



PERFORMANCE INDICATOR BASELINES

RFS GOOD PRACTICE MEL NOTES

RFS Good Practice MEL Notes aim to highlight examples of strong Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) practices across the central portfolio of activities managed by USAID's Bureau of Resilience and Food Security (RFS). These notes complement USAID's agency-wide MEL guidance¹ with concrete examples of how RFS is integrating MEL elements into its investments. The primary audiences for these notes are RFS Implementing Partners (IPs), A/CORs, and RFS MEL Specialists. While IPs typically develop Activity MEL Plans, RFS hopes these notes will encourage enhanced A/COR and RFS MEL Specialist engagement and collaboration throughout the Program Cycle.

Overview



Baseline values are most often established after indicators are selected in line with key results, but before the setting of performance targets

The PPL Monitoring Toolkit defines a performance indicator baseline as “the value of an indicator before the implementation of USAID-funded strategies, projects, or activities. Baseline data enable the tracking of changes that occurred during the strategy, project or activity with the resources allocated to that strategy, project, or activity.”² In practice, a baseline is the starting point to track progress against targets and actual results. Baselines should be established before implementation begins to capture all relevant outputs and outcomes. Baselines should be defined in the Activity MEL Plan Performance Indicator Reference Sheet (PIRS). For standard indicators, the PIRS often provides guidance on baseline requirements.

Baseline Scenarios

The section below introduces the most common scenarios and provides good practice examples from within the RFS central activity portfolio³. Scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and some activities may encounter multiple scenarios simultaneously for any given performance indicator.

Scenario 1: Baseline of Zero

This scenario is most common for output indicators, such as Number of people trained in climate change adaptation supported by USG assistance (EG.11-1) which is reported

¹ See [ADS 201](#) and the [USAID Learning Lab Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Toolkits](#)

² [Monitoring Toolkit: Performance Indicator Baselines](#)

³ Read more about RFS Activity examples cited [here](#)

on by SERVIR – Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH). Since SERVIR-HKH will train people as an output of the activity, the baseline was zero. This does not imply that other activities have not reported on the indicator, or even that other SERVIR activities have reported on this indicator, just that SERVIR-HKH has not yet produced these outputs.

Some outcome indicators may also have a baseline of zero. For instance, **Number of individuals in the agriculture system who have applied improved management practices or technologies with USG assistance (EG.3.2-24)**, is reported on by the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Crop Improvement (ILCI). Since the technologies and management practices are being created by ILCI, they know that the baseline has to be zero.

Scenario 2: Baseline Needs to be Collected.

This scenario is common for most outcome indicators, particularly if it is new and not zero. If the activity is a direct follow-on activity, the baseline could be set from its predecessor's final report if the data are recent and cover the same population. More often, data needs to be collected through site visits, surveys, etc.

Using the same outcome indicator as before, **Number of individuals in the agriculture system who have applied improved management practices or technologies with USG assistance (EG.3.2-24)**, the TELA Maize Project extracted data from their predecessor's final activity reports to inform what their baseline should be for this indicator because they were building on those efforts.

The Feed the Future Market Systems and Partnerships (MSP) gathered baseline data for its outcome indicator **Value of annual sales of producers and firms receiving USG assistance (EG.3.2-26)**, defining it as “the value of sales in the year prior to programming...collected through records of assisted firms and/or a sample survey of producers via recall,” in its PIRS. This documents options for data collection so that future data can be collected in a comparable fashion to accurately compare data over time.

Scenario 3: Established Indicators

Indicators with established data sources are occasionally chosen as outcome indicators for USAID activities. An example of this comes from the Women + Water activity under USAID/RFS's Center for Water Security, Sanitation, and Hygiene. This activity, and the center more broadly, monitors the custom indicator **Lives Saved Estimate**, which is measured using the Lives Saved Tool (LiST)⁴. When setting their baseline, Women + Water began by looking at their geographic focus and timeframe. Relevant data was available for all their geographic zones across India. Through discussions with their COR and RFS MEL Specialists they were able to agree that the data was current enough to be useful and it was not worth the additional expense of collecting more up-to-date information.

