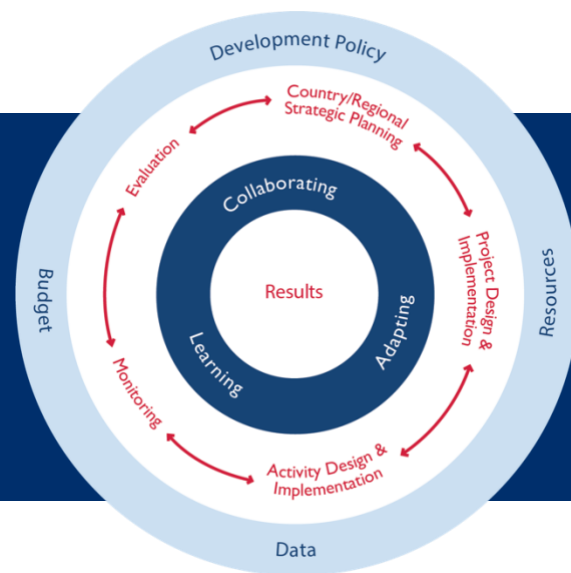# PROGRAM CYCLE

How-To Note: Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, & Learning (MEL) Plan

This resource describes how to prepare and maintain a Monitoring, Evaluation, & Learning (MEL) Plan.

Introduction

The USAID Program Cycle Operational Policy (ADS 201) states in section 3.4.10, that "Activities must have an approved Activity MEL Plan in place before major implementation actions begin". This How-To Note supplements ADS 201.3.4.10 with further guidance on Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Plans. It starts with an overview of Activity MEL Plans, including what they are, when they must be developed, and recommendations regarding content. It then outlines practical steps for developing, reviewing, and managing an Activity MEL Plan.

The primary audience for this guidance includes USAID Contracting Officer's Representatives (CORs) / Agreement Officer's Representatives (AORs) and the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning specialists who support USAID development activities. Additional users of this include implementing partners who are tasked with developing an Activity MEL Plan for their implementation of a USAID-funded development activity.

How-To Notes provide guidelines and practical advice to USAID staff and partners related to the Program Cycle. This note was produced by the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL).

Overview

What is the purpose of the Activity MEL Plan?

Activity monitoring, evaluation, and CLA focuses on whether an activity is achieving programmatic results and generating learning to inform the adaptation of activities based on evidence. The Activity MEL Plan describes the expected monitoring, evaluation, and CLA efforts of the implementer of a USAID activity over a specified period of time. Like any plan, it may change as time passes, new needs arise, or adaptations to new information are required.

What Activities are required to have an Activity MEL Plan?

USAID activities, with some exceptions, are required to have an Activity MEL Plan. According to ADS 201, a USAID activity "generally refers to an implementing mechanism that carries out an intervention or set of interventions to advance identified development result(s). Activities range from contracts or cooperative agreements with international or local organizations, to direct agreements with partner governments, to partial credit guarantees that mobilize private capital, among other examples. Activities also include task orders under global agreements (e.g., Field Support agreements) that generate programmatic results in a given country or region."

Awards and activities that are exempt from the requirement to have an Activity MEL Plan, include:
1. Awards that provide management or support services–and are therefore not *development activities*– including evaluations, assessments, MEL platforms, institutional support services, and other awards funded with Program Design and Learning (PD&L) funds.
2. Emergency Food Assistance, Disaster Assistance, and Transition Assistance, including Activities managed by the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA); and Activities managed by the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization's Office of Transition Initiatives (CPS/OTI).
3. Project and general contributions to PIOs or bilateral donors;
4. Development Finance Corporation (DFC) transaction agreements;
5. Program (non-project) assistance-type Government to Government (G2G) agreements.

In addition, the Mission Director or, in the case of Washington OUs, the head of a Bureau/IO may approve exceptions to the requirement that Activities have an Activity MEL Plan. Any exception must be documented in a memorandum and shared with PPL/LER and, for Missions, the relevant Regional Bureau Program Office. Activity MEL Plans may be developed for activities that are exempt from the requirement for an Activity MEL Plan; such activities and awards should be monitored whether or not an Activity MEL Plan is in place.

