



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

USAID MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING (MEL) TRAINING MODULE

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SLIDE 1: Welcome to MEL

Welcome to the “Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning” module of USAID’s training series.

SLIDE 2: Learning Objectives

This module is for organizations with limited or no experience working with USAID. It may also be valuable for organizations that want to strengthen their monitoring, evaluation, and learning, or MEL, practices.

You will learn:

- Ways your MEL system informs your work and supports USAID objectives.
- Key elements and sections to include in your MEL plan.
- Best practices to track progress and assess outcomes.

You will also learn how MEL relates to effective activity management.

SLIDE 3: Why MEL Is Important

When USAID partners receive an award, they are required to prepare an MEL plan. Strong MEL facilitates learning by:

- Supporting USAID’s Program Cycle;
- Supporting effective decision-making; and
- Helping you adapt and improve your activity.
- It also helps you to:
 - Ensure compliance with USAID policies and federal regulations;
 - Promote transparency and accountability; and
 - Provide a basis for sound documentation and reporting.

Let’s review the purposes of an effective MEL system in more detail.

SLIDE 4: Supports USAID's Program Cycle

You will follow the same process that the Agency uses for planning, design, and evaluation.

- In the strategic planning phase, USAID develops overall programming goals and objectives for a country and region.
- During project design and implementation, Missions create MEL plans to monitor progress in their regions and countries.
- Information from reports during monitoring and evaluation gives USAID feedback on challenges and successes.

When the Agency again enters the country and regional strategic planning phase, MEL data informs more effective programming decisions and adjustments.

SLIDE 5: Enables Decision-Making

You should gather and analyze data about your activity to assess what works well and what needs to change.

- During monitoring stages, gather the data relevant to tracking progress. This is typically an ongoing process.
- When evaluating, analyze information to determine how well your activity has met objectives.
- Learning from this data will help you understand what you need to make adjustments.

SLIDE 6: Helps You Improve Your Activity

Through the MEL process, you will identify adjustments and solutions to challenges throughout the life cycle of your award.

As you implement your activity and start assessing results, periodically revisit decisions you made when setting up your MEL system. You might find ways to streamline the planning process or more efficiently collect, analyze, and use data.

Your programming or operating environment may change over time, and these changes may affect your work. If that happens, be sure to adjust your MEL reporting processes and to adapt your programming.

SLIDE 7: Ensures Compliance

Being compliant means that implementation of your activity follows standard practices and USAID policies. This is key for delivering high-quality and appropriate interventions. Quality data is also essential, and we will discuss this later.

With a strong MEL plan, you can deliver evidence that your activity is fulfilling key requirements and meeting goals.

SLIDE 8: Promotes Accountability

Accountability is about operating responsibly and transparently.

Sound data management and reporting practices support transparency with accurate information and evidence. Your MEL system's detail and data can confirm that you are following proper practices and using resources as intended.

Your MEL plan helps you establish effective procedures for collecting and responding to feedback. It contributes to accountability within your team, your funder, U.S. taxpayers, as well as participants, stakeholders, and anyone intended to benefit from the activity.

As a USAID partner, you committed to maintaining a robust MEL system for the duration of your programming with the Agency. USAID provides guidance and policy around managing Agency-funded activities in Chapter 201 of its Automated Directives System (ADS) at USAID.gov.

Does your MEL system have everything you need?

SLIDE 9: Supports Progress Reporting

Good MEL practices help you generate, analyze, and use information as you manage your activity. Data is also used to document results in progress reports to USAID.

Work with your Agreement Officer's Representatives (AORs) or Contracting Officer's Representatives (CORs) to determine the information you will capture in your MEL system. They will also advise on how to share activity data beyond USAID reports.

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SLIDE 10: MEL Requirements

Now that we understand the importance of MEL, let's look at a framework and key elements.

SLIDE 11: Review Expectations

When USAID partners receive an award, they need to develop an MEL plan within 90 days. You might also have explained how you will execute this plan in the concept note you submitted for funding.

The award solicitation will state requirements for the MEL plan. Your AOR or COR will review your plan and provide guidance on how to use it for planning and reporting.

You need an approved MEL plan in place before you begin to implement any major aspects of your activity. Keep your MEL plan updated and relevant as programming needs or operating conditions change.

SLIDE 12: Activity Management Cycle

Strong activity management focuses on monitoring progress, making decisions, and learning how to improve.

Remember that information from your activity will also help USAID improve its own planning and program design. As you design your MEL system, consider what data will inform different aspects of planning and implementing your activity.

- Step one is to conduct an initial needs assessment to outline how your organization will identify and address development challenges. Consider USAID's goals and stakeholder or beneficiary needs in the region or country.
- In step two, decide what information you want to monitor and report. USAID will tell you what it seeks in progress reports.
- Step three: Review your data, document success, and learn what works. Your AOR or COR will help you evaluate progress or advise you on how an external evaluation might support your learning efforts.
- The last step of the cycle is to adjust your approach to make sure you are ready to respond to new opportunities.

