

Performance Management Plans: A Checklist for Quality Assessment

What makes a good performance management plan?

A performance management plan (PMP) establishes guidelines for the collection of specific information that will be used to assess program or project progress and guide decision making. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) operating units (OUs) must prepare a PMP for each direct objective (DO) for which they are responsible. Projects may develop their own PMPs using guidance from USAID's Automated Directives System (ADS).

While the scope and scale of projects can differ substantially, quality standards for performance management planning are essentially universal. The 14-item checklist below is designed to help managers decide whether or not a document has the basic characteristics of a good PMP. It can further be used to identify specific areas of performance management planning that may require review and improvement. Although the examples in this document come mainly from population and reproductive health (PRH) projects, the checklist is applicable to all types.

The PMP Quality Checklist

Use this checklist to screen for PMP quality. Unchecked items may signal a need for review.

- 1: Is the PMP clear and well-organized?
- 2: Are anticipated costs for implementing the PMP included?
- 3: Does the PMP deal mostly with results and indicators, not strategy or operations?
- 4: Is there a results framework showing causal relationships between outcomes?
- 5: Are key outputs, outcomes, and impacts reflected in the results framework?
- 6: Is the information on data flow and reporting responsibilities complete?
- 7: Is there an indicator table, with baseline estimates and targets where relevant?
- 8: Do the indicators seem closely aligned with project activities and objectives?
- 9: Are the indicators clearly and comprehensively defined?
- 10: Is there enough information in the PMP to judge the quality of the indicators?
- 11: Do the indicators reliably measure what is intended, and is their collection and use feasible?
- 12: Is the number of indicators adequate to reflect project results, but manageable?
- 13: Are indicators sufficiently disaggregated to meet project information needs?
- 14: Have opportunities for evaluation been identified and developed?



1: Is the PMP clear and well-organized?

The ADS advises that no standard PMP format exists, and suggests that USAID missions and offices “use a format that best fits their management and communication needs.”* Examples of formats abound. A carefully organized document should have very little extraneous or repetitive content. A basic template might include some or all of the following:

- list of acronyms
- project description
- results framework
- monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system description
- calendar of performance management tasks
- cost estimates by indicator or overall
- indicator table with targets and baseline values
- indicator reference sheets

While it’s not always possible to keep a PMP concise, bigger isn’t always better. The ADS suggests that a program’s PMP should not exceed 25 pages, excluding performance indicator reference sheets (PIRS) and any other appendices. For many projects, 10 or fewer pages should be sufficient. A clear, easy to follow PMP is more likely to be implemented correctly, helping to make “managing for results” possible.

2: Are anticipated costs for implementing the PMP included?

All programs or projects need to estimate what it will cost to develop and implement their PMPs. If the resources required for performance management are not defined and communicated to donors ahead of time, project budgets may fall short. Many PMPs include only a cursory approximation of estimated costs for data collection and reporting (usually, 3% to 10% of project costs overall); this may not be sufficient to capture the scope of requirements.

Expenditures for PMP development should ideally be estimated and budgeted ahead of implementation costs. The budget may include support for an external consultant to draft the document and facilitate related work, such as meetings with project staff and partners to review potential data sources and to discuss collection and reporting options. Consultants assisting with PMP development can, in turn, help guide the estimation of plan implementation costs, which should be included in the document.

When budgeting for implementation, the levels of effort that will be required to collect, clean, analyze, and report on the indicator set should be considered, as well as other costs associated with obtaining, aggregating, and quality-checking the data. More detailed cost estimation will usually be necessary for primary data collection.

* U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). *ADS Chapter 203: Assessing and Learning* [February 10, 2012 revision]. Washington, DC: USAID; 2012:23. Accessed 8 August 2012 at: <http://transition.usaid.gov/policy/ads/200/203.pdf>.

3: Does the PMP deal mostly with results and indicators, not strategy or operations?