Who develops the Activity MEL Plan?

While the requirement that certain activities have Activity MEL Plans applies to USAID Operating Units, it is typically the implementing partner who develops the Activity MEL Plan. USAID AOR/CORs review and approve the Activity MEL Plan. In the case of project assistance-type G2G agreements and cost-type agreements with bilateral donors and PIOs, the monitoring approach, including performance indicators, should be jointly agreed upon by the Mission and the partner government/PIO as part of the agreement. Guidance on Activity MEL Plans for Project-type G2G agreements is provided in [ADS 220 Strengthening the Capacity of Partner Governments through Government to Government (G2G) Assistance](#).

When is the Activity MEL Plan developed?

Activities must have an approved Activity MEL Plan in place before major implementation actions begin.

Implementing partners are required to submit a proposed Activity MEL Plan to the COR/AOR within 90 days of an award. Once approved by USAID, the Activity MEL Plan should be revised or updated as prescribed in the award or agreement. In many cases, regular review and approval of the Activity MEL Plan is done on an annual basis.

Where is the Activity MEL Plan documented?

Immediately upon approval, the COR/AOR must upload the approved Activity MEL Plan (and any subsequent updates) to the **Agency Secure Image and Storage Tracking (ASIST) System**, the Agency's official electronic repository for all Acquisition & Assistance (A&A) award documentation. Elements of the Activity MEL Plan may also need to be included in other Mission or Operating Unit information systems, such as a performance indicator information system or evaluation registry (per Mission or OU operating procedures).

Recommended Steps for Developing the Activity MEL Plan

This section provides step-by-step recommendations for developing an Activity MEL Plan, from activity design planning through activity implementation.

1. USAID IDENTIFIES MEL NEEDS DURING ACTIVITY DESIGN

During activity design planning, OUs should (as noted in ADS 201.2.4.5) "identify any needs for monitoring, evaluation, and/or CLA [that] they must incorporate into the design and/or award language." For example, OUs may consider at this stage:

> **PMPs and Activity MEL Plans**
>
> A **Performance Management Plan (PMP)** is developed by a Mission following CDCS approval to monitor, evaluate, and learn from the strategy.
>
> An **Activity MEL Plan** is typically developed by an implementing partner following an award. It is approved by the AOR/COR and describes plans to monitor, evaluate, and learn from a USAID activity.
>
> Each plan serves a distinct management purpose, but they are related and should be congruent, with some information appearing in more than one plan. For instance, a performance indicator may have relevance for, and appear in the PMP and one or more Activity MEL Plans.

- Will this activity be expected to contribute data or learning to monitoring, evaluation, and CLA needs as described in the Mission's Performance Management Plan (PMP) or other higher-level MEL plans in the Operating Unit?
- Are there applicable standard indicators or custom indicators in the Operating Unit's Performance Plan and Report (PPR) that this activity will contribute to?
- Does the activity include any new, untested approach anticipated to expand in scale or scope, thereby triggering the impact evaluation requirement?
- Does the activity have a TEC/TEA expected to be $20 million or more, thereby triggering an external evaluation requirement?
- Will any evaluation of the activity be conducted, necessitating the planning of a parallel evaluation design and ensuring that activity monitoring data support evaluation needs?
- Are there particular stakeholders or other activities with which USAID should encourage or require that the implementing partner of this activity collaborate?
- Are there identifiable points during implementation where it would be useful to reflect on progress and adapt as needed?
- Are there emerging risks to achievement of activity objectives that should be monitored during implementation?

2. USAID REQUESTS THE IMPLEMENTING PARTNER DEVELOP AN ACTIVITY MEL PLAN

Since implementing partners must submit a proposed Activity MEL Plan to the COR/AOR within 90 days of an award (per ADS 201.3.4.10), the Activity Planner should work with the CO/AO during the development of the award solicitation to appropriately include the Activity MEL Plan as a requirement in the contract or agreement. The requirement for the Implementing Partner to provide an Activity MEL Plan should be tailored to the particular type of award (e.g., cooperative agreement, performance-based contract, etc.), should reflect the monitoring, evaluation, and CLA needs identified during the activity design, and should support activity management and oversight by USAID.

