



# MENTORING FOR MORE MEANINGFUL MEASUREMENT

How USAID/Vietnam's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Platform Strengthens Local MEL Capacity

This brief highlights USAID/Vietnam's hands-on approach to supporting partners with monitoring, evaluation, and learning in order to achieve more context-driven and sustainable development results. By taking a mentoring role, USAID can collaborate with partners to find more meaningful ways to measure.

Learning is at the center of everything we do," shares Giang Le, a MEL Specialist with USAID/Vietnam's Program Office. Learning is not just an afterthought; rather, "effective monitoring [can help] to achieve better results."

Giang also serves as the Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) for USAID Learns, the USAID Vietnam Mission's MEL platform that acts as a learning force multiplier by bringing capacity strengthening approaches to over 40 activities.

**What is USAID Learns?** Thao Dinh, the USAID Learns Capacity Building Director, explains, "[it] serves as a thinking partner with the implementing partners and AOR/CORs. We're supporting them through the journey of doing MEL for decision making and adaptive management."

In response to interests shared by USAID/Vietnam partners, USAID Learns developed different capacity strengthening approaches—such as a [Learning Dojo](#) and [Activity MEL Plan \(AMELP\) clinics](#)—to provide tailored, intentional mentorship and coaching on MEL to USAID partners.

USAID Learns goes beyond sending templates to partners to fulfill USAID MEL requirements. It serves as a facilitator and thought partner to help partners make MEL processes central to their activities.

Take the example of AMELP development. "For any AMELP, we want to forget about the long and comprehensive templates," confirms Giang. "We want partners to have the opportunity to talk about and see the theory of change (ToC), and how they see it playing out over the next couple years." This perspective sets up partners to use their AMELP "as a management plan" and a way to ensure the entire team can be "really focused on the results they want."

## AMELP CLINICS

**What happens during the AMELP Clinic?** Over two and a half days, USAID Learns convenes an entire project team in the same room and coaches them through the process of developing an AMELP together.



USAID/VIETNAM. Mrs. Thai, among the oldest residents in one of Thanh Hoa province's poorest communes, washes her hands using the community water supply system built with support from USAID's Local Works partner, Institute of Population, Health and Development (PHAD).

## WHAT IS USAID LEARNS?

Implemented by [Social Impact](#), USAID Learns supports USAID/Vietnam to streamline MEL capacity across Mission teams, increase hands-on capacity building for local organizations and entities, implement innovative approaches, increase effective collaboration among stakeholders, and develop a highly utilized M&E system. This helps ensure USAID/Vietnam and its partners increase transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness in achieving program results.

USAID Learns communicates with both the Mission and partner teams to establish, as Thao explains, “why the AMELP is needed, how it can help them manage their activity, and how it’s valuable for everyone and not just the MEL person. That’s a pre-step.”

Thao describes their approach to the clinic: “How we deliver the clinic is as a facilitator and thought partner. We don’t tell them this is what you need to measure. We do share the requirements, but also how that looks in real project management and **how the AMELP can serve adaptive management and implementation of the project**. Everyone has a role in developing and using MEL to deliver project outcomes. This is not the task of a MEL person alone. That is why the Chief of Party, program staff, MEL staff, and sometimes operations staff participate in the clinic inclusively. From the first session, we emphasize improving project management principles to ensure whatever they develop will be useful, and that they have learning at the center of everything they are planning.”

From there, they ensure they have a strong theory of change (ToC) to serve as a foundation. Thao describes, “We go back to the draft ToC in the proposal or project document as time for the partner to really think deeper about whether the ToC still makes sense, whether it is **localized to the context** they’re now in, since there could be some time that has passed and changes in the context that might affect the success of the activity now. That’s what we’ll think through with the partners, to ensure the north star they want is still achievable, and discuss what other interventions they should be thinking about **so they’ll still be able to reach the ultimate outcome they want to achieve**.”

They walk through the ToC methodically and comprehensively, Thao explains. “We’ll also have them think through different elements—outcomes, new entry points, key interventions, assumptions—that’s where they’ll come to the same page.” The Agreement Officer’s Representative (AOR)/Contracting Officer’s Representative (COR) or Activity Manager also shares USAID perspectives and expectations, either during the clinic itself or as part of an outbrief depending on the proposed changes to the ToC. This ensures that “**everyone has a voice in the ToC**, not just the person who initially wrote it. This is the time they can **clear up any misunderstanding**—it might be the same wording but a technical person might have a different perspective than a MEL person.”

The clinic facilitators then guide the process of connecting the ToC with monitoring and learning plans. “After the ToC session is completed and

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## HOW THE CLINIC WORKS

### Facilitated workshop

offered through two flexible options that partners can choose from, with content and approaches customized to partner priorities.

