

Introduction

This resource supplements [ADS 201.3.5.7](#) and offers guidance for planning and collecting performance indicator baseline data for monitoring and evaluation of USAID strategies, projects, and activities.

WHAT IS A BASELINE?

A *baseline* is the value of an indicator before major implementation actions of USAID-supported strategies, projects, or activities. Baseline data enable the tracking of changes that occurred during the strategy, project, or the activity with the resources allocated to that strategy, project, or activity. A *baseline timeframe* is the month and year when baseline data were collected.

In some cases, values of an indicator may also be available for an extended period before the baseline; if these data show a general course or direction (e.g., increasing or decreasing), this is referred to as a *baseline trend*.

WHY ARE BASELINES IMPORTANT?

Baselines are used for comparison with monitoring or evaluation data collected during or after the implementation of a strategy, project, or activity. They are vital to setting realistic performance indicator targets and for measuring change over time. Baseline trends can be particularly helpful in understanding data in context. Baseline trend information is valuable for informing targets and predicting how the data might behave in the future. Baselines and baseline trends can also serve an important comparison function for both impact and performance evaluations by providing a point of comparison for future data collection.

ARE BASELINES REQUIRED?

All performance indicators are required to have baseline data.¹ Baselines should be measured using the same data collection source and method that will be used to collect data for that indicator throughout the life of the strategy, project, or activity. Each disaggregate of a performance indicator must also have a baseline. For example, the indicator *percent of 3rd grade students who read at grade level* must be disaggregated by sex, and therefore must have baselines for boys, girls, and all students. Baseline data for disaggregates are valuable in assessing variation in development results among different populations. For more information on indicator disaggregation see [Additional Help: Disaggregating Monitoring Indicators](#).

¹ While not required, it is recommended that baseline data are also collected for context indicators.

WHEN ARE BASELINE DATA COLLECTED?

Baseline data should be collected before implementation of an intervention. If performance indicator baseline data cannot be collected until later in the course of a strategy, project, or activity, the indicator's [Performance Indicator Reference Sheet](#) (PIRS) should document when and how the baseline data will be collected.

Planning prior to implementation is essential to selecting performance indicators and collecting relevant, quality baseline data. Baselines or plans to collect baselines for performance indicators included in a [Mission-wide Performance Management Plan \(PMP\)](#), [Project Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning \(MEL\) Plans](#), or [Activity MEL Plans](#) must be established prior to approving the PMP or MEL plan.

WHERE ARE BASELINES STORED?

All performance indicator data, including baseline data and baseline timeframes (month/year), must be documented in an indicator tracking table or monitoring information system. Baseline timeframes must also be recorded in the PIRS.

WHO COLLECTS BASELINE DATA?

There are no requirements regarding who should collect baseline data, but the responsibility for ensuring that performance indicator baseline data and other performance data are collected ultimately falls on the Operating Unit (OU) responsible for the indicator in question. For more information on roles and responsibilities for collecting baseline data, see [Additional Help: Staff Roles and Responsibilities for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning](#).

Typically, the organization that collects performance indicator baseline data is the same organization that will collect the performance indicator data throughout the life of that indicator. Implementing partners are generally responsible for collecting baseline data for those indicators included in Activity MEL Plans. However, baseline data may also be collected by monitoring, evaluation, and/or learning support contracts (especially when the baseline being collected will be used by multiple partners or activities); host country government agencies; third party entities unaffiliated with USAID that provide publically available indicator data; or even USAID staff.

Solicitation and award documents should specify the requirements for performance indicator baseline data collection, and may include details on budgeting and timing for baselines. Baselines or a plan for collecting baselines for each performance indicator should be included in the Activity MEL Plan prior to approval of the Plan by the Contracting Officer's Representative or Agreement Officer's Representative (COR/AOR).

Considerations for Setting Baselines

Timing for Collecting Data to Establish Baselines. There is no standard length of time it takes to collect baseline data. A baseline based on a large new household survey will likely take longer to collect than a baseline based on existing government administrative data. Since baseline data should be collected before implementation of an intervention, careful planning is required ensure that the appropriate amount of time is allotted for data collection and to avoid implementation delays.

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Resources for Collecting Data to Establish Baselines. Data collection requires resources. Missions should ensure that implementing partners, MEL support contracts, and USAID staff collecting baseline data have the necessary budget resources and technical expertise to manage data collection.

Coordination for Baseline Collection. Internal and external coordination for baseline data collection can improve efficiency, enhance alignment with local priorities, strengthen country systems, and reduce reporting burden. Internally, Missions should consider coordinating across projects and activities to minimize baseline data collection time and costs. For instance, if a project under a health Development Objective (DO) requires a household survey to collect baseline data, it might be possible for others in the Mission to coordinate with the health DO Team to expand the survey to include other household-level baseline data. Externally, USAID Missions should consider collaborating with local partners for baseline data collection, such as local governments, foundations, or other donor agencies, to pool resources and align monitoring efforts.

Leverage Existing or Planned Data Collection Efforts. Missions collect data for a variety of purposes in addition to monitoring performance. Missions are encouraged to leverage data collection efforts to serve multiple purposes. For example, project and activity designs often involve multiple analyses and assessments to inform design. Such analyses and assessments are an opportunity to include baseline data collection or may inform later indicator selection and baseline data collection efforts. Similarly, data collection efforts, such as surveys, that explicitly are designed to collect baseline data for performance indicators may serve other evidence and learning needs. As circumstances permit, such baseline surveys can be used as an opportunity for acquiring a broader understanding of the local context and how it may affect the project or activity.