For example, USAID staff may determine that a particular activity needs a robust Activity MEL Plan from the Implementing Partner, including both required and recommended sections of the Activity MEL Plan. The solicitation for such an activity may include specific requests regarding the content of each of the sections of the Activity MEL Plan. For another activity, USAID staff may determine that the Activity MEL Plan only needs the required monitoring plan. If it is determined that an activity subject to the Activity MEL Plan requirement does not actually need an Activity MEL Plan, then a decision memo should be prepared for the Mission Director or Bureau Head to waive the requirement, per ADS 201.3.4.10.(a).

OUs may also decide to recommend or require the Activity MEL Plan template provided by PPL or to recommend or require the use of their own Activity MEL Plan template in the award solicitation. The solicitation should state how soon it will be submitted after award (with an upper limit of 90 days), the time period to be covered by the Activity MEL Plan (e.g., annual, life-of-project, until a particular milestone is reached, etc.), and how frequently it will be updated.

3. USAID AND THE IMPLEMENTING PARTNER MEET TO SET EXPECTATIONS

After an award is made, and before the implementing partner develops the Activity MEL Plan, a meeting should be held between USAID and the implementing partner to discuss monitoring, evaluation, and CLA for the activity. This meeting may be part of a post-award meeting, an activity launch process, or a separate meeting. It should occur after the award but before the Activity MEL Plan is drafted, and should include the COR/AOR, the program and/or technical office M&E POC, and a learning advisor (if one exists).

USAID staff should use this opportunity to provide partners with relevant information necessary for completing the Activity MEL Plan that has not been previously provided. For example, USAID should inform the implementer if an external evaluation is planned and provide partners with PIRS for any required performance indicators. USAID should also clarify monitoring, evaluation, and CLA requirements that may be new to implementing partners and outline any specific features of the Activity MEL Plan USAID would like to see included. For example, USAID should inform the partner if there are specific Mission or Operating Unit learning questions that the activity is expected to assist in answering. Finally, USAID should inform the implementing partner if there are other activities or specific stakeholders that should be consulted during the development of their Activity MEL Plan. As a result of the meeting, the implementing partner and the COR/AOR should share an understanding of what is to be included in the Activity MEL Plan.

4. IMPLEMENTING PARTNER DRAFTS THE ACTIVITY MEL PLAN

The process of creating an Activity MEL Plan will vary, particularly as each plan is customized to the needs of the specific activity. In all cases, though, implementing partners should review their activity theory of change and its associated logic model as the foundation of the Activity MEL Plan. Implementing partners should assess the risks related to achieving the objectives described in the theory of change and determine what knowledge gaps need to be filled. Prior to submitting the draft Activity MEL Plan to USAID, Implementing Partners should ensure that it aligns with the activity work plan and addresses all of the elements required in the Activity MEL Plan as specified in the award agreement and as discussed with the USAID COR/AOR.

5. USAID REVIEWS AND APPROVES THE ACTIVITY MEL PLAN

Once drafted and submitted to USAID, it is the responsibility of the USAID COR or AOR to review the plan, collaborate on any necessary changes, and approve or concur with the plan prior to major implementation actions. Per ADS 201.3.4.10, USAID should ensure that the Activity MEL Plan is consistent with and meets the needs of a Mission's PMP for monitoring, evaluation, CLA, and collecting or managing data; external reporting requirements, such as the Mission's annual Performance Plan and Report (PPR); the PDD if applicable; and the program monitoring needs for the management and oversight of activities by USAID.

6. USAID AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNER SHARE AND USE THE ACTIVITY MEL PLAN

Once approved, USAID and the Implementing Partner should share the plan (excluding any sensitive-but-unclassified [SBU] information) with other partners and stakeholders, such as sub-awardees, host country partners, and other USAID activity implementing partners. The COR/AOR must upload the approved Activity MEL Plan (and any subsequent updates) to the [Agency Secure Image and Storage Tracking (ASIST) System](link). The plan should be actively used by the Implementing Partner to guide MEL tasks throughout implementation of the activity.

