



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

“MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING (MEL)” TRAINING MODULE

SLIDE 1: Welcome to MEL

Welcome to the “Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning” module of USAID’s training series. This module is for organizations with limited or no experience working with the U.S. Agency for International Development, but it will be valuable for *any* organization that needs to strengthen its monitoring, evaluation, and learning, or MEL, practices in its activities.

SLIDE 2: Learning Objectives

When USAID partners receive an award, they are required to prepare an activity MEL plan. This module will introduce you to the basic rules and principles to follow as you develop a MEL system that clearly demonstrates how you are implementing and improving your activity.

During this presentation, we will review how your MEL system informs your activities and supports USAID’s objectives.

- You will discover how MEL relates to effective activity management.
- You will come to understand the key elements and sections to include in your MEL plan.
- And, finally, you will learn how to develop best practices for a strong tracking process.

Please note that, at the end of the module, we will provide helpful links to relevant resources.

SLIDE 3: Why MEL Is Important

Strong MEL facilitates effective implementation by:

- Systematically collecting and analyzing information to support evidence-based decision-making; and
- Generating learning to inform the adaptation of an activity based on evidence.

It also helps you maintain accountability by:

- Ensuring compliance with USAID policies and federal regulations;
- Promoting transparency and accountability; and
- Providing a basis for sound documentation and reporting.

Let us review the purposes of an effective activity MEL system in more detail.

SLIDE 4: Supports Implementation & Decision-Making

USAID designs activities that support the Agency's strategic objectives in a given country or region.

Once an activity is awarded, the partner develops a MEL plan to assess progress toward the program's objectives.

An activity MEL plan includes proposals for monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

- Monitoring data helps USAID and its partners understand whether the activity is on track or adjustments are needed. In other words, monitoring informs your efforts to manage adaptively and promote accountability. For that reason, monitoring is an ongoing process.
- Evaluations answer key questions related to the implementation or outcomes of the activity.
- Learning means analyzing a variety of information (including evaluation findings and monitoring data) to inform possible adaptations needed to achieve programmatic objectives.

SLIDE 5: Facilitates Learning to Improve Activity

You will use the information from your MEL system to identify challenges and weaknesses and make adjustments to improve the implementation of your activity and, ultimately, its results.

As you implement your activity and start assessing results, periodically revisit decisions you made when setting up your MEL system. You might apply lessons learned to streamline processes or more efficiently collect, analyze, and use data and other information. You should also engage regional actors to better understand results from a local perspective.

Your programming or operating environment may change over time, and these changes may affect your activity implementation. As you learn more, be sure to adjust your MEL reporting processes and adapt your programming to enhance its effectiveness.

SLIDE 6: Ensures Compliance

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

With a strong MEL plan, you can deliver evidence that you are fulfilling key management requirements and meeting objectives.

SLIDE 7: Promotes Accountability

Accountability is about operating responsibly and transparently.

As a USAID partner, you committed to maintaining a robust MEL system for the duration of your programming with the Agency.

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

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

SLIDE 8: Supports Progress Reporting

Good MEL practices help you document results in progress reports to USAID.

Work with your Agreement Officer's Representative (or AOR) or Contracting Officer's Representative (or COR) to determine what information you should report. Your AOR or COR will also advise you on how to share activity data beyond USAID reports.

You can find additional details on the reporting process at USAID's "Preparing Progress Reports" module, which is listed on the "Resources" page at the end of this module.

DIVIDER SLIDE: MEL Requirements

Now that you understand the purposes of an effective MEL system, let us look at what is required.

SLIDE 10: Review Expectations

When partners receive an award, they need to complete an activity MEL plan in accordance with the terms of the award. Usually, you will need to develop your MEL plan within 90 days of signing a USAID

award agreement. If you submitted a proposed MEL plan with your concept note or proposal for funding, you may choose to further develop that.

The award solicitation will state requirements for your MEL plan. Your AOR or COR will review your plan and provide guidance on how to use it for planning, tracking, learning, and reporting. You will work with them to update the plan as programming needs or operating conditions change.

Note that you need an approved MEL plan in place before you implement any major aspects of your activity per the terms of your award.

SLIDE 11: Activity Management Cycle (GRAPHIC)

Strong activity management focuses on monitoring progress, decision-making, learning, and adapting implementation based on evidence to achieve better outcomes.

Remember that information from your activity will also help USAID improve its planning and program design process. The color wheel in this graphic indicates the partner's actions in the program cycle, while the gray steps outline the USAID Mission's corresponding actions.

