



AUSTRALIAN
COUNCIL
FOR
INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT



ACFID Code of Conduct

PMEL Guidance Note

Prepared for ACFID by Learning4Development

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ACFID Code of Conduct outlines principles of practice and standards for organisations committed to quality international development and humanitarian outcomes. Key to this is Quality Principle 4, which relates to Quality and Effectiveness. This principle recognizes the importance of investing in comprehensive analysis to guide planning and design; establishing clear goals, objectives and performance assessment frameworks; regularly reviewing and assessing progress and performance; evaluating results and approaches; and investing in continuous learning.

Quality Principle 4: Quality and Effectiveness

- 4.1 We articulate clear strategic goals for our work.**
- 4.2 We analyse and understand the contexts in which we work.**
- 4.3 We invest in quality assessment of our work.**
- 4.4 We reflect on, share and apply results and lessons with stakeholders.**

ACFID Code of Conduct's Quality Principle 4: Quality and Effectiveness

This guidance tool is intended to outline the key principles that underpin the disciplines of planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning. These can and should be applied at all levels of the organization – from setting and reviewing organizational strategy; operational planning and review; program design, monitoring and evaluation; partnership identification and management; to staff planning and review.

2. WHAT IS PMEL?

Most international development NGOs use a standard program management cycle as a conceptual framework for their approach to management. The key phases of the program management cycle cover planning; monitoring; evaluation; and learning or 'PMEL'.

We refer to 'PMEL' – planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning – as a collective notion because effective monitoring, evaluation and learning should start during the planning and design phase of any initiative. Generally speaking, no program or initiative should be planned or designed without also determining how performance and results will be monitored, captured or measured, evaluated, reflected on, shared and utilised. This is so because:

- we should be accountable for all our commitments and their impacts – to primary stakeholders, within our own organisations, to our donors, to the public and to other external stakeholders
- we need information in order to share and disseminate it to stakeholders
- we need information upon which to reflect, learn and adapt our approaches.

The phases are therefore interrelated and mutually reinforcing but are presented here as a cycle to reflect the usual sequence of program management steps.



The way that this program management cycle is represented and described will differ considerably between organisations. ACFID Members represent a diverse mix of entity sizes and sectoral focuses and engage in a diverse range of programs and initiatives. They draw on funds from different kinds of donors, and work with a variety of partners. Their approach, therefore, to planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning will also naturally differ.

The phases of planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning will however, be represented in any good program management cycle – albeit possibly represented and described differently. The

phases are presented as consecutive phases, but in practice, they may be concurrent or occur in a different order.

The key features of these program management phases are outlined below.

Planning:

- is undertaken in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders
- is grounded in an analysis of the relevant context
- includes an analysis of gender, power dynamics and marginalised groups;
- includes an analysis of risk
- recognises that most contexts and development challenges are complex
- is evidence based and draws on and references relevant research
- links with and builds on existing programs
- leverages lessons learned from other projects and experience
- articulates a clear shared vision that can be communicated with others
- outlines assumptions that underpin any theory of change
- establishes a clear framework against which progress can be measured
- establishes roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for partners and key stakeholders
- outlines protocols for communications, feedback and conflict-resolution processes.

Monitoring:

- is undertaken in collaboration with key stakeholders
- generates data to make an assessment of progress
- draws on reliable data sources wherever possible
- identifies limitations of data sources and methodologies
- ensures that risks are being actively identified and mitigated
- identifies areas of implementation that need to change to meet overall objectives or goals
- generates findings, recommendations and learnings that are shared with stakeholders.

Evaluation:

- is undertaken in cooperation with partners and stakeholders
- is undertaken with as much impartiality and independence as possible
- assesses the extent to which objectives have been achieved
- identifies factors that lead to success or failure
- identifies areas for improvement
- identifies learning.

Learning:

- identifies outcomes and findings
- recognises success and failures
- is shared with relevant stakeholders
- is appropriately resourced and scheduled
- is documented and recorded for future reference
- informs and influences future strategies and approaches
- stimulates innovation.