7. THE IMPLEMENTING PARTNER UPDATES THE ACTIVITY MEL PLAN REGULARLY

The Activity MEL Plan should be revised and updated on a regular basis and as needed in response to implementation milestones, changes in the activity, or changes in the activity's context that occur during the life of the activity. USAID review and approval processes for revisions and updates to the Activity MEL Plan are often prescribed in the award or agreement. In many cases, regular review and approval of the Activity MEL Plan is completed on an annual basis.

Recommended Format and Content

There is no required format for an Activity MEL Plan, although PPL provides a recommended [template](link). Individual Bureaus and Missions may use their own templates.

There *is* required and recommended content for Activity MEL Plans. Per ADS 201.3.4.10, Activity MEL Plans *must* include the following:

- The activity's monitoring approach, including monitoring processes, systems, and relevant performance indicators of activity outputs and outcomes, their baselines values (or plan for collecting baseline), and annual targets; and
- As appropriate, the activity's approach for establishing effective procedures for collecting and responding to feedback from beneficiaries, and reporting to USAID a summary of beneficiary feedback and how it was addressed.

Activity MEL Plans *should* include the following:
- Expectations for collaboration with any external evaluations of the activity planned by the Mission or Washington OU;
- Any proposed internal or external evaluations;
- Plans for monitoring context and emerging risks that may affect achievement of activity results;
- Learning activities, including plans for knowledge capture at activity close out;
- Estimated resources for the MEL activities that are a part of the implementing partner's budget; and
- Roles and responsibilities for all proposed MEL actions.

The following describes required and recommended sections of a full Activity MEL Plan. Each section of the Activity MEL plan should be concise and some sections may be more appropriate as annexes, separate documents, tables, or databases.

INTRODUCTION OR OVERVIEW (OPTIONAL)

An introduction enables the Activity MEL Plan to act as a standalone management tool for both USAID and the implementing partner. This section introduces the Activity MEL Plan, describes the structure of the plan, sets the time period covered by the plan, and describes how it will be updated.

The implementing partner may find it useful to include a brief summary description of the activity theory of change based on activity planning documents. Typically, this will include the following information:
- The context in which the development problem is situated;
- If-then (causal) outcomes needed to achieve the desired change and evidence used to support those casual predictions;
- Major interventions that the activity will undertake to catalyze these outcomes; and
- Key *assumptions* that underlie the success of this theory and potential *risks* to the success of the theory of change.

A logic model that graphically depicts the activity theory of change is also recommended to be included in this section. Annotating the logic model with summary descriptions of relevant monitoring, evaluation, or learning efforts can be a valuable way to provide a graphical overview of the Activity MEL Plan.

MONITORING PLAN (REQUIRED)

This required section describes the activity's monitoring approach, including monitoring processes and systems.

Performance Monitoring (required)

The plan should include a description of the efforts that the activity implementing partner will undertake to monitor activity performance and report to USAID. This should include monitoring the quantity, quality, and timeliness of **outputs** and relevant **outcomes** to which the activity is expected to contribute. Efforts to monitor performance may include a range of quantitative and qualitative methods such as surveys, direct observation, qualitative interviews, focus groups, expert panels, the recording of administrative actions, etc.

The Activity MEL Plan must include relevant performance indicators of activity outputs and outcomes, preferably listed in a summary table in an Annex. It is USAID's responsibility to inform the implementing partner what performance indicators must be reported and included in the Activity MEL Plan, including any foreign assistance standard indicators required as applicable for the annual USAID and State Performance Plan and Report (PPR).

Each performance indicator in the plan must:
- Be linked to an intended result (output or outcome) that it measures.
- Have a corresponding Performance Indicator Reference Sheet (PIRS) that is complete and sufficient. If the PIRS is not complete at the time an Activity MEL Plan is submitted to USAID, it must be completed within three months of the start of indicator data collection.
- Have a baseline. If baseline data have not been collected at the time the Activity MEL Plan is submitted to USAID, the plan should note when baselines will be collected. Baseline data collection should be completed before the start of implementation actions related to that performance indicator.
- Have annual targets. If targets have not been set at the time the Activity MEL Plan is submitted to USAID, the plan should note when targets will be set. Targets should be set prior to collecting and reporting data (other than baseline data) on an indicator.
- Be disaggregated by sex when measuring person-level data. Some foreign assistance standard indicators may require additional disaggregates.