### Meeting with the AOR/COR

to ensure clarity and agreement on anticipated processes, roles, responsibilities, and associated timelines.

### Tailored technical support

between a partner and a USAID Learns focal point based on the partner's interests.



the results framework is set, that's when we proceed with the learning and monitoring sessions," Thao describes. Understanding "the intended change they want to see happen," they can work together to identify what needs to be measured to observe that change. "We always highlight that **you have to do the AMELP anyway, why not make it useful?** It can bring adaptive management. We think the core of the AMELP is that they have the same understanding of what they want to do—the ToC—what's important to them, and the indicators to see the change." Thao expands on the monitoring sessions, sharing that "we base it on what is in their award documents first and help them think through which indicators still make sense, what else should be tracked based on the validated ToC, and if it's doable for them. Sometimes, their initial MEL approaches would be too hard or too resource intensive." They work together to adapt plans accordingly.

USAID standard indicators can capture important outcomes, but are often more useful for the Agency or Mission-wide level than the activity level. Indicators designed and adopted in response to an activity's specific objectives may be more conducive to monitoring change. To make measurement more meaningful, Thao explains that USAID Learns asks: "Other than the standard indicators, are there other indicators that match what makes sense for them? The fact is that when you want to see or measure change, the outcome indicators are essential to help you see [the change]. Partners usually need to create a custom indicator to capture outcomes. That is where they need to brainstorm a little more, to think of what makes sense for them."

The clinics also address other elements of an AMELP depending on partner needs and interests. "**We tailor our resources depending on the partner,**" describes Thao. Before the MEL clinic is completed, USAID Learns ensures that everyone is on the same page by organizing an outbrief to discuss the AMELP with the AOR/COR. They guide them through important elements and any changes to ensure the AOR/COR is on board with how MEL processes will fit into the activity.

Getting everyone engaged in creating meaningful indicators moves MEL beyond a box-ticking exercise. It helps place learning at the center of implementation to achieve better development outcomes. When relevant stakeholders from both USAID and partner organizations—including MEL staff, program staff, AORs/CORs, and Chiefs of Party—engage to develop right-sized AMELPs, they feel empowered to make more evidence-based decisions.

## LEARNING DOJO

**Why a Learning Dojo?** “We came up with the idea of the [Learning Dojo](#) because we found multiple challenges for MEL Specialists,” explains Giang. “If we [only] focused on supporting partners’ MEL specialists, we’d see minimal changes at the institutional level. It’s very difficult for them to convince their management teams about the benefits of effective monitoring. So we thought, if we only target the MEL staff, the outcome is very limited. If we want to see change at the institutional level, we need the awareness of others through training.”

In response to this challenge, USAID Learns created three Learning Dojo tracks tailored to different staff roles, developing curricula that were relevant and applicable for not only MEL specialists, but also organizational leaders and technical specialists. As Thao explains, “For MEL to support implementation and adaptive management, all roles need to think about how to use MEL in decision making.” The dojo curriculum draws on adult learning principles and a peer cohort model to help partner organizations “put learning at the center of their project implementation to produce better development results.”

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### MEL FOR BETTER IMPLEMENTATION

MEL staff of USAID’s local partner Center for Environment and Community Research (CECR), implementing the Local Works funded activity [Collective Action for Water Conservation](#), participated in the Learning Dojo’s “[Specialist](#)” track. They came back to their project team better equipped to share how MEL can be a tool for adjusting an activity approach based on data and for communicating more effectively about the activity. By bringing everyone together, the team shifted their perspective from “MEL means extra workload” to “MEL means collaboration... for better implementation.” With the entire CECR team more deeply understanding the what and how of USAID monitoring requirements—and how to work with these requirements to suit their own needs—they collaborated to revise their AMELP to be more practical and useful for the team.



### MINDSET SHIFTS

A project manager from USAID’s local partner Centre for Supporting Green Development (GreenHub), implementing the Local Works funded activity [Local Solutions for Plastic Pollution](#) (LSPP), participated in USAID Learns’ Learning Dojo “[Strategist](#)” track on adaptive management. She had never looked at LSPP’s theory of change. After reviewing it and understanding its “spirit” through the Learning Dojo, she better understands how to communicate about the activity’s efforts and results with stakeholders, as well as how to more actively engage her MEL colleagues in support of evidence-based decision making throughout implementation.

[FIND MORE IMPACT STORIES HERE](#)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS



**Spend time on a MEL plan to set a strong foundation.** “When we conduct the AMELP clinic,” Thao continues, “not all the IPs believe in the usefulness because it’s a two and a half day clinic. They might have doubts about why it’s such a long time, but then they’ll see its utility for their whole team to sit together even when they thought the proposal was really good. That comment actually came from a Chief of Party who used to be a USAID staff member and was an AOR/COR before. After going through the clinic, he changed his mind that the MEL planning process was totally worth the time and effort.”



