ADVANCING LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT (LLD) AND LOCALIZATION:
LEVERAGING MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING (MEL) PLATFORMS

How to use MEL platforms[1] to advance LLD, localization, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) goals

The New Partnerships Initiative (NPI) works to diversify USAID's partner base while enhancing local leadership, capacity, and accountability—objectives that align with the Administrator's priorities to advance localization and promote DEIA in programming. MEL platforms—which are regularly established by Missions and Washington, DC Operating Units, to support MEL functions—can be used to support LLD, localization, and DEIA goals. MEL platforms can elevate local participation in routine activities such as evaluations, or they can perform research and assessment services in support of localization, such as partner landscapes. How platforms do their work is also important—for example, intentionally working with local experts and local organizations.

This guide supplements the USAID Discussion Notes on Designing and Managing MEL Platforms by offering suggestions to USAID staff on how to design MEL platforms, shape MEL assignments, and leverage the platform's capacity for LLD and localization.

	①	**②**	**③**
WHAT?	**DESIGN locally led MEL platforms and assignments.[2]**	**SHAPE MEL assignments to advance LLD, localization, and DEIA priorities.**	**LEVERAGE MEL platforms to strengthen the localization strategy of your Mission or Operating Unit (M/OU).**
HOW?	Apply the LLD spectrum to the overall design of a platform and its assignment-level decision-making.	Incorporate local and marginalized voices into assignments such as evaluations and third-party monitoring.	Assign specific localization support work to the platform, such as partner landscape analyses, facilitation of co-creations, and capacity strengthening opportunities for nontraditional partners.

1   A "MEL platform" is an institutional support mechanism established by a Mission (or in Washington, DC) to support MEL functions (i.e., practices, processes, and requirements). MEL functions encompass the development and use of tools and practices for monitoring (including data management), evaluation (including other studies or analyses), collaborating, learning, and adapting.

2   An "assignment" refers to a specific scope of work assigned to the MEL platform by a Contracting Officer's Representative; for example, an evaluation, third-party monitoring of an activity, or the facilitation of an event.

A 2017 USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning study found that "platforms can help overcome constraints by providing sustained and dedicated MEL expertise. … As a Mission-based institutional support contract, typically for three to five years, platform staff often become deeply familiar with the Mission's strategy, context, sectors, and staff. They fill time-demanding tasks to allow USAID staff to do more critical analysis and may improve the ability to carry out MEL tasks."[3] Furthermore, the 2022 NPI Action Plan Summary Report notes that USAID staff have multiple competing priorities, and the additional effort required to develop new partnerships, including with local organizations, is a constraint to localization. MEL platforms are well positioned to alleviate this constraint and facilitate Mission localization strategies.

MEL platforms often work with Missions long-term and can offer significant workforce and technical expertise—serving as force multipliers for localization and inclusive development efforts.

MEL platforms can identify gaps and needs and give voice to local partners.

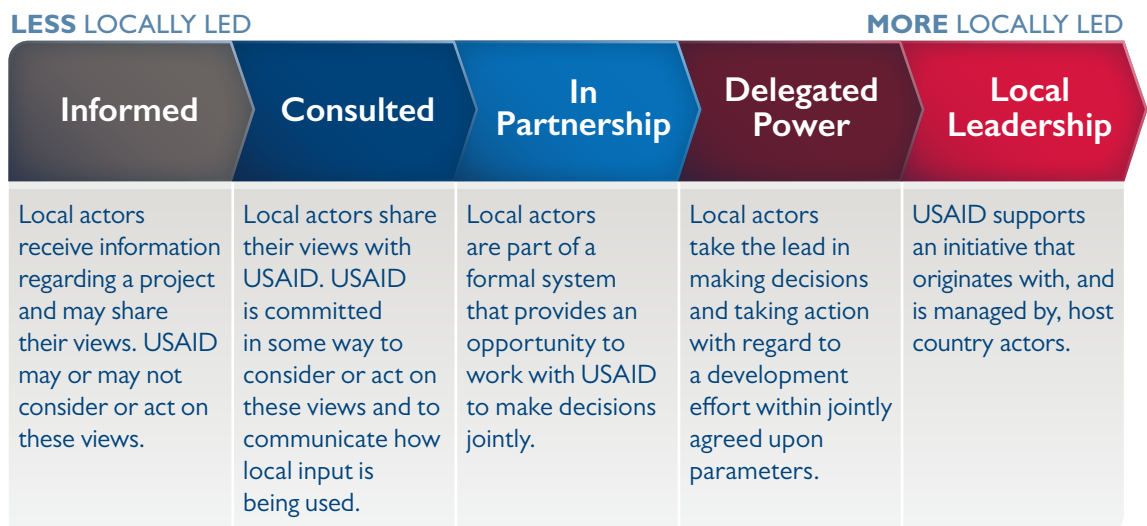MEL platforms can provide technical assistance to support high-quality data and reporting.

