

# VEMSS

## Guidelines for Reviewing Implementing Partner M&E Plans

This review guide is designed to guide the review USAID/Vietnam's implementing partner (IP) M&E plans.

### **Overview of the M&E plan:**

An IP M&E Plan presents the details of an IP's M&E systems, including how activity-level results contribute to the Project M&E Plan and the Mission PMP. The IP M&E plan describes how data will be collected and used to assess progress and guide decision making.

Per ADS 203.3.5, the IP M&E plan should:

- include performance indicators that are consistent with and meet the data collection needs of the Project M&E plan and the Mission's Performance Management Plan (PMP);
- include additional indicators that the Mission needs for activity management;
- not include every indicator that the implementing partner will use for its own management purposes.

### **General Review**

- 1) Is the M&E plan clear and well-organized? Was the USAID/Vietnam template used? If not, why not?

There is no official USAID format or template for M&E plans and USAID/Vietnam has not yet issued guidance on a required format.

- 2) Is there a general description of the activity, its purpose or objective, and its development hypothesis, including assumptions?

As with much of this review process, the first question is almost always yes/no. There should be some development hypothesis or theory of change or some other instrument or object that helps to understand not only what is behind the purpose (why the project was created) but why the project designers/implementers chose to structure or implement it in this way. This information is necessary for understanding the RF and M&E Plan.

- 3) Has the M&E plan changed from prior years? If so, is there an explanation for how and why?

M&E plans may be updated annually as the activity work plan is modified over time. Ideally, they would not change to a degree that the “goalposts” for measuring the most important or fundamental aspects change significantly from year to year. Any changes should be well documented and justified by describing the changed situation or different realities encountered that required the changes. This applies to all changes, including but not limited to targets, timing, definitions, collection methods, or dropping or adding indicators. M&E plans should only be changed in consultation with CORs and only with written approval.

### **Review of the Results Hierarchy**

- 4) Is there a results framework (or something similar) showing the causal and logical relationships between different levels of results and their associated indicators?

This first question to be reviewed relates to the activity’s graphic presentation of the results hierarchy (the presentation of the activity’s causality) while the next question gets at the contents of the diagram with the added aspect of identifying what kind of instrument it is, if present. How does it identify itself?

- 5) Is there a clear relationship among the levels of the objectives in the Results Framework?

Looking at the results detailed in the activity RF (excluding the Mission PMP and any other documents) at each level is there a logical consistency in it? Does each lower level result present both the necessary and sufficient actions or achievements to cause the achievement of the result at the next higher level (given appropriate assumptions)? This should be possible to determine with this document alone assuming a minimal knowledge of the sector irrespective of what the actual Mission DO and CDCS say. If the RF does not “make sense” then the corresponding indicators will not be useful or clear (in regard to strategy and objective achievement).

- 6) Are the results included at each level of the activity results Framework written in appropriate “results” language?

USAID has developed useful guidance on the correct wording of the results statements included at each level of an RF whether in the Mission PMP or in an M&E plan (TIPS #13, USAID LearningLab and USAID ProjectStarter). This guidance includes that the results statement should express an outcome as opposed to describing actions or processes; it should be clear and precise and stated in a way that can be objectively measured; and ideally, it should be uni-dimensional and only focus on one key discrete result.

### **Review of Indicator Selection**

- 7) Does the M&E plan have indicators at each level of results, i.e. IR, sub-IR, or output, etc.?

First, are there indicators at all? Next, are there indicators for each of the framework’s

objectives? What is the number and balance? One? Five? A wide variation? Guidance suggests approximately three indicators per result – but the number of indicators should be sufficient to determine the achievement of the indicator.

- 8) Will the indicators – as currently worded – actually measure the results with which they are associated?

Regardless of their vertical dependencies and relationships, each indicator should be well constructed and directly linked to its result. An indicator should not measure multiple things (school buildings AND students), measure directions (“Increase” is a Result, “Number of” is an indicator), and must have a number (“good test results” or “better economic context” is not an indicator).