As you design your MEL system, consider what performance data and other information will inform different aspects of planning and implementation.

- Step one is to conduct an initial needs assessment to outline how your organization will identify and address development challenges. Consider USAID's overall planning goals and needs in the country or region.
- In step two, as you design your proposed solutions, decide what information, or indicators, you want to monitor and report. USAID will tell you what it seeks in progress reports. Also, identify how you might fill any knowledge gaps and reflect on progress. Consider which stakeholders to collaborate with to help inform your activity's implementation.
- In step three, review your data, document successes and failures, and learn what works and what may need adjusting. Your AOR or COR will help you assess progress and may commission an external evaluation to support your learning efforts.
- The last step of the cycle is to adjust your approach based on your findings. This is an ongoing process. USAID may also use the information you report to adapt its policies and guidance to inform strategies for long-term results.

SLIDE 12: Your MEL Plan: What to Include

There are several key elements to a comprehensive MEL plan:

- First, explain your activity and goals—what you plan to do and why—in a summary.

- Second, explain how you will assess the information you collect. Detail how you will analyze data and measure the overall success of your activity. Build into your schedule time to review and discuss quarterly data as a team and decide on any adjustments that should be made. Consider collaborating with external stakeholders.
- Third, outline how you will collect, monitor, and maintain data and other information, including beneficiary feedback.
- Finally, describe how you will use this information to learn and adapt your programming. Consider what information you need but do not know right now and how you will ensure that your activity can adapt to unforeseen challenges and opportunities.

Find a guide to content in USAID’s “How-To Note:Activity MEL Plan,” a link to which is provided at the end of this module.

SLIDE 13: Base Your MEL Plan on Activity Design

Your MEL system will be based on your activity design. Consider these questions to develop and manage a more effective MEL system.

First, what is the goal of your activity? Is there an opportunity to partner with any organizations that share that goal?

Second, what kinds of data and other information will help you determine your activity’s effectiveness? Where and how will you gather that information? How will you engage local actors in collecting and assessing data?

Next, how will you document your results? How often will you measure performance indicators?

Finally, how will your team make adjustments and changes based on this information? We recommend building time into your quarterly schedule to analyze data and determine any adjustments that need to be made.

SLIDE 14: Key Elements: Monitoring

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

There are three main indicators that may be included in your plan:

- Performance Indicators help answer the extent to which an activity is progressing toward its objective(s). However, they alone cannot tell why such progress is or is not being made.
- Standard Foreign Assistance Indicators are defined by USAID and are collected by multiple Agency partners across activities. This allows USAID to aggregate and compare results.

- Context Indicators measure factors outside of the control of USAID that have the potential to affect the achievement of expected results, such as political, economic, or climatic issues. Context monitoring is recommended, but not required.

SLIDE 15: Performance Indicators

Your MEL plan should include a tracking table to describe each performance indicator and how you will collect related data. You will begin the tracking process by gathering baseline data, or information related to each performance indicator immediately prior to the start of your interventions. This data enables you to observe changes that occur during an activity.

Your MEL plan will also detail how you will monitor the quantity, quality, and timeliness of both outputs and outcomes.

Outputs are short-term and direct results. In other words, they are things over which you usually have control. An example would be the number of farmers trained in production practices. This is a change that can be directly attributed to your work.

Outcomes, on the other hand, are longer-term, more gradual changes that you may influence but do not directly control. An example would be improved crop yields based on the use of new farming technology. You will highlight the outcomes of your work through evaluations, which we will discuss a little later.

SLIDE 16: Types of Data

Your activity's MEL system should generate two types of data.

- Quantitative data is represented 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.

Remember: When handling data tied to personal identifiable information, you should ensure confidentiality through secure data storage and access controls.

SLIDE 17: Ensure Data Quality

After selecting the indicators and data that you will collect, you need to ensure data quality. Information 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 to ensure data quality:

- **Validity:** Data should clearly represent the intended result.
- **Integrity:** There should be safeguards to minimize the risk of bias, transcription errors, or data manipulation.
- **Precision:** Data should have a sufficient level of detail to inform decision-making.
- **Reliability:** Data should reflect stable, consistent collection and analysis methods through time.
- **Timeliness:** Data should be current, available often, and timely enough to inform decisions.

In your MEL plan, describe the steps your organization is taking to ensure your data is of good quality. Work with your AOR or COR to determine whether and when USAID will conduct a data quality assessment.