MEL platform staff are skilled researchers who collect information from local populations, local partners, or marginalized groups with a sense of neutrality that comes from being a third party.

MEL platforms have access to a variety of technical experts, which can relieve pressure on Mission staff.

What do we mean by locally led?

LLD refers to the **range of ways** in which USAID, its partners, and communities can work together to shift agenda-setting and decision-making power into the hands of local actors. This is a visual representation of the LLD spectrum.

LESS LOCALLY LED

MORE LOCALLY LED

Informed	Consulted	In Partnership	Delegated Power	Local Leadership
Local actors receive information regarding a project and may share their views. USAID may or may not consider or act on these views.	Local actors share their views with USAID. USAID is committed in some way to consider or act on these views and to communicate how local input is being used.	Local actors are part of a formal system that provides an opportunity to work with USAID to make decisions jointly.	Local actors take the lead in making decisions and taking action with regard to a development effort within jointly agreed upon parameters.	USAID supports an initiative that originates with, and is managed by, host country actors.

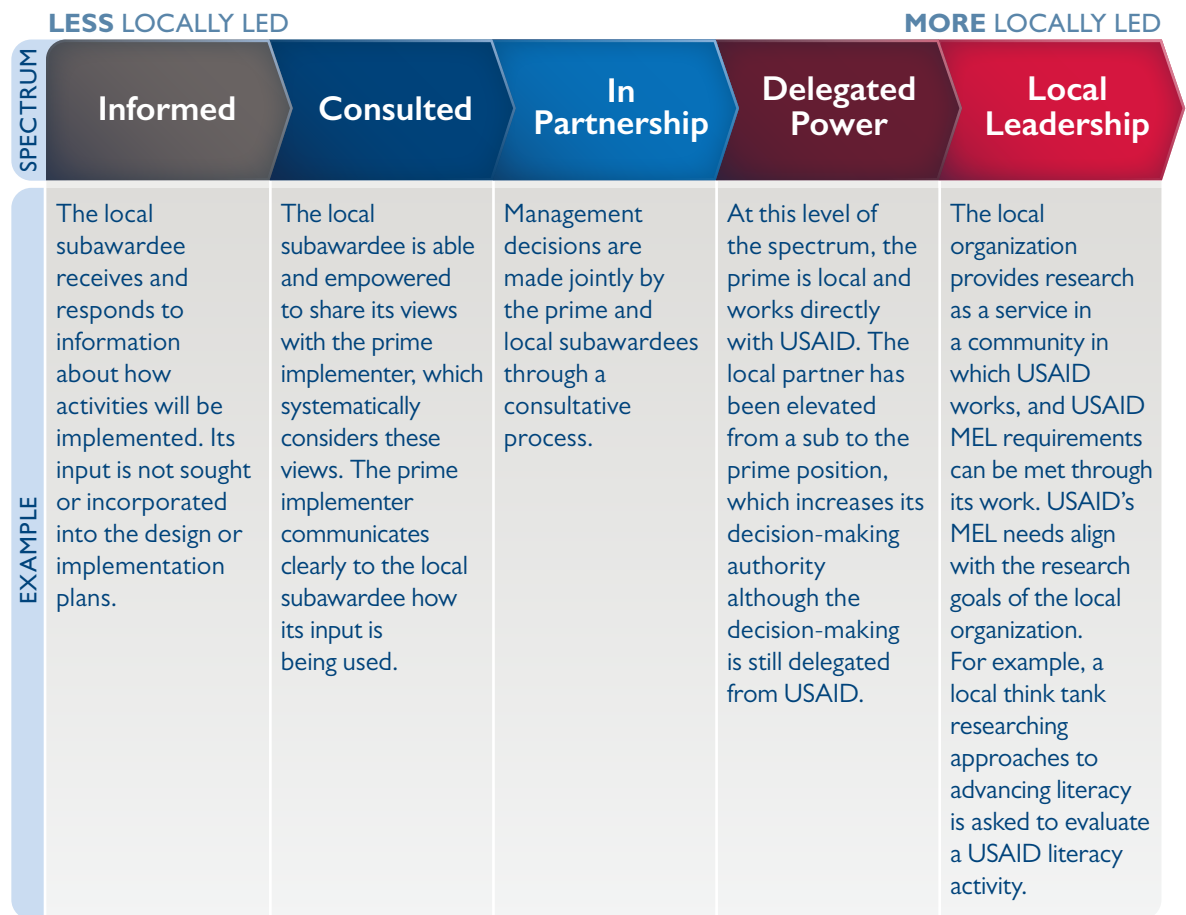3 See the Mission-Based MEL Platforms Assessment Report.