The latest official USAID ADS indicator criteria are VIPRT and there are earlier versions (DOPPA) or alternative versions (SMART) that describe much the same aspects. VIPRT stand for “Validity, Integrity, Precision, Reliability and Timeliness.” Training is available on using these in indicator analysis. Indicators should also be worded as specifically as possible using unambiguous terms (“achieved” is better than “addressed”).

Next, review the set of indicators for each result. Is each and every one needed? Are there redundancies? What kinds of indicators are these? At the lowest levels they may all be output or activity indicators (# of events) and as they ascend to higher levels the relative mix should change (not just # trained but % passing tests of learning) and, at the higher and highest levels, be all outcome or result indicators (% performing to standard, \$ amount of sales, % change in income, sector growth rate, etc.).

- 9) Is there a clear relationship between the activity-level results (outputs) and the higher-level results (outcomes) of the DO and CDCS results Frameworks?

The activity (project) RF should be analyzed in the context of the actual Mission RF at the DO, IR and Sub-IR (where applicable) levels of the Mission PMP. Through the RF and, if present, descriptive text in the M&E plan, the position of the activity and its intended results should be easily understood within the larger DO RF. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways including comparing objectives between the IP M&E plan and the Mission’s PMP, or from a direct mapping between the IR language and /or numbering system of the IP framework and the PMP.

- 10) Is the same wording used for indicators in the M&E plan as in the required USAID indicator (M-PMP, PPR, PAD M&E Plan, etc.)?

All indicator language for a required indicator should exactly match the wording of the USAID indicator. In addition, the PIRS for these indicators should include more precise information on the specific project activities that fall under the more general definitions of the USAID-generated PIRS.

- 11) Does the M&E plan include required USAID indicators and are these clearly identified as required USAID indicators?

There are many different types and potential sources of required USAID indicators that may be in M&E plans.

- a. USAID Gender Mandatory indicators
- b. M-PMP indicators from the relevant DO
- c. M-PMP indicators that crosscut
- d. M-PPR indicators from current approved list
- e. Other indicators that may be in award document
- f. Other indicators that USAID needs for activity management

- 12) Does the M&E plan include Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRS) for each indicator (or contain the information in an M&E manual or user document)?

- a. Are the PIRS complete?
- b. Is the information in the PIRS plausible (does it make sense)? (This requires some experience)
- c. Is the information in the PIRS correct? (This requires specific knowledge of the country context, for example data source)
- d. For required USAID indicators, does the activity PIRS match the USAID-developed one in key areas?

At the start of implementation there may be several items that are blank or “TBD”, in particular, baseline values, some targets, and/or data sources/methodologies, but there should be an identified process for how these will be obtained or produced.

Plausibility may be more difficult and require experience. An activity would not get data on national level contraceptive use from individual hospitals; this would come from the MOH or a similar agency. However, if the indicator is “contraceptive use in targeted district” or the “contraceptive acceptance rate at supported facilities” then this could come from individual hospitals or a district MOH office.

As discussed under item 10, the activity-level PIRS for required indicators should match as closely as possible the PIRS developed or provided by USAID for the indicator. This is the best way to ensure that the data will be collected and reported in the way that USAID intends. Where important detail is missing from the USAID PIRS, the activity can and should add information to help make the indicator data as clear as possible (and a separate list of PMP-specific PIRs should be created).

Most M&E Plan preparers find that the process of completing the PIRS is crucial to truly being able to fully “think out” the indicators and can help highlight issues that may not have been considered when the indicator was proposed or developed. One useful process to

accomplish this is to hold an IP M&E plan review session, where the strategy and indicators are reviewed to discuss logic and completeness.

13) What is the definition of “where” for M&E and GIS considerations?

Where appropriate, the activity should include one or more indicators with a geographic identification (national, district, project area). In addition, USAID increasingly desires or requires mapping and data visualization. The M&E plan should include a description of what geographic information is being collected by the project’s M&E systems so that USAID can assess if required information will be available for Mission need. Geographic identifications should match official government definitions and naming conventions and match requirements of any Mission MIS/GIS.

**Review of Performance Reporting Table**

14) Is there a performance indicator table that lists all of the performance indicators and key information about the indicator? If so, does the performance indicator table include the information that USAID needs?

