AORs is likely beyond the time resources available to any one staff member.

A commonly identified model, viewed as relatively successful in several Missions, emphasizes open collaboration between platform staff, Project (if applicable) and Activity Managers, and activity IPs. A platform COR acts essentially as an ombudsperson and facilitates access to platform support for appropriate project or activity monitoring POCs and allows for direct lines of communication with users (whether in the Mission or in the activity IPs) (see Page 2).

Increasingly, platforms are being used as a way to outsource basic Program Cycle functions that should most likely be done internally by Program Office staff and/or CORs/AORs for activities because Missions do not have the staff time to complete all monitoring tasks or in the case of restricted environments are unable to travel.

USAID staff and IPs are responsible for collecting relevant performance and contextual data. Platform support can supplement and build Mission and IP capacity to do so. However, there are important tradeoffs to consider.

When platform staff engage with IPs in capacity building efforts and have direct access to monitoring information, an unintended consequence may be that a distance is created between IPs and their CORs/AORs. This raises the question of what to outsource and how does outsourcing monitoring functions (e.g., development of the Mission-wide PMP or indicator reporting) affect dynamics between USAID and IPs. Outsourcing can lead to Mission staff being less involved in using monitoring data and in site-visit observations for decision-making. Ultimately, learning and adapting is an internal USAID process, thus outsourcing to a platform must be done with care. USAID staff cannot outsource participation and understanding of why certain data are collected, and how data can be used as both these processes are vital to utilization and responsive management.

Platforms' engagement in monitoring functions should be designed and utilized to enhance USAID staff use of data, rather than simply outsource roles and responsibilities for monitoring, for evaluation, and for learning. A best practice is to consider monitoring support as a complement to Mission responsibilities rather than a replacement. For example, a platform's role in DQAs is likely best organized from the perspective of an impartial facilitator (e.g., to move towards consensus among a diverse group of stakeholders), tool developer (e.g., standardized site visit checklists or guides), reviewer of outputs, and identifier of additional learning opportunities.

REVIEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES REGULARLY

A good practice is to review roles and responsibilities periodically to address instances when monitoring support services are not fully utilized or represent a missed opportunity for Mission learning. This includes setting up a responsibility framework for guidance, introductions, and decision-making that is streamlined to the best degree possible.

UTILIZING PLATFORMS FOR MONITORING SUPPORT SERVICES

Successful utilization of platform monitoring services is associated with having Mission staff actively engaged in monitoring. If monitoring is seen as primarily about compliance rather than learning and sound management practice, its products and benefits are unlikely to contribute to greater development outcomes through smart use of limited resources.

For those without prior experience with platform contracts, early and regular conversations about the needs of the Mission and the capacities and resources of the platform team are vital to maximizing the

quality of Mission monitoring efforts. Platform capacity-building assistance (including for Mission and activity IP performance data collection, verification, and utilization) is often underutilized.

RECOGNIZE PLATFORM LIMITATIONS FOR ADDRESSING MISSION MONITORING NEEDS

There are trade-offs with respect to engaging platform expertise in Mission monitoring functions. While a Mission with access to platform services gains access to the expertise of qualified monitoring specialists, practical use of these services may consume an inappropriate share of resources without careful planning for use and flexibility to adjust monitoring plans.

In addition, while platform staff providing monitoring support to Mission teams and IPs are expected to have the requisite skills to build capacity, they are not necessarily experts in internal USAID procedures. A best practice among USAID staff managing platforms is to discuss and make available relevant and appropriate Agency guidance as it is consistently updated and adapted. This includes ADS policy, Additional Help and supplemental guidance, and other toolkit documents, which are typically made publicly available on USAID's [Learning Lab](#) and Agency [websites.](#)

PLATFORMS ARE USEFUL CONVENERS, FACILITATORS, AND DISSEMINATION SERVICE PROVIDERS

For monitoring services, the benefit of the expertise from platform staff capacities may be in the facilitation of discussions and dissemination plans for a wide range of stakeholders. This use incorporates the expertise of platform monitoring specialists, while also not overly outsourcing functions associated with internalizing timely performance and context monitoring data.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR DATA MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Missions should consider their capacity to absorb and utilize suggested data management support, which is context specific. Data management processes are diverse, ranging from OUs that have clear procedures with well-defined roles and responsibilities and cloud-based information management systems that enable sharing and management, to OUs that have loosely defined procedures and data stored on individual spreadsheets.