1 **Designing** Locally Led MEL Platforms and Assignments

The LLD spectrum is a useful tool to help M/OUs consider the **range of structures** their MEL platforms (or mechanisms) can take. These are some examples of how to apply the LLD spectrum to award structures and assignments. Note that in all cases where it is not specified, the prime partner is assumed to be non-local (given that if they were local, the platform or activity[4] would already be locally led).

Local Leadership within MEL Platforms

When applying the LLD spectrum to the implementing MEL platform structure, consider, for example, whether the prime partner or any subawardees are local organizations and to what degree local organizations are driving the technical work.

	LESS LOCALLY LED				**MORE** LOCALLY LED
SPECTRUM	**Informed**	**Consulted**	**In Partnership**	**Delegated Power**	**Local Leadership**
EXAMPLE	The local subawardee receives and responds to information about how activities will be implemented. Its input is not sought or incorporated into the design or implementation plans.	The local subawardee is able and empowered to share its views with the prime implementer, which systematically considers these views. The prime implementer communicates clearly to the local subawardee how its input is being used.	Management decisions are made jointly by the prime and local subawardees through a consultative process.	At this level of the spectrum, the prime is local and works directly with USAID. The local partner has been elevated from a sub to the prime position, which increases its decision-making authority although the decision-making is still delegated from USAID.	The local organization provides research as a service in a community in which USAID works, and USAID MEL requirements can be met through its work. USAID's MEL needs align with the research goals of the local organization. For example, a local think tank researching approaches to advancing literacy is asked to evaluate a USAID literacy activity.

On the "Informed" end of the spectrum, for example, a non-local prime may make a subaward to a local organization and completely direct its work by designing the local organization's scope, methodology, and budget. The local partner's knowledge and experience are not incorporated in any way. In this instance, the MEL mechanism falls on the low end of the LLD spectrum because a local subawardee is not doing the technical work. Furthermore, a MEL platform with no local subawardee, even if local experts are hired by a non-local prime, would not be considered as utilizing local organizational capacity.

---

4 A USAID "activity" is an implementing mechanism that carries out an intervention or set of interventions to advance identified development result(s). Examples include contracts or cooperative agreements with international or local organizations, direct agreements with partner governments, and partial credit guarantees that mobilize private capital. Activities also include buy-ins under global agreements (such as field-support agreements) that generate programmatic results in a given country or region. In Missions, activities should contribute to development result(s) set forth in the Mission's Country Development Cooperation Strategy.

