



# Strategic Framework (SF) Development and Approval Process

A Mandatory Reference for ADS Chapter 201

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## Introduction

For Operating Units (OUs) that are developing a Strategic Framework (SF), this document serves to provide guidance on the requirements for developing an SF.

Per [ADS 201.3.2.4](#), overseas OUs that are exempt from developing a Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) are **not required** to develop a country or regional strategy, but may **choose** to:

- Develop a CDCS, following the process and guidance in [ADS 201mag](#);
- Develop an OU-internal programming approach or strategic planning document, in consultation with the Regional Bureau Program Office;
- Develop a Project Development Document (PDD), especially if they implement single-sector programs (see [ADS 201sam](#)); or
- Develop an SF following the guidance laid out in this Mandatory Reference.

Per [ADS 201.3.2.5](#), OUs that request a CDCS waiver are **not required** to develop a strategy, but may request approval to develop an SF. The requests to waive the CDCS requirement and develop an SF may be combined in a single Action Memo for co-approval by the Assistant Administrator (AA) for the Regional Bureau and the Assistant to the Administrator for the Bureau for Planning, Learning, and Resource Management (AtA/PLR).

Compared to a CDCS, SFs offer OUs additional flexibilities, such as:

- The ability to customize and streamline the SF development process, content, and length;
- Customized SF timeframes (typically lasting three to five years);
- Identifying and defining responsibilities of specific B/IOs involved in the SF development and approval process;
- The option to develop a more flexible and adaptive theory of change that reflects broader lines of effort or more complex, non-linear, or alternative impact pathways compared with the traditional results framework used in CDCSs; and
- Greater emphasis on adaptive management throughout the strategy, including, as relevant, scenario planning, complexity-aware approaches, conflict sensitivity, and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

## Process for Developing and Finalizing the SF

The SF process involves the following key activities:

- Obtaining initial approval to develop a SF,
- Developing the SF, and
- Obtaining approval of the final SF.

## 1. Obtaining Initial Approval to Develop an SF

The OU must work with the Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management, Office of Strategic and Program Planning (PLR/SPP) and the Regional Bureau to develop and approve an SF Process Action Memo before developing the SF. The Action Memo should include the following information (recommended [template](#)):

- **Justification:** Describe the rationale that informed the OU's decision to develop an SF, including budget considerations.
- **SF Process:** At a high-level, describe the OU's process for developing the SF, with an estimated timeline and key milestones. In its approach, the OU must include at least one touchpoint with the relevant stakeholder(s) in USAID/Washington (USAID/W) before final clearance.
- **Timeframe for the SF:** Most SFs cover three to five years, but the OU has the flexibility to determine the most suitable timeframe for its context.
- **Designated reviewers:** List any USAID/W Bureaus/Independent Offices (B/IO) that will review the interim deliverables and clear the final SF, in addition to the Regional Bureau and PLR.

The OU's SF process and Process Action Memo should be developed in consultation with the Regional Bureau and PLR/SPP. The Process Action Memo should be comprehensive and precise, as it will become the foundational reference document for the SF's development and approval. The Regional Bureau and PLR/SPP will use the CDCS process outlined in [ADS 201mag](#) as a benchmark for resolving any issues of ambiguity or lack of clarity in the final, approved Process Action Memo.

If an OU is exempt from developing a CDCS per [ADS 201.3.2.4](#), the Process Action Memo requesting approval to develop an SF must be cleared by the AtA/PLR and approved by the AA for the relevant Regional Bureau. If an OU requests a CDCS waiver per [ADS 201.3.2.5](#), the waiver and the request to develop an SF must be co-approved by the AA for the relevant Regional Bureau and the AtA/PLR. The OU must specifically indicate in the Process Action Memo if they want any other additional B/IOs to review and clear the Process Action Memo or be involved in any other ways throughout the SF process.

## 2. Developing the SF

OUs must ground the SF in a nuanced understanding of the local context. Conducting initial contextual and systems analyses, before or concurrently with the development of the Process Action Memo, will help inform the OU's strategic priorities and vision. All OUs that develop a strategy, including SFs, are required to conduct the three mandatory analyses on gender, tropical forests and biodiversity (118/119), and climate (see [ADS 201mag](#)). OUs should work with the Bureaus that manage each of the mandatory analyses to streamline and right-size the analysis based on their context and resource constraints, for example by leveraging other pre-existing analyses and evidence.

OUs are also encouraged to reflect on lessons learned from past portfolio reviews, midcourse stocktaking, or project or activity implementation, and review and analyze relevant third-party data including sources of local knowledge and insight. Analyses should be conducted when information needs arise, throughout the Program Cycle. OUs should leverage existing analyses to the greatest extent possible, to minimize the number of analyses that need to be conducted in preparation for the SF. Examples of analyses that can help inform strategy development include, but are not limited to: political economy analyses, partner landscape assessments, inclusive growth diagnostics, and others. Any substantial new research should be fit-for-purpose to meet information needs relating to contextual factors and potential shifts for the SF. OUs should also consult the [Inclusive Development: Additional Help for ADS 201](#) guidance, the [Guide to Inclusive Development Analysis](#), and the [Localization Hub](#) for additional resources on engaging diverse local actors to help make the strategic planning process and the SF more inclusive and locally led. The Regional Bureau may also advise on other relevant analyses or assessments.

### 2.1 SF Content

At a minimum, OUs must include the following information in the SFs (recommended [template](#)):

- **Evidence-based country or regional context:** The SF should provide a summary of the most salient aspects of the local context that informed the OU's strategic approach. This must include, at a minimum, relevant information from the three mandatory analyses (climate, gender, and 118/119). The climate annex must be attached to the final SF per [ADS 201mat](#).
- **A theory of change:** The theory of change can take any form (i.e., narrative or graphic) but must include, at a minimum, an overarching vision or goal statement and a development hypothesis (or multiple hypotheses for different focus areas) supported by evidence that articulates how the OU intends to make progress toward or build the

foundations for that vision or goal, and for which results the OU plans to track performance. The SF should also include the risks and assumptions underpinning the theory of change.