The Agency is developing the Development Information Solution (DIS), which will be a suite of information technology tools that support information management within the Agency, as well as include a module for performance management. Beginning in Fiscal Year 2021, USAID OUs must use the Agency-wide Development Information Solution (DIS) for storing information on performance indicators.

Part 3: Managing the Evaluation Function

REVIEW OF EVALUATION SUPPORT AND SERVICES

Platforms can support various types of evaluations or related services that fit into one or more of three categories:

1. Performance evaluations;
2. Impact evaluations;

3. Ex-post Evaluations, and
4. Meta-evaluations or syntheses of existing evaluative studies.

Evaluation can facilitate learning throughout the Program Cycle (e.g., a performance evaluation of a single activity or whole Intermediate Result (as applicable), an impact evaluation of an innovative pilot program, an ex-post evaluation to determine what was sustained, or a synthesis of findings across a technical sector or Mission portfolio).

With the majority of platforms managed in Program Offices, the use of platforms for evaluations aligns with ADS 201, in which Program Offices, not technical offices, are responsible for managing external evaluations. Table 3 provides further detail of how platforms are typically utilized for the evaluation function. The Evaluation Toolkit provides additional guidance on evaluation requirements and services.

Table 3: Typical Mission evaluation functions and platform support	
Evaluation function	**Examples of platform support**
Performance and Impact Evaluations	– Conduct evaluations (this includes identifying evaluation team members and managing the evaluation team). – Oversee evaluation logistics, such as providing meeting space for evaluation planning, overseeing travel, lodging and transportation arrangements, and providing office support (e.g., desk space, internet access, printing, etc.). – Evaluation report drafting, quality assurance, review and dissemination. – Facilitate, create, or manage the process of additional learning opportunities and products.
IR, Project-level or Thematic Evaluations	– If a Mission or OU wishes to examine processes, results or themes under an Intermediate Result, project or across a set of activities, the MEL platform can conceptualize, staff, and implement the evaluation in collaboration with the Mission or OU staff.
Meta-evaluations and Special Studies	– Synthesize findings from across evaluations. – Revisit previous evaluations and programming to examine sustainability and local ownership after implementation.
Development of Evaluation SOWs/SOOs	– Facilitate an iterative process to develop the SOW. – Draft an initial SOW based on a Statement of Objectives (SOO), concept or initial thoughts on purpose, use, and evaluation questions. – Provide feedback, comments, and suggestions on an SOW, such as data collection, analysis, and evaluation questions. – Support the partner government in evaluation activities.
Baseline, mid-term, and/or final data collection	– Plan and conduct data collection, if evaluation or reporting and planning tasks require substantial data collection. – Identify and train data collection team members. – Develop or identify population or areas of interest for data collection.

Table 3: Typical Mission evaluation functions and platform support	
Evaluation function	**Examples of platform support**
	− Manage data collection teams and implement quality control measures.
	− Manage data entry, cleaning, coding, and analysis.
	− Draft and/or review and disseminate report.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

The Mission-platform relationship is ultimately one of client and service provider, thus platform staff typically try to be responsive to USAID users. Miscommunication is possible even in cases where Mission and platform staff have advanced evaluation capacity. These issues can be addressed by communicating a platform's capabilities, resources, and the feasibility of the request in a constructive manner. This includes USAID staff, the IP being evaluated, and the platform evaluators having a common understanding about the evaluation process (e.g., planned stakeholder engagement, draft report review, final report dissemination, etc.).