In line with the Agency's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, NPI suggests **requiring** local organizations to be a part of MEL platforms in solicitations. In addition, by providing capacity strengthening opportunities in the design of the platform, USAID enhances those organizations' ability to implement technical work and understand the Agency's systems during the course of the activity.[5] Some M/OUs are already implementing MEL platforms in this way, such as USAID/Rwanda's Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting Activity, which explicitly aims to build the capacity of Rwandan MEL practitioners and firms. A partner landscape (see Section 3) can assist Missions to identify local organizations that are well positioned to become USAID partners.

Tip: Quality assurance takes time. If a local organization provides MEL services to the Mission, a non-local organization can provide quality assurance (of technical aspects and to meet USIAD expectations) before submission to the Mission. Allow ample time for the latter's role. While outsourced quality assurance takes time, it is a worthwhile investment in building local MEL capacity.

Tip: Capacity strengthening also takes time and can be costly: Allocate funds accordingly.

Suggested Indicators

MEL platforms with a non-local prime partner might use the following indicators to measure progress toward strengthening local organizational capacity of MEL actors.

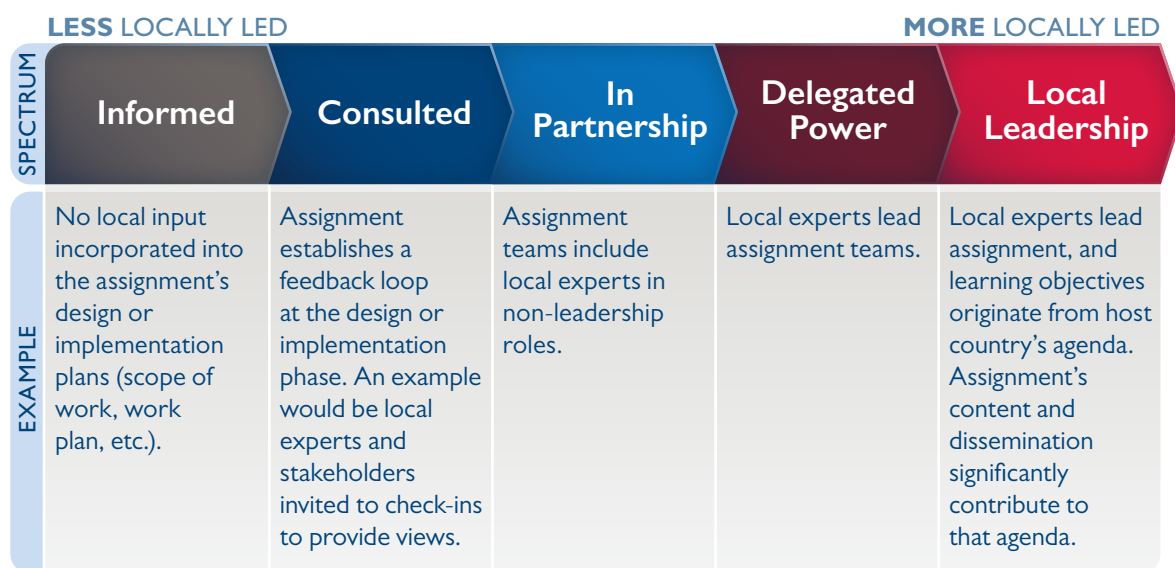| #	%	$
Number of subaward partners that receive direct USAID awards	**Percent of U.S. Government-assisted organizations with improved performance (CBLD-9)**	**Value ($) of non-donor resources mobilized for local development priorities (CBLD-10)**
This indicator tracks the number of organizations that received capacity strengthening services that won direct awards with USAID or subawards to a USAID award.	A standard indicator, CBLD-9 tracks whether an activity is improving the performance of organizations linked to intentional capacity strengthening efforts. This could include organizations that are subawardees under MEL platforms.	At the "Local Leadership" end of the spectrum, implementing partners may mobilize their own resources alongside the U.S. Government's since the work aligns with their mission and research goals. Resources under this standard indicator can include cash and in-kind contributions such as volunteer hours or intellectual property.