- **Preliminary learning priorities:** These learning priorities, and the illustrative approaches used to monitor and evaluate them, are meant to reinforce the importance of the strategy as a tool to guide the OU's whole-of-portfolio and cross-cutting learning. The learning priorities should address the gaps in knowledge and evidence in the strategy's theory of change. They can be revisited and updated when the Performance Management Plan (PMP) is finalized after the SF is approved. OUs can consult this [Learning Questions Tip Sheet and Checklist](#) for additional guidance on developing their learning priorities.
- **Policy Alignment:** OUs must demonstrate how the SF aligns with key USAID and U.S. Government policies and strategies (e.g., the [USAID Policy Framework](#), other key USAID policy documents in the [USAID Policy Registry](#), the [USAID Agency Equity Plan](#), the [National Security Strategy](#), the [State-USAID Joint Strategic Plan](#), or the [State-USAID Joint Regional Strategies](#)). OUs are not required to demonstrate alignment with all of these policies and strategies, but rather should use their contextual analyses to determine which policies and strategies are most relevant for the local context and highlight strategic alignment with those. OUs operating in countries listed on the Tier 2 Watchlist or Tier 3 in the annual [TIP Report](#) must address trafficking in persons in their SF (see [ADS 201mas](#) for further guidance), and OUs operating in countries listed on Tier 1 (Countries of Particular Concern) or Tier 2 of [USCIRF's Annual Report](#) or the [Department of State's Report on International Religious Freedom](#) must address religious freedom in their SF.
- **Management and budget:** This section explains how the OU will organize itself to attain the results articulated in the theory of change, including staffing implications, if relevant. OUs must work with their Regional Bureau and the Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management, Office of Budget and Resource Management (PLR/BRM) on developing budget parameters that will guide the OU's discussion of implementation, management, and operations. These budget parameters should be a realistic reflection of the resources required to achieve the overarching vision or goal of the SF within the specified timeframe. The budget parameters must be included as an annex in the internal version of the final SF. If there is a strong likelihood for shifts in context, staffing, or resources, the management approach should address the implications of those shifts and how the OU intends to adaptively manage strategy implementation with available resources (see the [Discussion Note on Adaptive Management](#)). OUs in volatile contexts may also consider use of [conflict sensitive approaches](#), adoption of [shock responsive](#)

[programming and adaptive mechanisms](#), or [complexity-aware MEL](#) approaches.

## 2.2 Draft SF Review

OUs must include at least one opportunity for designated USAID/W stakeholders to review an interim deliverable (such as a draft theory of change or draft SF) before the final SF is submitted for clearance. The OU, in consultation with the Regional Bureau, may determine the most appropriate format for its engagement with USAID/W. Options include:

- Holding a **presentation on the OU's strategic priorities and theory of change**, with a slidedeck distributed in advance, to solicit key points of Washington feedback, with any questions or comments raised during the discussion documented in a Summary of Conclusions (SOC) memo (see [R/CDCS template](#) for reference); or
- Circulating a **draft document accompanied by a comment tracker** for reviewers to provide feedback asynchronously before a specified deadline.

## 3. Obtaining Approval of the Final SF

Once the OU has cleared the final draft of the SF internally, they must submit an Action Memo to the relevant Regional Bureau Program Office requesting co-approval of the final SF by the AA for the relevant Regional Bureau and the AtA/PLR. This Action Memo should be cleared by the Regional Bureau Program Office, PLR/SPP, PLR/BRM, and any other B/IOs that were designated by the OU in the initial Process Action Memo. Other B/IOs may be information-copied, at the OU's discretion. Once submitted, the Regional Bureau and PLR should co-approve the SF within 10 business days or provide a substantive reason for not clearing and a suggested resolution.

Once fully approved, in order to post the SF either internal or externally, the OU must ensure that the internal, and external versions are both compliant with [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act \(29 U.S.C. § 794d\)](#). OUs should refer to [ADS 201mag, Section VI, Post CDCS Approval: Dissemination of the CDCS](#) and [Posting Internal and External Strategies on USAID Websites](#) for guidance on preparing and approving internal and external versions of the SF. If an OU wishes to keep the SF closehold or internal-only (i.e., if the context is especially sensitive), they must specify that in the Process Action Memo.

Within three months following the final approval of the SF, the OU must finalize a PMP to guide their Monitoring, Evaluation, Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (MECLA) efforts throughout the implementation of the strategy.

## Updating, Amending, or Extending the SF

OUs must conduct an SF-level review (such as a [portfolio review](#) or [pause and reflect exercise](#)) at least annually. If an OU decides to develop a five-year SF, they are encouraged to conduct a [mid-course stocktaking exercise](#) to comprehensively review the strategy at the mid-point of its implementation. OUs in volatile operating environments may elect to conduct more frequent, less formal reviews using best available information and analysis of both program performance and the operating context. SF reviews may be integrated into other existing processes, such as quarterly financial reviews (QFRs). OUs are encouraged to share the findings of these periodic reviews with the relevant Regional Bureau, PLR/SPP, or the USAID-internal CDCS Review listserv.

OUs should use these reviews to align program implementation with contextual changes and other data or evidence, guide near-term course correction, revisit assumptions, and look ahead to future planning. They can also help an OU determine if they need to update, amend, or extend the SF. OUs must follow the guidance in [ADS 201max](#) for updating, amending, and extending strategies, including SFs.

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