A PMP is a reference document designed to describe how results will be measured. While it should always be closely aligned with project strategy and implementation plans, **a good PMP is centered on the indicators themselves**. Other sections should be succinct, without repetitive content within the PMP or between it and other project reference documentation.

Readers unfamiliar with a project should be able to ascertain readily from the PMP what indicators and indicator benchmarks will be used for monitoring and evaluation. They should also be able to draw informed conclusions about the advantages and weaknesses of these indicators as measures of project performance.

4: Is there a results framework showing causal relationships between outcomes?

A results framework should drive the PMP. This framework models the expected relationships between project outputs, outcomes, and impact. An illustrative PRH project might aim to reach more women with family planning counseling (output), leading to increased adoption of effective contraceptive methods (outcome), resulting in higher birth spacing (impact).

Anyone unfamiliar with a project should be able to use the project's results framework to quickly gain a general understanding of what the project is trying to accomplish, and how. For program PMPs, the results framework should include each DO and intermediate result (IR) identified in the program strategy. For more information and guidance on developing a results framework, see http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadw113.pdf.

5: Are key outputs, outcomes, and impacts reflected in the results framework?

Project *outputs* are often services or materials delivered to participants. An output may also reflect processes, such as the development of a new monitoring tool or practice guidelines for providers. *Outcomes* represent the direct, immediate, or short-term results of service delivery or research processes (for example, the adoption of a desired behavior or the application of a recommended protocol). An *impact* is a high-level result that normally requires multiple influences over time, such as improved health status or lower mortality.

Priority services and those that represent large relative investments should be a major focus of a project's results framework, and will often be reflected in both output and outcome indicators. For some projects with long timelines, impact may also be appropriate to include, but for others the collection of such high-level results will prove infeasible or of limited use in project monitoring. See checklist item 14 "Have opportunities for evaluation been identified and developed?" for additional guidance on impact evaluation as part of a PMP.

Review the framework to ensure that it accurately reflects results at every level. Consider whether impressive results on just the factors included in the framework will tell the whole story of what the project hopes to achieve. If so, the results model is likely a comprehensive one.

6: Is the information on data flow and reporting responsibilities complete?

The M&E system description and calendar of performance management tasks, or other content provided, should include basic details about who is responsible for collecting and working with the indicator data, when data collection will take place, and what reporting standards are in effect. The flow of information should be clearly defined, so that everyone involved understands how and by whom results will be collected, recorded, and submitted for review after each reporting period.

7: Is there an indicator table, with baseline estimates and targets where relevant?

The indicator table is the heart of the PMP. It should be organized by result, from the results framework, and list each indicator along with a short, precise definition. Full details of the definitions can be included in indicator reference sheets or elsewhere in the document as required. For service delivery projects, baseline estimates and annual or other targets should be displayed across each row in the indicator table for quick reference and comparison. Target-setting can be a complex exercise involving external technical assistance and multiple rounds of revision; separate documentation of the methods and assumptions used to generate target values, therefore, may be required.

8: Do the indicators seem closely aligned with project activities and objectives?

The best indicators reflect outcomes that are central to a project's work, rather than being incidental. Some contextual factors may be included (e.g., maternal mortality); but for all but the largest and most ambitious projects, the majority of indicators should be activity-specific. A highly successful project should produce striking results. Indicators that are relatively impervious to the changes a project is trying to effect should usually be avoided in favor of more sensitive ones.

9: Are the indicators clearly and comprehensively defined?

Indicator reference sheets are optional for projects but, where present, should be annexed to the PMP. These sheets may be two or more pages each and contain a multitude of technical details about the data for each indicator including the source, disaggregation factors, potential limitations, calculation methods, justification and management utility, data quality assessment procedures, and estimated cost. As with PMPs overall, a multitude of PIRS templates are available online and from program offices.

Project managers may wish to adapt one of these standard formats for use, retaining the parts that are useful and omitting those that seem less essential. It is rare, for example, for a team to include more than a cursory approximation of estimated costs for data collection and reporting (usually from 3% to 10% of project costs overall). A more useful approach may be to include an expense overview, focused on whether indicators use pre-existing sources or whether primary data collection will need to be financed. It may be necessary only in the latter case for teams to conduct more detailed performance management cost estimations.

