



USING RESULTS CHAINS TO DEVELOP AN ACTIVITY WORK PLAN AND MEL PLAN

This document includes recommendations for developing theory of change (TOC)-based activity work plans and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plans during activity start-up. It also includes tips to enable collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA).**

3 PREPARE FOR THEORY OF CHANGE WORKSHOP

- Orient participants to workshop process, roles, resources, and outputs
- Validate context analysis and proposed strategic approaches in virtual sessions; update as needed
- Modify or introduce work plan and MEL plan templates to enable learning and adapting
- Consult program/contract office staff early and often on matters of timeline, deliverables format, and CLA supporting practices

4 THEORY OF CHANGE WORKSHOP

- Ensure understanding of the importance and practice of linking the activity TOC to work plans and MEL plans
- Enable a workshop experience that encourages participation, evidence use, and collaborative decision-making
- Share guidance for translating results chains into work plans and MEL plans
- Facilitate a culture of learning and partnership that will persist during implementation

STEP 3 AND 4 OUTPUTS

EVIDENCE REVIEW

- Substantiates activity scope, threats, drivers, and strategic approaches
- Identifies evidence gaps and a plan to fill through activity implementation

CONTEXT/PROBLEM ANALYSIS

- Updates situation model to reflect partner knowledge and expertise and refines it through evidence review

THEORY OF CHANGE & LOGIC MODEL

- Articulates activity purpose, intended life-of-activity outcomes, and strategic approaches
- Exhibits strong logic and strategic links to project
- Highlights key results for each strategic approach in a series of results chains
- Depicts programmatic assumptions
- May identify indicators to track implementation of the TOC
- May highlight learning priorities to investigate in implementation

5 FINALIZE START-UP DELIVERABLES

- Ensure relevant stakeholders are identified and have had an opportunity to review and contribute to deliverables
- Assess TOC and work and MEL plans for best practice elements, including:
 - TOC diagram and narrative that is clearly communicated
 - Strategic approaches that are an organizing unit for the work and MEL plans
 - Performance indicators (custom and standard) are identified and aligned to the TOC

* See activity start-up overview handout for full description of the five steps.

** For the purposes of these handouts, the terms "adaptive management" and "collaborating, learning, and adapting" are used interchangeably.

TRANSLATING RESULTS CHAINS INTO ACTIVITY WORK PLAN

The activity work plan's actions and outputs should clearly link to (a) results/outcomes of one or more of the strategic approaches that make up the activity TOC and (b) a related timeline. The figure and table below show a simple way to display the links between a logic model (in this case, a results chain, Figure 1) and a work plan (Table 1).

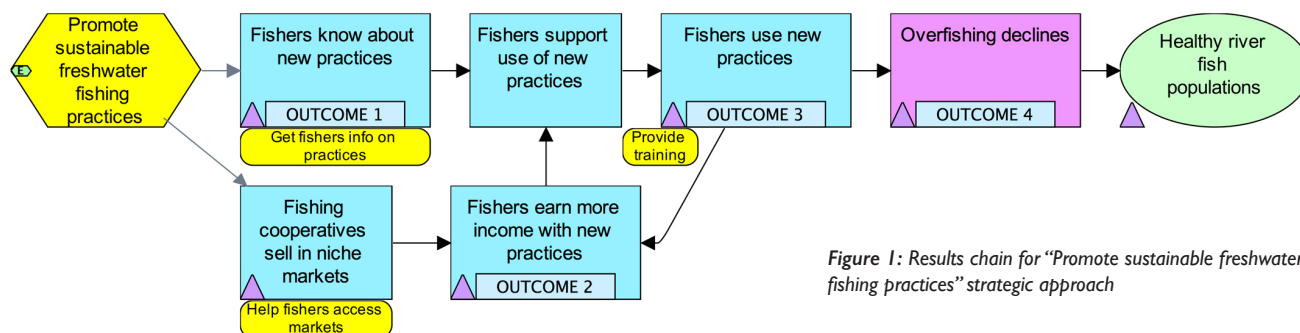


Figure 1: Results chain for “Promote sustainable freshwater fishing practices” strategic approach