Find a link to USAID’s guide to “Conduct a Data Quality Assessment” at the end of this module.

SLIDE 18: Key Elements: Evaluation

Your AOR or COR will tell you if USAID will commission an external evaluation by a third-party evaluator. If you plan to use USAID funds to conduct an internal evaluation of your activity, check first with your AOR or COR.

The purpose of an evaluation is twofold:

- First, it generates information on the extent to which an activity is being implemented as planned and achieving desired results. This helps USAID and other stakeholders determine whether you are using the funds as intended.
- Second, it provides information for long-term planning and decision-making. It supports learning with understanding about which interventions are effective in which contexts.

Evaluations may include perspectives of those benefiting from your activity. Including communities and stakeholders in evaluations also ensures 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—must be posted to the Agency’s Development Experience Clearinghouse, or DEC. This is an online library of activity reports and other resources.

Find a link to the DEC and details on evaluations on the “Resources” page at the end of this module.

SLIDE 19: Key Elements: Learning

You can improve the effectiveness of your activity by incorporating the collaborating, learning, and adapting (or CLA) process.

- First, consider how you will *collaborate* with the right partners, including local organizations, at the right time to promote an informed and integrated approach.
- Second, plan to *learn* by asking thoughtful questions and reflecting on what is working and not working to guide decision-making.
- Next, prepare to *adapt* your activity in response to what you learn to improve its effectiveness.

Work with your AOR or COR to integrate CLA into your activity. You can learn more about this approach at USAID’s Learning Lab, listed on the “Resources” page.

DIVIDER SLIDE: MEL Personnel and Process

Now that you understand the essential elements of an effective MEL system, we will review the personnel and process necessary to create and manage it.

SLIDE 21: Staff and Skill Sets

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 you to include certain positions in your personnel plan and budget.

Your organization will need to devote staff time to various elements of your MEL system.

- First, a MEL manager will oversee the overall MEL approach for your USAID award and supervise 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.
- You will also designate someone to coordinate the actions, from design to evaluation, that make up your MEL system. This includes collecting and analyzing data and making sure collections occur on time. This person should have training and experience working with data and information systems.
- A team member is also needed to ensure data are properly organized, entered accurately into the appropriate database, and stored securely in your system. This person should have strong administrative and computer skills.
- Finally, you will need someone on your team to incorporate CLA practices across the full activity management cycle. This person will focus on strengthening implementation through partnerships, learning and adapting based on available data, and instilling a culture of learning throughout the project.

SLIDE 22: 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.

Plan for success by scheduling enough time for your team to collect, review, and analyze the data and consider how it reflects on the implementation of your activity. If you are a subcontractor on a USAID award, schedule time to incorporate partner feedback into your progress report.

Involve relevant staff early to create a coherent progress report from different aspects of your program. They need time to draft, edit, and format the report to comply with USAID requirements.

And, finally, allow time for your organization's leadership to review and approve the progress report and related documents before submission to USAID.

SLIDE 23: 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 communication tools to share your work with donors, stakeholders, and the public.

A strong MEL system helps. Information you collect to track achievements offers evidence and examples that convey your activity's impact to beneficiaries, host communities, local and national governments, and USAID.

Work with your AOR or COR to identify opportunities to promote the efforts of your organization and the Agency.

SLIDE 24: Key Points

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

- First, develop indicators to monitor progress and measure the direct results of your work.
- Second, confirm the quality of your data so that decisions and progress reports are based on accurate information.
- Next, be prepared to support and collaborate with external evaluators commissioned by USAID.
- In addition, use the CLA approach to continue to adapt your activity so it remains relevant and effective.

- Finally, when preparing progress reports, give your team time to collect and analyze data and consider lessons learned.

SLIDE 25: Additional Resources

Here is a list of resources we have referred to in this module. You may also wish to download and print the quick reference guide to remind you of important guidelines and helpful hints.

SLIDE 26: 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.

We invite you and your staff to review the other modules available in our “How to Work with USAID” training series to continue improving your skills and understanding of the Agency’s operations.

SLIDE 27: Acknowledgement

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

USAID thanks all the individuals who contributed their time and ideas toward the development of this training module.

Please email any feedback and questions to IndustryLiaison@usaid.gov.

To learn more about partnering with USAID, please visit www-dot-Work-with-USAID-dot-org. Again, that is www-dot-Work-with-USAID-dot-org.