---

5 See the Global Health Bureau's Local Capacity Strengthening Implementation Guide for different models of capacity strengthening.

Using Local Experts in MEL Assignments

According to NPI best practices, MEL platforms that do not have a local prime partner and cannot use local organizations for technical subawards should utilize local experts to fill long- and short-term roles to the greatest extent possible. Below are some examples of how to apply the LLD spectrum to building short-term assignment teams that are more locally led.

LESS LOCALLY LED   **MORE** LOCALLY LED

SPECTRUM	Informed	Consulted	In Partnership	Delegated Power	Local Leadership
EXAMPLE	No local input incorporated into the assignment's design or implementation plans (scope of work, work plan, etc.).	Assignment establishes a feedback loop at the design or implementation phase. An example would be local experts and stakeholders invited to check-ins to provide views.	Assignment teams include local experts in non-leadership roles.	Local experts lead assignment teams.	Local experts lead assignment, and learning objectives originate from host country's agenda. Assignment's content and dissemination significantly contribute to that agenda.

Suggested Indicator

The following indicator can incentivize the use of local experts by MEL platforms.

Average LLD spectrum score of platform assignments

The prime implementer scores every assignment it completes on a scale of 1 to 5, corresponding to the five LLD spectrum categories. The scores are weighted by the dollar value of the assignment as shown in the chart below.

MEL Assignment	LLD Score	Dollar Value	Dollar value as a proportion of total value of MEL assignments = Weight Value	Score x Weight Value = Weighted LLD Score
Facilitation of a co-creation event	4	$10,000	10,000/300,000 = 3.33%	4 x 3.33% = 0.13
Third-party monitoring of an activity	3	$50,000	50,000/300,000 = 16.67%	3 x 16.67% = 0.5
Activity evaluation	2	$240,000	240,000/300,000 = 80.00%	2 x 80% = 1.6
Average: 3	Total: $300,000		Total Weight: 100%	Average weighted LLD score (sum of the above): **2.23**

Language in MEL Platforms

Language has been identified as a significant barrier to partnering with local organizations and to local leadership of USAID-funded programs. As part of USAID's commitment to localization, the Agency seeks to open doors for partners that cannot readily access a high level of English-language proficiency. Although some Missions publish courtesy copies of solicitations and accept concept notes in local languages, there remains a barrier at the end of the USAID application process: Potential partners are required under 2 CFR 200.111 to submit full applications in English. Allowing for translation and interpretation costs in the procurement and implementation of MEL support services can facilitate partnership with local organizations. The following are examples of ways to enable local organizations to engage fully in the process.

FOR PROCUREMENT:

- Translate Requests for Proposals or other solicitation materials into local languages;

- Accept concept notes in other languages and have them translated into English or scored by Foreign Service Nationals or other Mission staff proficient in that language; and

- Utilize interpretation services for co-creation sessions.

FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

- Permit primary analysis in another language and then translate final reports and presentations into English. This allows deliverable producers without English skills to participate.

2 Shaping MEL Assignments to Advance LLD, Localization, and DEIA Priorities

Just as leveraging local organizations and experts can make MEL platforms and assignments more locally led, each MEL assignment within a platform—such as an evaluation, for example—can advance LLD, localization, and DEIA goals. The following are some examples.

Evaluations

Participatory Evaluation

In a participatory evaluation, the evaluation team partners with stakeholders to shape the research process, from planning to data collection and analysis dissemination, and the utilization of findings. Participatory evaluation is a way to practice LLD, regardless of whether local organizations and experts are utilized in the intervention. See Guidance Note: Participatory Evaluation for guidance on planning, commissioning, and carrying out evaluations in more locally led ways.