Table 1: Partial work plan for “Promote sustainable freshwater fishing practices” strategic approach

STRATEGIC APPROACH: PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE FRESHWATER FISHING PRACTICES				
RESULT	ACTION	OUTPUT	OUTCOME	TIMELINE
Fishers know about new practices	1.1.1 Deliver information on practices to fishers 1.1.2 Conduct outreach to fishers 1.1.3 Conduct workshop on practices	Survey of fisher communities; outreach materials; completion of outreach and workshop	80% of communities reached by outreach; 60% attendance rate at workshops	Q1-Q2
Fishing cooperatives sell in niche markets	1.2.1 Identify niche markets for fish 1.2.2 Help fishers access markets 1.2.3 Organize fishers' cooperatives	Survey of existing markets; education materials for fishers on niche markets; technical assistance to cooperatives	20% of fishers organized into cooperatives and selling in niche markets	Q2-Q3
Fishers support use of new practices	1.3.1 Provide training 1.3.2 Provide follow-up technical support as needed	Training materials; delivery of training; follow-up technical assistance	Training provided to 80% of communities reached by outreach	Q1-Q4

ILLUSTRATIVE WORKPLAN OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- Context/problem analysis (can include situation model and threat ranking)
- Summary project TOC

II. Theory of Change

- TOC summary narrative and logic model (e.g., a results chain)
- Activity purpose and life-of-activity outcomes
- Relationship to project TOC

III. Strategic Approaches, Actions and Outputs

- Description and justification of strategic approaches
- Detailed results, outcome statements, actions, and outputs
- Annual targets and timeline

IV. Management Approach

- Management structure
- Adaptive management principles and practices
- Timeline
- Budget

CHECKLIST:

A CLA-READY WORK PLAN MAY INCLUDE:

- ✓ A clear theory of change describing how strategic approaches work together to achieve results, in collaboration with other activities and actors
- ✓ Efforts to socialize the activity's TOC with key stakeholders
- ✓ A management approach section that details specific actions and outputs to facilitate USAID and partner learning and adapting
- ✓ Tasks that engage local actors in learning and adapting
- ✓ Sufficient staff, capacity, budget, and time to execute programmatic actions and facilitate learning
- ✓ Plans to pause and reflect on Year 1 to inform Year 2 work planning

TRANSLATING RESULTS CHAINS INTO AN MEL PLAN

As described in the [PPL How-to Note on Activity MEL Plans](#), “the activity MEL plan serves multiple purposes, but primarily describes how USAID and the implementing partner will know whether an activity is making progress toward stated results.” The activity’s theory of change is the conceptual framework and underpinning for identifying relevant performance and context indicators. Performance and context indicators work together to monitor and report on the activity purpose, outcomes, outputs, and programmatic and context assumptions. Once indicators are prioritized and selected, the next step is to populate a TOC-informed indicator table and monitoring plan (Table 2).

Table 2: Partial monitoring plan for “Promote sustainable freshwater fishing practices” strategic approach

INDICATOR	BASELINE	TARGETS	METHODS AND DATA SOURCE	WHEN?	WHO COLLECTS AND ANALYZES DATA?
Activity Purpose I: Ecological integrity of priority biodiversity sites restored for current and future generations					
% of priority areas classified as in good or very good condition	Baseline: 20%	Target 2025: 50%	Ministry of Environment dataset	Baseline, every 5 years	Environment project manager (collect/analyze)
Outcome I.I: Fishers know about new practice. By 2025, 90% of fishers can identify two sustainable practices					
% of fishers in identified sub-watersheds who can name and describe at least two new practices	Baseline: 0%	Target 2020: 90%	Household survey (questionnaire)	2020	Implementing partner (IP) staff (collect), MEL coordinator (analyze)
Output I.I.I: Workshops on fishing practices conducted					
# of meetings or workshops conducted	Baseline: 0	Target 2015: 50	Review project tracking records	2015	IP staff (collect), MEL coordinator (analyze)

A learning question can be a component of a monitoring plan, evaluation plan, and/or CLA plan. In a monitoring plan, some (but not all) outcomes and outputs may have an associated learning question. In this case, a team may add a column to Table 2 to record them. For example, in this activity, the learning question associated with Outcome I.I might be “What approach and type of program is best to train the target fishers to use two or more new sustainable fishing practices?” See “Identifying Learning Questions” on page 5 for more information.