10: Is there enough information in the PMP to judge the quality of the indicators?

To judge the quality of indicators as performance measures, basic information about the source and data collection methods is required. Teams developing PMPs may not always have abundant evidence about an indicator on each of the specific quality factors they would like to assess. In some cases, a factor may not be particularly relevant to the indicator at hand. Estimates can generally only be calculated with known statistical precision, for example, from a survey with a probability sample. For some indicators of project performance, proxy measures might be the only available option. Finally, additional aspects of measurement quality, such as the representativeness of source data, may also be important to consider for some indicators.

11: Do the indicators reliably measure what is intended, and is their use feasible?

The feasibility of valid, reliable data collection is a critical component of indicator quality. Most projects will not have to develop all new indicators; for nearly every type of activity there are established indicators in common use. These can be readily found on indicator compendia (e.g., the Family Planning and Reproductive Health Indicators Database developed by MEASURE Evaluation PRH[†]) and in published survey reports. Collecting and using established indicators for performance management can mean that less time and effort must be invested in developing definitions and calculation procedures. In addition, projects using the same established indicator can compare experiences in order to advance institutional learning.

Teams preparing a PMP must answer two basic questions about the indicator set: What should be measured? and How?. The ADS recommends seven criteria for answering the first question, abbreviated OPUDATA:

- Objective (clearly defined, unidimensional)
- Practical (data can be obtained in reasonable time at reasonable cost)
- Useful (for management decision-making)
- Direct (used in lieu of proxy measures)
- Attributable (to USAID/U.S. government efforts)
- Timely (available when needed)
- Adequate (as many indicators as necessary for effective performance assessment)

To base decisions on measurements confidently, we must also have reason to believe that the quality of the measurements is high. This requires an understanding of measurement error, or the various ways that the process of producing an indicator value has the potential to yield a result that differs from the *true* value. A second set of ADS criteria is principally concerned with this issue, the components of data quality:

- validity (data represent the intended result)
- integrity (data are not intentionally manipulated)
- precision (reflects specific population of interest, margin of error is small)
- reliability (data are collected and analyzed using consistent methods)
- timeliness (current data are available with adequate frequency)

[†] This database is available online at: http://www.cpc.unc.edu/measure/prh/rh_indicators.

Steps taken to maximize data quality might include eliminating indicators that seem invalid or unreliable, choosing strategically from among all possible data sources for an indicator, changing survey questions, or improving training for those who conduct data collection. **A good PMP will have an indicator list free from obvious sources of measurement error**, and include acknowledgement of any measurement issues that may be unavoidable or justified.

12: Is the number of indicators adequate to reflect project results, but manageable?

The total number of indicators included in a PMP should be based on the needs and resources of the project or program. A mix of indicators reflecting reach and coverage as well as the effects of the project is usually ideal. There are too few indicators if the number is inadequate to capture performance broadly across activities for a DO with several IRs, or for a project's major activities. There are too many indicators, however, if there is a very high burden of information collection with little added value.

Including too many indicators on a PMP can also overwhelm a person's ability to see the "big picture" when examining results. This puts the exercise of performance management planning decidedly at odds with its principal objective — encouraging the use of quality data for effective project management.

13: Are indicators sufficiently disaggregated to meet project information needs?

Disaggregation responds to the need to look for differences between subgroups in a population. **Person-level indicators in a PMP should often be disaggregated by sex.** This includes baseline estimates and targets. Many indicators should be disaggregated by age, and others by parity, ethnicity, geographic area, or other relevant characteristics. Some facility-level indicators benefit from disaggregation by facility type, as provider-level indicators do from provider type. Disaggregation is not the same as defining a population of interest: If source data are intended to represent a particular group, such as women or children, that group should be explicitly defined in the earliest stages of the sampling or data collection strategy, not after data collection is over.