DEIA, LLD, and Partnering Oriented Evaluation Questions

USAID uses evaluations to learn from experience and provide accountability to stakeholders. NPI suggests including questions about Agency priorities within activity-based midterm and final evaluations. The Agency Learning Agenda includes three noteworthy questions that may offer guidance when developing evaluation questions for an activity.

? **Question 7 (on DEIA) asks,**

> "How can USAID programs and operations mitigate harm to underrepresented and marginalized populations, while promoting equity and inclusion?"

? **Question 8 (on LLD) asks,**

> "How can USAID more equitably engage local knowledge, assets, and practices and align programming with local priorities and metrics for success?"

? **Question 9 (on partnering for sustainability) asks,**

> "How can USAID's partnerships with the private sector; local, faith, and nontraditional partners; and other donors contribute to sustainable development objectives?"

Consider how the Agency Learning Agenda questions align with themes in the scope that is being developed. These questions are generally not included as evaluation questions but rather are a factor that can shape evaluation questions. Share any evaluation evidence around these questions with the Agency Learning Agenda team through this form and with NPI through NPITechnicalSupport@usaid.gov.

Third-party monitoring (TPM)

Overview

TPM is a versatile tool. Beyond basic observations for verification of implementation, TPM can be used to collect feedback from a variety of stakeholders. This feedback can then be used to support Agency localization, LLD, and DEIA goals as well as broader development impacts. For example, TPM may answer the following questions.

LLD	DEIA

• How do (local) constituents perceive the quality of the intervention?
  » How satisfied are you with [intervention]?
  » Would you recommend this [intervention] to a friend?
  » Will this [intervention] improve your life?
  » Will you benefit from [intervention] without further assistance?
  » And for each question: Why or why not? What can be improved?
• Do interventions and methods of implementation align with local priorities?
	• Do marginalized groups and underserved communities have fair access to the intervention?
	• Does the activity ensure that the needs, involvement, and priorities of marginalized and underserved groups and persons in vulnerable situations are considered?
	• Did the intervention address equity and the specific and proportionate needs of certain persons or populations to attain fair and just treatment and outcomes?

Localization	Development Results
• How can local subpartners' responsibility and decision-making authority increase? • Is capacity strengthening achieving necessary results? • What progress was made on special award conditions?	• Are the expected outcomes and impacts likely? Why?

TPM can also provide assurances to Missions as they take on increased risk, such as investing more in new and local partners, by providing an alternative to site visits that are more regular and less burdensome to Mission staff. For additional guidance see Learning Lab's Third-Party Monitoring in Non-Permissive Environments.

Accountability and Feedback Planning

TPM can also be used to implement activity-level accountability and feedback plans (AFPs). AFP is an NPI standard practice that builds upon and goes beyond the Agency's requirement for beneficiary feedback plans.[6] They can be used to track relevant DEIA or localization issues. For example, an AFP may solicit feedback from a marginalized group to see if members can fairly access an intervention. Another AFP may ask subawardees if they are on track to take on prime awardee responsibilities or how they think investments in capacity strengthening are working (in the case of a transition award). USAID often has limited visibility on subaward performance; through TPM and AFPs, the Agency can better understand what is happening at this level and ensure sub-partners are fully utilized and receive the capacity strengthening they need in alignment with their priorities.

The MEL platform may also use its expertise to help implementing partners design AFPs.

TIPS

- MEL platforms can serve as a bridge—in coordination with the prime partner—between USAID and sub-partners.

- Consider how you can use TPM services to achieve your Mission's locally led programs' targets.

- TPM assignments range in complexity and cost; for example, from a checklist to multiple interviews per site visit. Fund the assignment sufficiently to collect an adequate depth of data on the desired range of topics.

- Data collection should balance the use of close-ended and open-ended questions to quantify trends and provide qualitative insights.