Baseline Scenarios

USAID Missions or implementing partners may encounter various scenarios when trying to establish a baseline.

Scenario 1: A performance indicator has a baseline of zero.

This scenario is common for output indicators. For example, *the number of women trained in small business enterprise development* will have a baseline of zero prior to USAID's interventions to provide the training. A zero baseline does not imply that the similar outputs have not been produced before, just that the current USAID activities have not produced these outputs.

Scenario 2: A performance indicator baseline needs to be collected.

This scenario is common for most outcome performance indicators. A baseline will need to be collected if an indicator is new and it does not have a baseline of zero. For instance, to set a baseline for *the number of women-owned small businesses*, data collectors will need to conduct surveys in the intervention target area.

When the baseline needs to be collected, the feasibility of future data collection should also be considered in the design of the data collection methodology. In order to compare data over time, the data need to be collected according to the same methodology as the original baseline, so that assigned

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data collectors are able to replicate the baseline data methodology throughout the planned data collection period.

Scenario 3: An established indicator is selected as a performance indicator.

Established indicators (or indicators based on established data sources) are occasionally chosen as outcome performance indicators for USAID strategies, projects, and activities. Data are already being collected for these indicators. Examples include indicators based on USAID-funded data collection efforts, such as the civil society organization sustainability index or the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and indicators based on third party sources, such as annual health indicator data from the World Health Organization.

Setting a baseline when the indicator is already established is just a matter of selecting the appropriate timeframe for the baseline that best matches the period immediately before major implementation actions of the USAID-supported strategy, project, or activity that is being monitored. For example, if data collection for an established performance indicator began in 2000 and was collected annually thereafter, then the appropriate baseline for a new activity using this established indicator would be the most recent year of data collection, not the first year of data collection in 2000.

Scenario 4: An activity is implemented on a rolling basis.

When an intervention within a project or activity does not begin simultaneously for all beneficiaries, it can cause difficulty in trying to set a useful performance indicator baseline. For example, if activity implementation is phased in across geographic regions over time, baseline data collection might be conducted in different phases before the start of the activity in each region.

When performance indicator baselines are expected to be established on a rolling basis, Missions or implementing partners will need to create a baseline collection plan that reflects this implementation rollout. A description of the rolling baseline data collection timeline and methodology should be included in the PIRS.

There are a variety of ways to deal with the effect of rolling implementation on indicators and their baselines. If interventions target different geographic regions over time, disaggregating data by geographic region can help ensure baselines are recorded separately for each region. If beneficiaries are provided services at different times requiring individual baselines for each beneficiary, the performance indicator may be defined as the average *change* in beneficiary outcomes over a set period of time. For example, *the average change in participant test scores from the beginning of the training course to the end of the training course* is a typical outcome indicator for training interventions that may be conducted at different times for different beneficiary populations during activity implementation.

Scenario 5: Multiple baselines for the same indicator.

In some situations, there may be multiple implementing partners reporting on the same performance indicator who start implementation of their interventions at different points in time. For instance, a Mission may have two different implementers, starting in two different years, and working in two different geographic regions, each of whom is reporting on the indicator *number of women trained in small business enterprise development*. In this scenario, each implementing partner will have its own baseline of

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zero, aligned to the period directly before their implementation began. This is appropriate; there is no problem with each implementing partner having their own baseline. When the Mission reports the aggregate *number of women trained in small business enterprise development* in their annual Performance Plan and Report, the Mission will also have its own baseline based on when it first started reporting against this indicator.

Scenario 6: Implementation has started but a baseline was not conducted.

If an intervention has started but the baseline data were not collected, then it is certainly a problem for outcome performance indicators that don't have a baseline of zero. Without the baseline it will be difficult to understand the extent of the change. The first step in response to this scenario is to start collecting data as soon as possible and document the delay in baseline data collection in the PIRS. If the performance indicator with the missing baseline measures an outcome that is not expected to change much until later in the life of the project or activity, then the damage to comparability over time will likely be minimal.

It is also possible to attempt to reconstruct the missing baseline. If other data exist that correlate well with the indicator whose baseline is missing, it may be possible to estimate a missing baseline. The recall technique, where beneficiaries are asked to describe their situation before the intervention began may also be effective in helping to reconstruct the baseline.

Scenario 7: The indicator has changed.

Over the course of implementation, it may be necessary to adapt or change indicators in response to ongoing learning. If a performance indicator is changed to slightly alter the definition or data collection methods, but the indicator is fundamentally the same, then a new baseline is not needed. For example, if the indicator *number of women-owned small businesses* is collected via a survey of businesses and the sample size is increased to improve the precision of the data, then a new baseline is not necessary.

If a change to a performance indicator fundamentally alters how it measures the expected result or measures a new or different result, then a new baseline is required. For example, if the data source for the indicator *number of women-owned small businesses* is changed from a survey of businesses to administrative business registration data, then a new baseline is likely to be necessary.

Because the distinction between a slight alteration of an indicator and a fundamental alteration of an indicator needs to be made on a case-by-case basis, Missions are encouraged to contact their monitoring and evaluation point of contact for further guidance. Whether a change to an indicator is minor or substantial, it should be documented in the PIRS.