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS OF USAID TEAMS AND PLATFORM EVALUATION TEAMS

Managing the expectations of both Mission technical teams and platform evaluation teams can be a challenge. All too often, it is only after data have been collected and analyzed and preliminary findings presented that the commissioners and/or users of an evaluation are able to articulate what they wanted. At that point, it is too late to redefine evaluation questions or revise data collection and methods. Additionally, a technical team may not be satisfied with a platform's completed performance evaluation because data collection and analysis do not go deep enough, but rather simply confirm what is already known. This has implications for future use of the platform for evaluation functions. There are two sides to this issue:

- Mission technical teams are not always as familiar with evaluation study designs as compared to the platform COR and platform staff, including what various designs require for planning and implementation, and what specific designs can (and cannot) provide. This has implications for the length of time it takes to develop and refine an SOW to fit with data needs and to match the level of rigor and intended use, as well as expectations of the final report and conclusions. An unrealistic time frame can result in the receipt of an evaluation report long after the purpose for which it was intended.
- Platform staff may not be able to identify specific expertise required for highly technical or emerging methods, for example if the evaluation is to be completed in a compressed time frame. Furthermore, if platforms bring in external evaluation team members with specific expertise, but without regional or contextual knowledge, then the team may require more time to consider data collection instruments, methods, and sampling, for example.

MANAGE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EVALUATION TEAMS AND ACTIVITY IPS

Communication between USAID staff, platform staff, and activity IPs whose activities are being evaluated is critical, as a platform's evaluation work is dependent on others for information. Platform staff and

platform CORs or Activity Managers may face reluctance from IPs and/or technical teams to seek evaluations, especially in cases when the platform is also conducting monitoring support. It is important to remember that, per ADS 201.3.6.9, draft reports must undergo a peer review and should be reviewed against ADS 201maa, Criteria to Ensure the Quality of the Evaluation Report. Draft reports must be shared with IPs of the activities addressed in the evaluation (and, if relevant, with other donors).

When implementing partners do not agree with the findings, it is the responsibility of the Mission to examine the evidence and make appropriate management decisions reflecting a balanced view of activity, project, and strategy goals. Implementers, donors, and members of the evaluation team must be allowed to write a statement of difference for any significant unresolved differences of findings or interpretation, which the Mission would then attach to the final evaluation report. This also assumes that even when findings, conclusions, and recommendations are agreeable that they are (1) reflected and acted upon, and (2) documented in the Evaluation Dissemination Plan, which is required by ADS 201.3.6.10.

UTILIZING PLATFORMS FOR EVALUATION SUPPORT SERVICES

Evaluations undertaken by platforms experience many of the same challenges as evaluations not completed by platforms. The following highlights several considerations in utilizing platforms for evaluation support services.

MANAGE FOR OPTIMAL USE OF EVALUATION FINDINGS

The type of evaluation needed is the first major consideration for those commissioning an evaluation. (see Box 7).

Evaluations conducted under a platform require collaboration between the technical office and the platform COR. The technical office has a set of responsibilities related to establishing the questions and utilizing the findings. The platform COR is responsible for managing expectations and communications between the technical office and platform staff. Platform staff have a responsibility to be realistic about their capabilities, transparent about their methods and findings, and adhere to good evaluation principles.[2]

Conducting evaluability assessments, allowing time for thorough document review, pre-testing or scoping processes, and ensuring productive collaboration sessions in the process of design are all key factors that contribute to clarity and success.

There is often a wide range of Mission capacity to adequately review and use evaluation findings. It is not uncommon for Mission staff to be relatively unfamiliar with standards of evaluation quality – including standards of report organization and clarity, but also the level of rigor related to the methods used to collect and analyze data. In these instances, it is helpful to provide Program Office support for these teams, utilize the existing toolkits, request capacity building assistance from the platform or another provider, or reach out to colleagues in other USAID OUs (e.g., PPL or regional bureaus) that have tools or tips to offer.

BALANCE RIGOR, RESOURCES, SCHEDULE NEEDS, AND CONSTRAINTS

The development of evaluation SOWs is time consuming. It requires awareness of the iterative process of identifying answerable questions and matching the questions with the potential or suggested methods of data collection, analysis,

> **Box 7: Management considerations for impact evaluations**
>
> The Mission-Based Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Platforms Assessment Report (2016) noted that some solicitations prioritized impact evaluations. These platforms encountered several challenges due to some of the unique requirements of impact evaluations.
>
> 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 donor, implementer, and evaluator, and (4) considerable timeline and resource planning. Because of these specific needs, impact evaluation-prioritized platforms may face management challenges in accommodating other evaluation tasks.
>
> When deciding to include an impact evaluation in the platform SOW, a Mission may find it necessary to consider the workload of the platform COR and the overall management structure for impact evaluations. Missions are encouraged to consult the Evaluation Toolkit for additional information about commissioning impact evaluations.