SLIDE 13: Plan for How Your Activity Will Make a Difference

Start the design of your proposed activity by developing a theory of change. This explains the difference you anticipate.

Illustrate your theory of change with a logic model, or “logframe.” This is a visual depiction of how your overall goal and related objectives, activities, and results are linked.

Answer these questions to help you determine how to design and manage your MEL system:

- What type of change do you want to achieve? Are there any partnerships that could be valuable?
- What kinds of data will help you determine effectiveness? Where and how will you gather that information?
- How will you document your results? How often will you measure indicators of impacts?
- How will your team use what it learns to improve? Can team-building and feedback sessions help incorporate new ideas?

SLIDE 14: Baselines and Assessments

To ensure program quality, follow standard MEL practices. Develop indicator baselines, using performance indicator reference sheets and conducting regular data quality assessments.

Develop a reference sheet for each indicator, explaining why it is important and when and how you will collect information on it. These will be submitted to USAID as an annex to your MEL plan.

As you implement your activity, conduct regular data quality assessments to make sure data is clean and accurate. We will discuss this further in the coming slides.

SLIDE 15: Your MEL Plan: What to Include

There are several key elements to a comprehensive MEL plan:

- First, introduce your activity and goals—what you plan to do and why.
- Second, explain how you will collect, monitor, and maintain data. Describe expected results and how you will track progress.
- Third, review how you will evaluate the information you collect. Explain how you will analyze data and report on the overall success and contributions of your activity.

- Last, describe any information or knowledge gaps, how you plan to keep your interventions or approaches relevant, and how you will work with your team to apply what you learn. Remember to highlight the staff and resources you will need.

Find a guide to content in USAID's [How-To Note: Activity MEL Plan](#) online.

SLIDE 16: Key Elements: Monitoring

The MEL plan should describe expected results and the indicator you will use to track your progress.

Two types of indicators help you assess success:

- Output indicators measure short-term and direct results. Outputs are things you usually have control over. An example would be the number of farmers trained in production practices. This is a change that can be directly attributed to your work.
- Outcome indicators track longer-term, more gradual changes. Outcomes are shifts or observed differences which you may influence but do not necessarily have direct control over. An example would be the number of farmers using improved production practices.

MEL plans should include a tracking table that describes each indicator and how you will collect related data. Evaluations of your activity will highlight the outcomes of your work.

SLIDE 17: “SMART” Indicators

The indicators you choose to track should be tied to your objectives and overall goals. To better understand your progress, use indicators that are SMART.

These are ideal indicator characteristics:

- A specific indicator is a concrete change, event, or action.
- A measurable indicator quantifies the level of effort, participation, or change.
- An appropriate indicator measures something your activity can affect.
- A realistic indicator tracks change that can be achieved with available resources.
- A time-bound indicator outlines the time frame in which an objective will be achieved.

So: specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic, and time-bound. SMART.

Use USAID's Learning Lab [Indicator Criteria Checklist](#) to establish your plan indicators.

SLIDE 18: Types of Data

Your MEL system will generate two types of data.

- Quantitative data is in the form of numbers, such as workshop participation rates or number of households reached.
- Qualitative data is in the form of words and pictures. It conveys contextual details about selected approaches, and includes feedback such as stakeholder interviews and staff insights about activities.

When handling data tied to personal identifiable information, ensure confidentiality and protect people through secure data storage and access controls.

SLIDE 19: Ensure Data Quality

Data you collect for each indicator needs to be entered carefully into your system so that you can trust it for analysis and use.

Use the following criteria for data quality:

- **Validity:** Data should clearly and adequately represent the intended result.
- **Integrity:** There should be safeguards to minimize the risk of errors in data entry.
- **Precision:** Data should have a sufficient level of detail to inform decision-making.
- **Reliability:** It should reflect consistent collection and analysis methods over time.
- **Timeliness:** Data should be current and available often enough to inform decisions.

In your MEL plan, describe steps to ensure your data is of good quality. Guidance from your AOR or COR will determine how you meet requirements for a data quality assessment.

SLIDE 20: Key Elements: Evaluation

Evaluation is a comprehensive assessment of performance to determine the overall impact of your activity. Your AOR or COR will decide, or will tell you, if an evaluation is needed and how to conduct it.

Evaluations serve three primary purposes:

- First, they help to ensure accountability. USAID and other stakeholders need to determine whether you are using the funds as intended and achieving results.
- Second, they provide information for long-term planning and decision-making. They support learning with understanding about which interventions are effective in which contexts.

- Third, they include perspectives of those benefiting from your activity. Including communities and stakeholders in evaluations helps ensure they are informed about how the results of your program are documented.

USAID-funded evaluations—whether conducted internally by an organization’s staff or with an external evaluation team—may be posted to the Agency’s Development Experience Clearinghouse, or DEC. This is an online library of activity reports and other resources. Ask your AOR or COR whether to submit information to the DEC.