Scenario 4: Rolling Implementation

When an intervention within an activity does not begin simultaneously for all aspects of implementation or for all beneficiaries, setting a baseline can be challenging. For example, MSP is a demand-driven activity with buy-in options. For the indicator **Value of annual sales of producers and firms receiving USG assistance (EG.3.2-26)** the baseline(s) will need to be set as new private sector partners are engaged throughout the activity. MSP's PIRS indicate how baseline data will be collected as each new private sector partner is engaged. Each buy-in is entered separately and has its own baseline in DIS.

⁴ LiST is a well-established and widely used tool. Read more on the [LiST website](#).

Scenario 5: Retroactive Data Collection

While baselines should be collected before an activity starts, sometimes it is not feasible or did not occur. In these cases, a baseline should be collected as soon as possible or retroactively established. For the indicator **Number of private sector firms that have improved management practices or technologies as a result of USG assistance (EG.5.2-2)**, the Feed the Future Food Systems for Nutrition Innovation Lab (FSN-IL) was unable to collect data on baseline management practices as it was unclear which firms would be engaged. In some instances FSN-IL was already working with firms before the baseline could be established as part of stakeholder engagement or other activities. FSN-IL plans to use established techniques such as retrospective pretest to establish a reliable baseline about the state of management practices at each firm prior to engagement with the activity.

Scenario 6: Indicator has Changed

It may be necessary to adapt or change indicators in response to ongoing learning during implementation. If an indicator is changed to slightly alter the definition or the data collection methods, but the indicator remains fundamentally the same, then a new baseline is not needed. If an indicator is changed to fundamentally alter how it measures the expected result or measures a new or different result, then a new baseline is required. All changes should be documented in the PIRS.

Slight Alteration: The MSP IP and COR determined during a data quality assessment in year two that some indicators needed to be refined to better reflect their operational context. As the changes did not fundamentally alter how results were measured or the results themselves, it did not affect their original baseline. Changes to indicators should be documented through a change log, such as the example below from the MSP revised Activity MEL Plan.

Date	Change By	Change	Justification
9/1/2021	MEL manager	Minor updates to the PIRS for the following indicators: 2.3.4.5.6&7	Changes reflect greater operational clarity regarding roles, responsibilities, and the systems used to collect data
<i>Excerpt from the MSP Activity MEL Plan Change Log</i>			

Fundamental Alteration: While FSN-IL developed initial indicators for reporting and evidence for decision-making, they recognized that the indicators are unlikely to remain sufficient. As an Innovation Lab they are identifying and supporting new technologies and metrics which will generate critical knowledge for determining how to implement the latter phases of the activity. The activity fully anticipates needing to revise several indicators to the point that they will effectively become new indicators to remain relevant over time.

Helpful Tips for Establishing Performance Indicator Baselines

- Baseline data should be collected before implementation begins. Activities should ensure that an appropriate amount of time is allotted for data collection during activity start-up to avoid implementation delays.
- Baseline data collection requires both budget and staff time. Ensure that IPs, MEL

support contracts, and/or USAID staff have the necessary resources and technical expertise for data collection.

- When possible, baseline data collection efforts should be coordinated across activities or other initiatives to improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness, enhance alignment with local priorities, strengthen country systems, and reduce reporting burdens.
- Data collection efforts can be leveraged to serve multiple purposes. In addition to gathering data for multiple indicators during one data collection effort, data collection may also be used to better understand local contexts, generate buy-in from local stakeholders and beneficiaries, and help influence any design aspects that remain flexible.
- Ensure that the data collection timeline is clear so it can be replicated (i.e. collecting data at the same time of year).
- Should a performance indicator have any required disaggregates, those disaggregates must also have baselines established and documented.
- Subsequent data collection can follow the same approach (i.e. collecting data at the same time of year).
- Should a performance indicator have any required disaggregates, those disaggregates must also have baselines established and documented.