ILLUSTRATIVE MEL PLAN OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- a. Activity context/problem

II. Theory of Change and Logic Model

- a. Activity TOC and strategic approaches
- b. Activity purpose and life of activity outcomes
- c. Programmatic assumptions, evidence gaps, and learning needs

III. Monitoring Plan

- a. Performance indicator summary table (PIST)
- b. Data collection and analysis plan
- c. Roles and responsibilities

IV. Evaluation Plan

- a. External and internal evaluations
- b. Evaluation methodology considerations

V. Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Plan

- a. Learning agenda, audience, and information needs
- b. CLA methodology considerations
- c. Pause, pivot, and proceed/pause and reflect schedule

VI. Annexes:

- a. Performance indicator tracking table (PITT)
- b. Performance indicator reference sheets (PIRS)
- c. Results chain diagrams

CHECKLIST:

TOC-BASED MEL PLAN DEVELOPMENT

To successfully develop and implement a TOC-based MEL plan, the mission’s technical, program and support offices, and implementing partners should understand, agree to, and share a common vision of:

- ✓ The MEL planning methodology and process
- ✓ Priority information, evidence needs and audiences
- ✓ MEL investments and outputs
- ✓ Monitoring and evaluating for both accountability and learning
- ✓ MEL plan centered around a TOC, not a list of indicators
- ✓ Key outcomes and related indicators
- ✓ Programmatic assumptions that may be tested during implementation

SCOPING CONSIDERATIONS FOR MEL PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Throughout development of the MEL plan, it is important to consult and coordinate regularly with relevant technical and support offices in the mission, any other relevant operating units, and the implementing partner(s). Try to be consistently clear about the programmatic and mission context, recognize and accommodate the actors involved and their monitoring and learning priorities, and understand what capacity, mission culture, host country norms, and financial and human resources exist for monitoring, evaluating, learning, and adapting. Below are lists (not exhaustive) of prompting questions to help navigate conversations and plan support:

UNDERSTANDING HOW TO WORK WITH MISSION AND PARTNERS

- What is the existing culture, capacity and expectations that support more rigorous M&E in the mission and with partners?
- What resources are available for learning and adapting?
- What norms, processes, and requirements exist for learning and adapting?
- What degree of integration with other development sectors is prescribed or needed?

DEFINING YOUR TECHNICAL INPUTS/OUTPUTS

- At this point of engagement, how far have the mission and implementing partner gone in the activity design and start-up process?
- Are the start-up timeline and/or deliverables fixed, or is there space to adjust? For example, are preliminary drafts of activity work plans and activity MEL plans acceptable on contract due dates to allow time for analysis and planning during start-up?
- How confident is the mission and/or the implementing partner that they have selected the most appropriate and effective strategic approaches to achieve the desired outcomes?
- Do the mission and implementing partner teams have experience with TOC-based MEL? Do they have experience with using results chains as the logic model?
- How will you, the mission, or the implementing partner address any additional evidence or analysis needs?
- If one or more additional funding sources are used, what are the requirements (e.g., required indicators) for each?
- Are there plans to conduct a mid-term or final performance or impact evaluation?
- Is there a mechanism that will provide evaluation or analytical services to support the activity's learning and adapting?

LEARNING AT USAID

USAID is working to further institutionalize learning pathways through a variety of CLA efforts. Some key priorities for learning that underpin the advancement of learning at USAID include:

1. Ensuring greater relevance and use of monitoring data in decision-making
2. Designing and conducting evaluations that better inform ongoing and future programming
3. More strongly aligning MEL efforts across the strategy, project, and activity levels

All activities should have an MEL plan that not only monitors for accountability and measures progress, but also describes an intentional process for learning and adaptive management. Within the MEL plan, the CLA plan helps ensure that the implementing partners, COR/AOR and the program team are able to learn from implementation and adapt the activity accordingly. The CLA plan may identify learning questions that address knowledge gaps or examine programmatic assumptions related to activity or project theory of change. Programmatic assumptions and learning questions may even influence how indicators are identified and selected. Finally, an activity's CLA plan should indicate how the implementing partners will investigate learning questions, work to fill knowledge gaps and adjust as circumstances change or learning occurs.