and the purpose and use of an evaluation. An unrealistic or mismatched time frame can result in the receipt of an evaluation report too late to fulfill the purpose for which it was originally designed. Key steps to take include:

- *Forecast to create sufficient time*. If there is insufficient time from the conception of an evaluation to designing and implementing it, platform staff may not be able to assemble the required resources or employ methods that best fit. This may result in a purposive sampling or an overly limited set of site visits, as opposed to a more robust mixed-methods approach that would provide greater confidence in the conclusions.
- *Ensure availability of sufficient data.* The absence of accurate or useful baseline, performance, and program records or documentation can severely limit the choice of evaluation design options. Inadequate or untimely access to secondary or existing data or reports can also delay the evaluation process or completion. Expectations for evaluations may not be met if Mission staff or IPs cannot provide documentation that a platform evaluation team requires. Additionally, IPs may be reluctant

to share data, especially when an activity is early in its implementation. This is best handled by USAID providing the first introductions and remaining engaged in all platform IP communications.

Access to platform evaluation services does not absolve USAID staff from devoting considerable time throughout the evaluation process. Learning from evaluation is a participatory process even when contracting out data collection to platform staff.

Part 4: Managing the Learning Function

There is significant overlap in the considerations for managing monitoring and evaluation functions as for the CLA practice. This section discusses how best to manage platform support mechanisms that have specific CLA responsibilities.

Figure 1: CLA Framework

REVIEW OF LEARNING FUNCTION

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) is USAID's approach to organizational learning and adaptive management. CLA helps ensure that programming is coordinated, grounded in evidence, and adjusted as

necessary to remain relevant and effective. In essence, platforms that support CLA functions may assist Missions with the following:

1. Coordination and integration of Mission programming with partner government, public and private sector actors, and other donors;
2. Designing programming in a strong evidence base; and
3. Managing programming adaptively through an intentional approach to decision-making in response to new information and changes in context.
4. Providing facilitation and other support to the Mission.

Table 4 provides a brief overview of typical Mission CLA functions according to the components of the CLA Framework (see Figure 1) and how platforms have typically supported them. The CLA Toolkit provides additional background, tools, and resources.

	Table 4: Platform support for CLA by CLA Framework component
CLA in the Program Cycle — Collaborating (Internal and External)	– 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/programmatic sectors). – Research stakeholder networks or facilitate stakeholder consultations for project or activity design). – Facilitate discussions with Mission staff and IPs on indicator and target selection. – Coordinate and/or facilitate working group of IP staff (e.g., Chiefs of Party, economists, M&E advisors).
Learning	– Provide technical expertise and/or facilitate stakeholder discussions for the development of PMPs and Activity MEL Plans, including CLA or learning plans. – Support the development of learning agendas among Development Objective, Project, and/or activity teams. – 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 field-based site visits (e.g., provide logistical support, assist in appropriate site selection, and/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 IPs, government officials, private sector partners).

		– Facilitate and coordinate periodic evidence-sharing summits.
		– Support periodic [CDCS Mid-Course Stocktaking and/or portfolio reviews]().
	Adapting	– 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	– 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	– 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 and/or maintain knowledge management infrastructure.
		– Support the development of innovative knowledge products designed for utilization (e.g., short videos, infographics, dashboards, etc.).
	Resources	– Support to CLA champions in the Mission.
		– Serve as technical assistance resources to support CLA for IPs.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

MEL platforms can support CLA efforts as they often operate across technical sectors (when managed by the Program Office) and have relationships with IPs, other stakeholders, and/or partner governments. Platforms can have dedicated staff and expertise in designing and implementing learning-based activities, from facilitating analytical thinking to action planning. In Missions with limited staff time, this support can dedicate resources and boost awareness of CLA as an integrated component of the Program Cycle.