For more information about performance indicators, see the Selecting Performance Indicators guidance document.

Context monitoring (recommended)

The Activity MEL Plan may also include, if relevant, a description of any efforts that the activity implementing partner may undertake for monitoring the activity's context and emerging risks that could affect the achievement of the activity's results. These may include environmental, economic, social, or political risks and programmatic assumptions. Efforts to monitor context and risks may include a range of quantitative and qualitative methods such as surveys, direct observation, qualitative interviews, focus groups, expert panels, tracking of independent third-party indicators, etc.

BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK PLAN (REQUIRED, AS APPROPRIATE)

This section describes whether beneficiary feedback is applicable, and if so, provides the activity's approach for collecting and reporting on beneficiary feedback. Applicability of this requirement may depend on the

type of award or activity, or practical considerations that make identifying and collecting feedback from beneficiaries infeasible.

The beneficiary feedback plan within the Activity MEL Plan should describe:

1. A determination on whether collecting beneficiary feedback is appropriate for the activity. If not, then a written explanation for why not. If collecting beneficiary feedback is determined to be appropriate, then the following should be included in the Activity MEL Plan

2. *Procedures for collecting feedback from beneficiaries*, including: the intended beneficiaries–or the different groups of intended beneficiaries–of the activity and how they will be identified; the various methods expected to be employed for collecting feedback; the frequency of beneficiary feedback collection; and how the activity will ensure that feedback collection methods are safe, accessible, confidential, and aligned with beneficiary preferences.

3. *Procedures for responding to feedback from beneficiaries*, including: how the activity plans to analyze, review, and incorporate beneficiary feedback information into activity decision making; procedures (if any) for reporting back to beneficiaries about the feedback received and decisions made as a result of that feedback; and how the activity will respond to any critical or sensitive protection issues that arise from feedback received, as appropriate.

4. *Procedures for reporting to USAID*, including: how and when the activity will report a summary of the feedback information to USAID and how the activity will report on any actions taken to address issues that arise from the beneficiary feedback. For many activities, such reports may be part of the activity's regular progress reports that are provided to USAID on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis.

If beneficiary feedback is expected to be used for monitoring, evaluation, or CLA efforts described elsewhere in this plan, then this section may note such linkages.

EVALUATION PLAN (RECOMMENDED)

If an implementing partner intends to conduct an *internal* evaluation using USAID funds, the Activity MEL Plan should include an internal evaluation plan.[1] This plan should identify all evaluations that the partner will manage over the life of the activity, and should include information on the type of evaluation (performance or impact), purpose, and expected use (including if it is expected to answer learning questions identified in the CLA plan), possible evaluation questions, estimated budget, planned start date, and estimated completion date. The evaluation plan should be clear about the expected level of USAID involvement, such as reviewing an evaluation statement of work (SOW) or draft report. For resources about evaluations at USAID, see the Evaluation Toolkit. Final reports of any internal evaluations using USAID funds must be shared with USAID and should be posted on USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse.

If USAID plans to conduct an *external* evaluation of the activity it is USAID's responsibility to inform the implementing partner if and when they will be evaluated by an external evaluator. The Activity MEL Plan

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[1] Per USAID terminology, an external evaluation is commissioned by USAID and must be managed by the Operating Unit's Program Office, while an internal evaluation is one commissioned and managed by an implementing partner.

should include a section describing how the implementing partner will collaborate with the external evaluation by, for example:

- Reviewing and providing feedback on draft evaluation designs, draft evaluation data collection instruments, and the draft evaluation report;

- Sharing performance monitoring data (and anonymizing person-level data prior to sharing with the evaluation team);

- Providing written responses to an evaluation self-assessment questionnaire;

- Making staff available to answer questions related to the activity;

- Accommodating evaluation design requirements in the implementation of the activity;

- Supporting the evaluation team in identifying and obtaining access to stakeholders, beneficiaries, and sites of operation; and

- Supporting the evaluation team in holding stakeholder meetings to discuss and develop recommendations based on evaluation findings.