3. APPROACH TO PMEL

Just 'doing' planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning is not enough. The approaches we take and the principles that underpin them are equally important. The approaches should be carefully considered and designed to:

- enhance the ability of stakeholders to meaningfully participate and contribute and provide leadership where possible or appropriate. Stakeholders could include partners, primary stakeholders, other external actors in-country, donors (if appropriate or desirable), and your own organisation.
- ensure language, structures (being mindful of other work/family/community commitments) and the mediums used (written, spoken, video etc) enhance accessibility, participation and contribution.

Ensuring these approaches requires a commitment to equity, participation, inclusion, and transparency.

PMEL across the Code and QAF

The Code of Conduct includes practices expressed as 'verifiers' in the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) which collectively enable the foundations for good planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning practice.

This section provides guidance on what is required of your organisation to be compliant with the Code of Conduct in regards to planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning. All of the practices described also reflect good practice and will enhance the operations of your organisation.

3.1 At a strategic or policy level

To meet your Code compliance requirements, the QAF requires a policy, statement or guidance document which commits Members to:

- (4.3.2) monitoring, evaluation and learning across the whole organisation.
- (4.4.1) the dissemination of information about results and lessons to all stakeholders – primary stakeholders, partners and donors.

Let's consider what is meant by a 'policy, statement or guidance document'. It is beneficial to have a high-level document which applies to the whole organisation and which outlines your broad philosophy, position and/or approaches towards monitoring, evaluation and learning. This could take the form of a formal policy, ratified by your governing body or it could also take the form of a documented statement or guidance document. This range of document types recognises the diversity of ACFID Members and their varied size, evolution and scope. The important point is that a commitment to MEL is documented at a whole-of-organisation level, that it has the endorsement of leadership to give the staff a mandate and associated accountabilities, and that it provides staff with the necessary guidance to undertake MEL functions in a consistent manner.

The requirements to meet compliance indicators 4.3.2 and 4.4.1 could be combined into a single policy, statement or guidance document or dealt with separately – that's up to each organisation. The dissemination of information about results and lessons to all stakeholders (4.4.1) is a natural extension of monitoring, evaluation and learning across the whole organisation (4.3.2).

A policy, statement or guidance document would most likely include:

- how the organisation defines monitoring, evaluation and learning
- the principles identified by the organisation which underpin its monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches or processes - for example, participation and voice of primary stakeholders, transparency etc
- any theoretical references or frameworks that underpins your MEL practice
- your organisation-wide or thematic theory of change
- a brief outline of how the policy will be operationalised at each stage - i.e. monitoring, evaluation and learning. This could briefly outline the processes or procedures to be used, or provide reference to a procedures manual.
- reference to supporting tools or templates that should be used, for example standard M&E plan or framework, monitoring trip report template, progress report templates, and standard evaluation terms of reference. These would most likely be provided in a procedures manual or equivalent.

3.2 During design and planning

To meet your Code compliance requirements, the QAF requires a design and planning framework, tools and templates that require or approaches that consistently show the consideration of:

- (1.2.2) the needs, rights and barriers to the inclusion of those who are vulnerable and those who are affected by marginalisation and exclusion in context-specific ways.
- (1.2.4) the potential for unintended harm and strategies to mitigate the risk of harm.
- (2.1.2) participation of primary stakeholders.
- (2.3.2) consultation with those marginalised due to gender identity, in particular women and girls, contextual analysis of barriers to their inclusion and identification of opportunities for their participation.
- (2.4.2) consultation with people with disabilities and contextual analysis of the barriers to social inclusion and participation.
- (2.5.2) consultation with children, contextual analysis of their needs and rights, and identification of opportunities for their participation.
- (3.1.1.) analyses of the causes of poverty and inequity.
- (3.1.2) identification of local organisations and/or primary stakeholders and strategies to enhance and promote their own development.
- (3.2.3) the analysis of risks associated with advocacy initiatives, with a particular focus on the safety and rights of primary stakeholders.
- (3.3.1) evidence of the analysis of environmental risk and management.
- (4.2.1) context and stakeholder analysis, including the consideration of the perspectives and knowledge of primary stakeholders.

The QAF's verifiers require either

- 'design and planning framework, tools and templates that require the consideration of...'
- or
- 'approaches that consistently show the consideration of...'