Learn more about evaluations with the [Evaluation Toolkit](#) at the USAID Learning Lab.

SLIDE 21: Key Elements: Learning

USAID partners use the collaborating, learning, and adapting, or CLA, approach to take advantage of lessons learned. CLA encourages your staff to:

- Seek insights and feedback from stakeholders
- Assess data and measurable results; and
- Review adjustments as the activity is implemented.

Discuss implementation risks, and whether or how your assumptions about what would work and what would be challenging are proving true. This is also an opportunity to review the effectiveness of your approaches, ask questions about what is important to learn, and gather data to help fill information gaps.

By sharing issues and ideas among the team, you can adopt successful approaches throughout the activity.

Information may also be shared with partners and activities that are developing, implementing, and evaluating similar efforts.

SLIDE 22: Collaborate, Learn, and Adapt (CLA)

Schedule time to conduct “pause and reflect” sessions with your activity team to discuss achievements and status of results. “Pause and reflect” means dedicating time at regular intervals—monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually—to discuss quality of program activities, review trends in data, map out opportunities for working with other partners, and organize messages about how work is progressing and making a difference.

This is an opportunity to intentionally acknowledge best practices and plan for performance improvements.

Ask these types of questions:

- Which partnerships or relationships are essential to implementation?
- What are you observing and documenting that drives activity success or failure? and
- Where can you adjust to amplify impact?

SLIDE 23: Incorporating CLA

Improve the effectiveness of your activity by incorporating key aspects of CLA:

- First, consider how you will collaborate with the right partners at the right time to promote an informed and integrated approach.
- Second, plan to learn by asking thoughtful questions that guide decision-making.
- Next, prepare to adapt your activity to improve its effectiveness.
- Finally, enable success by creating a culture and team spirit that support ongoing efforts to collaborate, learn, and adapt.

Work with your AOR or COR to integrate CLA into your program.

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SLIDE 24: MEL Process

Now that you understand the essential elements of an effective MEL system, here is some information about the process and staff necessary to create and manage it.

SLIDE 25: Personnel

Let's consider the people necessary to successfully implement your MEL system.

- An MEL manager oversees the approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning for your award and supervises your MEL team. This person can also be the bridge between your organization and other USAID partners when joint monitoring is needed. The MEL manager should have a range of management experience and a higher level of education or training.
- Designate someone to coordinate data collection and analysis and make sure they happen on time. This person should have training and experience working with data and information systems.
- The same person will ensure that data about activity interventions and participants are properly organized, entered into the appropriate database, and stored securely. They should have strong administrative and computer skills.

- You will also need someone on your team to facilitate CLA practices to strengthen the way your activity uses its data. They will need to focus on impact and encourage learning relationships.

The way you structure and staff MEL-related roles depends on your organization's personnel plan and the USAID award. In some cases, the Agency may require certain positions to be included in your personnel plan and budget.

SLIDE 26: Time Management

With the right staff in place, start assigning responsibilities for MEL system outputs as you create progress reports. Make sure your entire team is clear about roles and deadlines.

- Ensure enough time is set aside to assess quantitative and qualitative data. Remember, some types of information, like qualitative data, can take more time to prepare and analyze.
- Build in time to review what you learned to date. If you are a sub-contractor on a USAID award, schedule time to incorporate partner feedback into your report.
- Involve the communications team early to create a coherent report from different aspects of your program. They need time to draft, edit, and format the report to comply with USAID requirements.
- Last, allow time for your organization leadership to approve the report and related documents before they go to USAID.

SLIDE 27: Tell Your Activity's Story

Think for a moment about how you became interested in partnering with USAID. What story will you tell through your activity? How will MEL help you tell it?

Successful program stories are important tools in communications with donors, stakeholders, and the public.

A strong MEL system helps. Information you collect to track achievements offers evidence and examples.

Data will help you produce reports that convey your activity's impact to beneficiaries, host communities, local and national governments, and USAID.

Talk to your AOR or COR about how to provide information and stories about your activity to promote efforts of your organization and the Agency.

SLIDE 28: Key Points

Here are some of the key points we covered in this module:

- Develop “smart” MEL indicators that measure the direct results of your work.
- Confirm the quality of your data so that decisions and progress reports are based on accurate information.
- Conduct strategically timed evaluations to ensure accountability and promote learning.
- When preparing reports, give your team time to collect and analyze data and consider lessons learned.
- Use the CLA approach to continue to adapt your activity so it remains relevant and effective.

We encourage you to download our quick reference guide to refer back to the information you learned.

SLIDE 29: Additional Resources

We covered a lot of information in this training module. Here is a list of resources, and you can find management guidance on other topics in our “How to Work with USAID” training series.

SLIDE 30: Thank You

Thank you for participating. We hope that you learned some helpful information about this important topic and that it will support the development and management of your activity with a solid foundation for monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

SLIDE 31: Acknowledgement

This module was produced by the United States Agency for International Development. The presentation team is made up of staff from USAID and the Partnerships Incubator.

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