**Plan for bureaucratic realities that can derail setting a strong MEL foundation.** “In Vietnam,” Giang explains, “the context is unique. All activities need to go through the Government of Vietnam’s project approval, which is at least six months but can take over two years. After we complete the first year work plan with everyone involved, IPs usually have enough time to work and submit their AMELPs subsequently.” It allows IPs to create anything that meaningfully incorporates the input of the local partner, USAID, or the local government.” Recognizing this reality, USAID Learns engages activity teams and AOR/CORs on AMELP development early, usually right after award kick-off meetings. This allows them to take time for planning and achieve consensus among the project team and AOR/COR before project approval. This way, they remove the rush to create the AMELP upon work plan approval.



**Collaborate!** USAID wants its partners to succeed. As Giang emphasizes, taking this holistic, mentoring approach to MEL enables the Mission to center learning. “We encourage IPs to be open to speaking with the Mission and ask for support instead of being more conservative. If they are able to collect better data and have a better story to tell, we can all understand how to do our work better.”

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USAID/VIETNAM. Ha and Nuong, two ethnic minority students at Sa Phin Semi-Boarding Primary and Secondary School in Ha Giang province, drink water directly from a drinking water system supported by USAID's Local Works partner PHAD.

## ADVANCING LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT





Sometimes, a USAID activity may be the first time a local partner is formally engaging in MEL. Though familiarity with MEL varies, USAID Learns meets partners where they are to provide support based on partners' own visions of success. "Before we do anything else, we talk about what is the most important thing that we can help our partners with in order to develop an effective monitoring system," explains Giang.

Initially, USAID Learns thought partners only wanted monitoring support. "It turns out," Thao describes, "they actually start thinking about learning and how to bring Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) principles into their way of doing things." When USAID Learns asked partners what types of support they wanted, "a lot of learning and CLA topics came to the top." For example, partner organization MEL officers expressed interest in stakeholder analysis, qualitative analysis, and gender equality and social inclusion analysis. This assessment of partner interests also exposed MEL-related topics to technical specialists and organizational leaders who do not directly work on MEL—a finding that led to the development of the Learning Dojo.

Too often, MEL can be thought of as just an award requirement. Instead, it's an opportunity for local partners to define their own vision of success from the beginning of an activity and think through how that success can be achieved. It is also an opportunity for USAID to engage more deeply in exploring how an activity will achieve its intended results, and think through how to best support the partner. Instead of simply creating a list of indicators and processes to meet USAID requirements, an AMELP can convey the results local stakeholders care about and lay out a strong plan for how those results will be captured, learned, and used for program improvement. This sets up both USAID and the partner to use data for adaptive management, contributing to more sustainable, meaningful outcomes.

## ADVICE FROM LOCAL WORKS ON LOCALLY LED MEL

Taking a locally led approach to MEL means letting the local partner lead, providing resources and guidance, and co-creating where needed. Missions might consider the following principles and questions to put this into practice in their own operating contexts:

-  **Flexible:** How can an existing template be customized to meet the goals of a local partner? Can a new template be developed?
-  **Collaborative:** Who else—including activity participants and other local stakeholders—can be included in the MEL planning process? How can custom indicators be informed by other local stakeholders? What do local partners want to learn, and how can local actors be engaged, to the greatest extent possible, in identifying priority learning questions?
-  **Responsive:** How and from whom is feedback being collected? How can the feedback process be tailored to partners' (often limited) resources? How will learning from feedback be shared back with activity participants? How can data be not only available, but useful to local communities?
-  **Adaptive:** How will indicator data, stakeholder feedback, or other sources of data be used? How often will the team “pause” to reflect upon it, and who will be included in those reflection sessions? What decisions will be informed by new data and evidence?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Dive deeper into [USAID Learns' key resources](#) to see what best practices and examples you can integrate into your own work. Find out more about the [USAID Learning Dojo](#).
- Read another [example from USAID/Paraguay](#) of how one indicator triggered a pivot towards more demand-driven local capacity strengthening.
- The [Locally Led Development Spectrum and Checklist](#) help USAID and our partners think about what locally led development means in practice throughout our Program Cycle in any sector.
- Explore USAID's [Local Capacity Strengthening \(LCS\) Policy](#) and learn how to put its seven principles into action through [interactive, five minute micro-trainings](#). Try out the micro-training on [principle three](#), and see if you can identify how USAID Learns' approach aligns with this LCS principle!

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