As with M&E support functions, CLA support benefits from clarity of purpose and clear roles and responsibilities. Clarity is especially important for CLA, because learning inherently should be owned by a Mission and its staff – in other words, outsourcing learning can be counterproductive. The platform COR plays an instrumental management role in defining and interpreting the boundaries of support available to Mission teams, pursuant to the platform's SOW, in order to ensure that the benefits of otherwise sound CLA practices are not outsourced. As introduced in Table 6, platform support for CLA, while always context dependent, is best utilized to support:

1. Design and facilitation of learning and/or collaboration opportunities;
2. Dissemination of lessons learned among internal and external stakeholders;
3. Support for syntheses, technical assistance, and analysis for interpreting the data collected for results-based adaptive management; and
4. Operational or logistical requirements.

UTILIZING PLATFORMS FOR CLA SUPPORT SERVICES

CONSIDER REQUIRED SKILLS FOR CLA

The skills platform staff need to provide CLA support are not necessarily the same as traditional M&E skills, although these can be quite complementary. Facilitation is one skill identified as critical for CLA processes. Subject-matter experts do not necessarily make the best facilitators. Thus, depending on resources, having a professional facilitator or Learning Specialist included as a full-time staff member is recommended if CLA support functions are intended to make up a significant portion of the platform's SOW. If other key staff members do not have facilitation experience, investment in facilitation training may be worthwhile.

Including Learning Specialists as platform staff members can take multiple forms. Typically, they can support CLA advocates within a Mission. For instance, dedicated platform staff can mentor Mission staff to become better able to lead the learning-focused activities, such as:

1. Capturing the results from pause and reflect sessions and after-action reviews;
2. Holding team members accountable to agreed-upon actions or norms;
3. Facilitating consensus-building and synthesizing decision points to move a team forward, thereby cutting down on redundancy;
4. Building capacity to hold meaningful and actionable periodic performance reviews; and
5. Incorporating performance, context, and complementary monitoring data to inform learning priorities and periodic stocktaking efforts.

CONSIDER WHETHER PLATFORM STAFF WORK INSIDE OR ARE LOCATED VERY NEAR THE MISSION

Overcoming constraints related to location requires intentional planning on the part of both USAID and the platform team. It should be factored into design, inception, and day-to-day scheduling and planning. There are several considerations. For instance, particularly for CLA, physical location can be a constraint to effective collaboration between teams. Due to space and security (e.g., badging) issues, platform staff typically do not work inside a Mission. Physical separation can act as a barrier to including the platform in key learning opportunities, such as regular team meetings and both formal and informal sharing of ideas. The separation also limits the ability of platform staff to build relationships within the Mission and facilitate the maturation of CLA practices. On the positive side, Missions can use platforms' off-site offices for collaborative events – an option that is perhaps underutilized.

CAREFULLY DEFINE DELIVERABLES FOR PLATFORM CLA SUPPORT

A potential challenge is defining deliverables for CLA support provided by a platform. CLA must be context-specific. Facilitating the CLA maturity tool self-assessment is one way to help to define the most appropriate deliverables and outputs for a Mission. Program Cycle activities enhanced by CLA include portfolio reviews, CDCS Mid-Course Stocktaking efforts, learning agenda development, co-creation of activities, and stakeholder engagement, for example.

The Landscape Analysis of Learning Agendas (2017) provides examples of knowledge products actively being used by Mission staff. Examples include:

1. Print materials, e.g., policy papers, guidance notes, infographics, network analyses, checklists, and research reports.
2. Multimedia resources, e.g., websites, wikis, email listservs, blogs, vlogs, and webinars.
3. In-person events, e.g., presentations, study tours, and experience or evidence summits.

CONSIDER PERIODIC REVIEWS TO UPDATE SUPPORT TASKS

The benefit of platform CLA support is typically the platforms sustained engagement and cross-team focus. Reviewing the usefulness of platform support periodically, in collaboration with platform staff, is a sound practice to ensure that support continues to be tailored to the CLA practices taken up by the Mission. USAID management of platform CLA support functions also benefits adaptively managing partnerships and implementation activities.

ENDNOTES

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

[2] See, for example the American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators.

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 and managing MEL platforms. Please visit the ProgramNet page (USAID staff only) on MEL platforms for more information.