COLLABORATING, LEARNING AND ADAPTING APPROACH (RECOMMENDED)

Collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) is USAID's approach to organizational learning and adaptive management. Including CLA in the Activity MEL Plan helps ensure that the implementing partner and the COR/AOR have planned for an intentional approach to learning to inform adaptation and for collaborating with others to achieve higher-level results.

The CLA approach may include defining questions related to the activity's theory of change or gaps in the technical knowledge base and plans for how to address them, including through monitoring, evaluation and other learning activities. This section may identify how the activity's MEL contributes to addressing a Mission learning priority or specific learning questions, if applicable. It should also identify how the implementing partner will use new knowledge and learning to make adjustments during implementation and include a description of how knowledge will be captured and shared at activity closeout.

USAID encourages implementing partners to regularly reflect on progress. These opportunities may take the form of after-action reviews or be incorporated into existing processes, such as work planning or quarterly reporting. Reflection opportunities may focus on challenges and successes in implementation, changes in the operating environment or context that could affect the activity or the related project, opportunities to collaborate, or other relevant topics. The Activity MEL Plan may include information on the type and frequency of reflection opportunities and who will be involved. If USAID intends to have the implementing partner contribute to or participate in OU-sponsored learning activities, such as portfolio reviews or stocktaking events, that information may be included in the Activity MEL Plan as well.

As appropriate, this section may include information on strategic collaboration. USAID may encourage or require (through language in awards) that the implementing partner collaborate with other activities or with particular stakeholders. Collaboration may include, for example, joint work planning, regular partner meetings that facilitate knowledge sharing, or working groups organized along geographic or technical lines. The implementing partner may include information on collaboration with local partners and listening to local voices, in support of the partner country's development efforts.

RESOURCES (RECOMMENDED)

A resources section should specify the budget allocated to monitoring, evaluation, and learning by listing the tasks, estimated costs, and proportion of the budget.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES (RECOMMENDED)

The Activity MEL Plan may include a section on general and individual roles and responsibilities related to the implementing partner's monitoring, evaluation and CLA tasks and approaches.

SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITY MEL PLAN TASKS (RECOMMENDED)

A schedule of recurring MEL tasks during the activity and the individuals who are responsible for them may be included. This may be a simple matrix outlining responsible parties and timing, or a more detailed narrative, including anticipated involvement from USAID. If multiple partners are implementing an activity (such as one prime partner with one or more sub-awardees), this section should identify each partner's role and responsibility in MEL tasks.

RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHER PLANS

DATA MANAGEMENT PLANS

Data Management Plans (DMPs) are tools that guide the identification of anticipated data assets and the outlining of tasks needed to manage these assets across a full data lifecycle. Per ADS 579.3.1, all activities that require an Activity MEL Plan also require implementing partners to create a DMP. The DMP may be developed and approved as a section of the Activity MEL Plan or as a separate plan. Similar to the Activity MEL Plan, OUs and Missions must put a DMP in place before major implementation actions begin and update it as necessary. For further guidance on Data Management Plans, see ADS 579.

QUALITY ASSURANCE SURVEILLANCE PLANS

A Quality Assurance Surveillance Plan (QASP) is a document that is used to ensure that a government contractor complies with the technical requirements in the contract relating to the quality of the services provided, the contract clauses about the inspection of services to be performed, and other quality controls incumbent on the contractor. A QASP is required for contracts that use performance-based acquisition methods, in particular, contracts based on a Performance Work Statement (PWS) or Statement of Objectives (SOO). For contracts that require both an Activity MEL Plan and a QASP, the QASP may be developed and approved as a section of the Activity MEL Plan or as a separate plan. In either case, USAID OUs should ensure coordination between information included in the Activity MEL Plan and QASP.