14: Have opportunities for evaluation been identified and developed?

In project monitoring, outcome and impact indicators measure population-level changes that *coincide* with the project's activities. These changes are reasoned to have been influenced, at least in part, by the project as depicted in the results framework, but the extent of the causal relationship is unknown. Evaluation, on the other hand, measures outcome and impact that can be reasonably *attributed* to project activities. **Impact evaluation** ideally employs an experimental or quasi-experimental design using a counterfactual, and yields the strongest evidence for a project's effects. **Performance evaluation** refers to less rigorous designs that are more feasible for most projects to implement, but still produce stronger evidence of results than monitoring usually can.

Both forms of evaluation are increasingly promoted and conducted as part of performance management in U.S. government agency-supported programming. Programs must identify opportunities for performance and impact assessment over the strategy periods covered by their PMPs, particularly for the larger projects in a portfolio. This means that many more projects will have the opportunity to include attributable results in their performance reports.

Examples of PMPs incorporating information from formal project evaluations are still relatively uncommon. But identifying opportunities for evaluation is unequivocally part of the performance management planning process. If one or more evaluations are planned over the course of project implementation, a PMP should:

- document the reasons for the evaluation (why does this particular project warrant focused study and how will the results be used?);
- incorporate the key results of the evaluation into the indicator set;
- note in the PMP that the source of these data is a project evaluation, not routine monitoring (this may necessitate a different collection and reporting schedule);
- describe the study design, the proposed questions (measures) and the sampling plan, and give a brief assessment of limitations on all three fronts; and
- plan to collect and report comparable data from other sources if readily available, to compare with evaluation results.

This integrated planning approach ensures that M&E efforts are harmonized, mutually reinforcing, and together yield the best possible information for assessing and guiding project performance. USAID's Evaluation Policy, issued in January 2011, can be found at: <http://transition.usaid.gov/evaluation/USAIDEvaluationPolicy.pdf>.



While PMPs will vary in terms of length and content, a number of standards are universally applicable. **A good PMP is easy to follow, with a clear, comprehensive results framework, indicators that reflect the project's major objectives, and practical, realistic plans for obtaining high-quality data.** Small projects and those with very limited resources will have less extensive PMPs with a short list of indicators and source data that rarely if ever call for primary data collection. PMPs for large projects should be more involved, with a multi-level results framework and well-developed plans for evaluation as well as monitoring. For any project, initial investment in developing a strong PMP to help guide management decision-making is unequivocally worthwhile.

Additional resources

Additional guidance for general performance management planning including evaluation, and for PRH-focused performance management, is available from the ADS and the MEASURE Evaluation project. Selected resources include the following:

Performance management planning

ADS Chapter 203: Assessing & Learning. Available at: <http://transition.usaid.gov/policy/ads/200/203.pdf>.

ADS 200 Supplement: The Performance Management Toolkit. Available at: <http://transition.usaid.gov/policy/ads/200/200sbn.pdf>.

ADS Chapter 578: Information Quality Guidelines. Available at: <http://transition.usaid.gov/policy/ads/500/578.pdf>

TIPS Number 6: Selecting Performance Indicators. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABY214.pdf.

TIPS Number 7, Preparing a Performance Monitoring Plan. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABY215.pdf.

TIPS Number 12: Guidelines for Indicator and Data Quality. Available at: <http://transition.usaid.gov/policy/ads/200/tips12.pdf>.

TIPS Number 13: Building a Results Framework. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadw113.pdf.

Evaluation

Evaluation: Learning from Experience. USAID Evaluation Policy. <http://transition.usaid.gov/evaluation/USAIDEvaluationPolicy.pdf>.

TIPS Number 19: Rigorous Impact Evaluation. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadw119.pdf.

Population and Reproductive Health

Family Planning and Reproductive Health Indicators Database. Available at: www.cpc.unc.edu/measure/prh/rh_indicators.

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