IDENTIFYING LEARNING QUESTIONS

An activity MEL plan should include learning questions related to the activity's theory of change. A good learning question should be appropriate in scope and time horizon for the project or activity it supports, answered at the minimum level of rigor required for results to be dependably actionable, and intend to inform a programmatic decision. A results chain can help identify several types of learning questions.

TYPES OF LEARNING QUESTIONS

Questions can focus on various programmatic and operational levels. For example, learning questions may:

- Examine an action's effectiveness (e.g., "What approach and type of program is best to train the target fishers to use two or more new, sustainable fishing practices?"). Learning about an action's effectiveness can improve programming and build technical knowledge.
- Test a programmatic assumption in the theory of change (e.g., "Under what conditions does increased knowledge about new, sustainable fishing practices lead to fishers' increased support for or uptake of these practices?"). Testing assumptions between outcomes can help reveal whether a theory of change is valid, validate appropriate or improve ineffective actions, and identify unintended consequences that may require course correction.
- Develop evidence about one or more overall strategic approaches (e.g., "Are our two strategic approaches, training fishers about new sustainable fishing practices and regulatory reform, together, sufficient to reduce overfishing to level that we are seeking?").
- Better understand the relationship between enabling environment conditions and the success of a strategic approach or combination of strategic approaches (e.g., "What factors may incentivize or inhibit government or civil society to promote of new, improved fishing practices?")

Regardless of the origin and type of learning question, it is critical to identify what the team wants to know, and how and when that question will be answered and used. Learning questions should be as specific as possible: they should be understood by those who will develop or apply the answer; indicate an approach or describe a method for answering them; and result in an answer that is relevant to the problem. At the same time, questions may be adapted over time, making room for new ideas or considerations that arise.



When to identify draft learning questions: Identification can occur as early as the context or problem analysis phase, but it is most common during strategic approach brainstorming and prioritization. It can also take place at other stages of theory of change development, validation, or revision.



Where and how to incorporate learning questions: Some learning questions may be answered by formal evaluations (performance or impact), while other questions may be included in an MEL plan and answered through learning activities such as pause and reflect meetings, informal assessments, or regular reporting documents.



How to answer learning questions: Methods for answering learning questions may range in type and intensity, from qualitatively assessing a project team's perceptions on activity implementation to highly rigorous or intensive, hypothesis-driven studies. They may update, expand, or downscale existing analyses, use evidence from within or beyond implementation, need to be repeated over time, or require collaborative learning or varied perspectives across technical areas to answer. The approach to answering learning questions, including level or rigor required, depends on the type of decision that the answer will support, the risks associated with a wrong or misleading answer, and the time and resources available to the team.

PRIORITIZING LEARNING QUESTIONS

Teams will inevitably identify more learning questions than they can effectively answer. Below are three criteria that can help shape, validate, or prioritize learning questions:

- **Feasibility** – Can we satisfactorily answer the question within the life and budget of the activity?
- **Importance to success** – What is the risk if the question remains unanswered?
- **Relevance to management decisions** – Will the answer give us clear, actionable direction?

RESOURCES:

USAID 2017. [*How-to Note: Developing a Project Logic Model \(and its Associated Theory of Change\)*](#)

USAID 2017. [*How-to Note: Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning \(MEL\) Plan*](#)

Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Plan Template (forthcoming)

USAID 2016. [*USAID How-To Guide 3: Outcomes and Indicators for MEL in USAID Biodiversity Programming*](#)

[USAID Monitoring Toolkit](#)

[USAID Evaluation Toolkit](#)

[USAID CLA Toolkit](#)

USAID 2018. [*Evidence in Action: Using and Generating Effectiveness in Biodiversity Programming*](#)

USAID 2018. [*Facilitating Pause & Reflect*](#)

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