Performance indicator tables are very useful pieces of an M&E plan, especially during the design process, that can be shared among M&E plan and project stakeholders to permit quick review and commentary on proposed indicators. Performance indicator tables should contain basic information regarding the indicators such as the definition, unit of measurement, USAID-required indicator type, reporting interval, data source and responsible person and should be organized by the results framework of the activity so that the position of the indicators within the causal path can be easily understood.

**Review of Baselines and Targets**

15) Do the indicators have baseline values and targets? If so, are they reasonable given time, resources, and conditions? What has been changed and why? Any issues with targets? Are target achievable or they are too ambitious?

When completed or finalized, all indicators must have baselines and targets. In draft or initial forms, some – but not most – indicators may have values of “TBD” but plans for how to obtain or produce these values should be identified. Note that for many indicators - particularly project outputs such as # trained - the baseline will, by definition, be zero as the project will not have trained anyone yet. Many target values are set in the RFP or in the proposal and final contract and represent what the project has contracted to achieve.

Note that actual setting of plausible and reasonable targets is difficult. Deciding what is the required amount of many indicators to achieve higher-level change requires extensive local experience and technical understanding of the intervention and development hypotheses. Target setting must be plausible and achievable. It would not be reasonable to commit to train 100 people in Year 1 and 10,000 people in Tear Two. Where it might be plausible to

achieve a 10% rise in the wholesale price of a commodity produced in Year 2 given activity-induced quality improvements, it would likely not be reasonable to target a 100% rise in farmer income in Year 2 due solely to the project or activity.

### **Review of Data Quality and Management**

16) Does the M&E plan describe the partner's data quality assessment (DQA) procedures? Are the procedures acceptable? Does the plan identify who is responsible for data quality? The M&E plan (or M&E manual) should describe responsibilities and timing for reviews of data at all stages. This may include review by technical staff of data received by M&E Manager from grantees or sub-contractors. It may also include review of all results by DCOP and/or COP before any release of data even in a non-formal response to a request as well as formal report submission.

17) Does the M&E plan describe the frequency and type of reports that will be submitted? Does this meet USAID's needs?

Generally, activities are contractually obligated to submit quarterly and annual reports. Some activities may have monthly or even weekly reports when the activity is of exceptional political importance. As the COR/AOR, does the frequency and type of reports meet your reporting needs? If not, it is better to change the reporting type and frequency than to ask for such reports on an *ad hoc* basis even if this change requires negotiation and contract modification.

18) Does the reporting period proposed by the M&E plan match the Mission's M&E calendar such that reports from the activity will contribute to the Mission's higher-level performance management?

Of particular importance are the Mission needs for PPR or other reporting to Washington. It is important that the reporting schedule will allow the AOR/COR to have time to review, verify, collate, calculate or otherwise handle the data so that it can contribute to DO or Mission PMP reporting.

### **Review of Evaluation section**

19) Does the M&E plan, including baseline planning, reflect the Evaluation plan of the Mission?

At the start of the activity, the Mission may not yet have an Evaluation Plan (likely annual) that includes this activity in it except in a notional or forward-looking way. Nevertheless, M&E plans should provide information on what kinds of evaluation would be applicable to this activity, whether it falls under the USAID Evaluation Policy guidance for Impact Evaluations or Performance Evaluations (pilot, size, etc.) and, most importantly, whether the activity is now correctly or sufficiently establishing the baselines for the indicators that will be required for evaluations three to five years later.

## **Review of Implementing Partner M&E Capacity**

20) Does the partner have enough staff with the right skills to implement the M&E plan and are their roles and responsibilities clear? If not, does it describe how M&E will be managed? Who will take responsibility in doing M&E?

The M&E plan should identify the staff members who will be working on M&E tasks, including one or more staff members designated as the M&E Director, M&E Manager, or similar. In large projects there may be as many as a dozen people in the M&E division, especially if there is a wide geographic spread to the activity's activities. In any case, the person most directly responsible for M&E must have adequate experience of at least several years in M&E and reporting as well as an academic or work background that supports understanding of the project.