Developmental Evaluation

Developmental evaluators are embedded within an activity implementing partner team to drive learning and adapt activity design to better meet outcomes throughout implementation.[7] However, developmental evaluators remain independent from implementing staff. They provide a third-party perspective to support an adaptive management process. Developmental evaluations offer flexibility and are able to adjust learning objectives and research methods based on activity needs. They can be particularly helpful in guiding complex programming in challenging, multifaceted environments—such as when engaging numerous new partners or trying new, locally centered implementation approaches. They allow programs to correct course during short implementation periods and offer an understanding of results as they occur.

---

6   See the Agency's Draft Guidance on Collecting Beneficiary Feedback.
7   See the Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity for examples and resources.

3 Leveraging MEL Platforms to Implement Your M/OU's Localization Strategy

Missions and Operating Units can use MEL platform expertise and capacities in research, assessment, and facilitation to provide MEL capacity strengthening and meet Mission localization learning needs. These are some examples.

Partner Landscape Analyses and Assessments

Partner landscapes help M/OUs identify organizations in a particular geography and with relevant technical or sector expertise. Through a partner landscape assessment, a MEL platform can recommend which organizations, based on their experience and organizational capacity, are most ready to partner with USAID.

Co-creation and Stakeholder Consultations

MEL platforms may be able to provide professional, third-party facilitation for co-creation and stakeholder consultations. In addition to facilitating an event, the MEL platform can help with desk research and reporting on results and recommendations.

Tip: A MEL platform can serve as a bridge between USAID and its partners and constituents. As a third party, it can often draw out insights the Agency might not obtain when speaking directly with local actors.

MEL Capacity Strengthening

Missions can leverage MEL platform resources and expertise to strengthen the capacity of nontraditional partners. It is important to remember that capacity strengthening may be done in many ways other than training and should be designed to meet the needs and learning styles of the target organization and its staff.

Training

MEL platforms have the expertise to design and deliver training on MEL concepts that could help new and potential partners understand the Agency's requirements. Such training could be delivered individually or to multiple organizations at once. Topics may include developing an activity MEL plan; selecting indicators; data collection and reporting; data quality assessment (DQA); or data security and protection of privacy.

During the period of a MEL award, some countries in which USAID operates may have populations with the potential, through internships or professional development programs, to become MEL professionals. With a multi-year award, it is possible to focus on building cadres of these MEL professionals that local partners can then tap for jobs or consultancies.

MEL Mentoring

A more involved capacity strengthening approach may include some form of mentoring for nontraditional partners' MEL teams. This involves making available expertise for periodic MEL support. For example, the platform could be used to recruit and retain personnel to provide embedded, short-term technical assistance to partner MEL teams. Such personnel could work in an advisory capacity to strengthen—not supplant—the organization's MEL structure.

DQAs and Follow-up Support

MEL platforms are often tasked with completing Mission DQA requirements. However, DQAs are often useful beyond the required Agency schedule and may be a logical entry into MEL capacity strengthening for nontraditional partners. In-depth inquiry into indicators and the partner's related data collection and quality assurance systems can identify weaknesses that can be addressed through MEL training, process improvement, or mentoring.

Working with NPI

The NPI team in Washington, DC is available to provide a wide range of technical support for localization efforts through virtual or in-person temporary duty assignments. Reach out to us at NPITechnicalSupport@usaid.gov to talk about applying these concepts at your Mission or Operating Unit. We would also like to hear from you and your experiences using MEL platforms for localization, LLD, or advancing inclusive development.

ACTIVITY DESIGN

- Design, award/ subaward, and implementation
- Refinement periods

SOLICITATION DESIGN

- Acquisition
- Assistance
- Technical Evaluation Committee (TEC) support
- Co-creation planning

IDENTIFICATION/ ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL ACTORS

- Customized engagement (strategies, tools, and resources for support)
- Partner landscapes

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING TO MEET LOCALIZATION TARGETS

- Facilitation (when appropriate)
- Implementation of new capacity strengthening policy (either directly or through the central support mechanism for capacity strengthening and compliance)

MEL

- Capacity strengthening
- Evaluation design and management
- Third-party monitoring
- Accountability and feedback planning
- Non-permissive environments