Having two options as verifiers recognises the diversity of ACFID Members and their varied size, evolution and scope.

Using 'design and planning framework, tools and templates' is a more formalised and systematic approach. The design and planning framework is a guidance document that might cover:

- the principles or approaches that will be consistently followed for all design and planning;

- the steps that should be followed such as context analysis, consultation with partners and primary stakeholders, articulation of an initial concept or theory of change, appraisal, articulation of a more comprehensive design or plan etc;
- the tools or templates to be used; and
- the process for appraisal, selection and approval.

Using standardised ‘tools and templates’ ensures that all staff (and perhaps partners) use a consistent approach to design and planning ensuring it is underpinned by clear principles and maintains a standard of quality desired by your organisation. These could include standard tools or templates to ensure systematic context and stakeholder analysis, risk analysis, the participatory development of concepts and theory of change, a standardised program or initiative design or plan document ensuring all the desired issues or themes are covered.

Using ‘tools and templates’ can ensure a rigour and discipline to your processes. Having a design and planning framework, tools and templates in place does not suggest that these must be followed blindly or rigidly. Good process should always allow for contextual adaptation and improvement over time.

For some younger or smaller organisations who are either yet to develop a framework and templates or who chose not to perhaps because they only have a few programs/initiatives, it is also possible to comply with this Code requirement by demonstrating **‘approaches that consistently show the consideration of...’**. This means that your organisation must still consider all of the issues and themes outlined in the Code and the QAF, but that this can be operationalised directly through your practices. These approaches or practices should be reasonably consistent while still allowing for contextual adaptation.

Regardless of the whether your organisation has a ‘design and planning framework, tools and templates’ or ‘approaches’, both must show evidence throughout the design and planning process of the consideration of the issues listed in the Compliance Indicators at the beginning of this section.

3.3 During appraisal

To meet your Code compliance requirements, the QAF requires an appraisal and selection process that ensures designs and plans:

- (4.2.1) include systematic consideration of context and stakeholder analysis, evidence and research, and the perspectives and knowledge of primary stakeholders.
- (4.3.1) are critically assessed against a set of criteria or equivalent.

To ensure the quality of your designed and planned initiatives there should be a process in place to critically appraise all initiatives, and approve, iteratively improve or reject them. Critically appraising programs or initiatives prior to their commencement, enables you to analyse, assess and identify gaps or areas requiring strengthening. Appraisal and selection of programs or initiatives should be done consistently and systematically although its degree of structure or formality will differ depending on the varied size, evolution and scope of ACFID Members.

While challenging for small organisations, having an external person or someone internal but not deeply invested (and potentially conflicted) in the proposed program or initiative being appraised, enables a fresh perspective and some degree of independence or objectivity. It is common practice in many organisations to establish a dedicated committee or group that reviews, appraises and

makes recommendations about new programs or initiatives although this would obviously be challenging for smaller agencies.

The most useful appraisal processes are not based on simple 'tick the box' checklists. The design of the process should facilitate shared discussions and joint reflection and the tool should demand analysis and the recording of narrative which can be used to guide the strengthening of designs and plans.

A good appraisal process may include the consideration of:

- whether the proposed approaches and outcomes align with the organisations' purpose and values.
- the design process and whether it has been sound and reflective of good practice. This might include consultation with and contributions from partners and the full range of primary stakeholders;
- the quality and findings of contextual and stakeholder analysis;
- the quality of analysis of the development challenge or social change that has been identified;
- the underlying theory of change or equivalent and the internal logic or soundness of the proposed response;
- the role of partners and primary stakeholders in implementation;
- cross cutting issues and themes including human rights, gender, social inclusion, environment etc;
- safeguarding issues including child protection, resettlement etc;
- risk analysis and management strategies;
- strategies to enhance sustainability;
- strategies for monitoring, evaluation, dissemination of information, reflection and learning; and
- governance or management of the initiative and partners involved.

Regardless of how your organisation goes about it, the important features are that the appraisal and selection process facilitates critical analysis and assessment, some objectivity or independence and the consistent application of an agreed (and therefore transparent) set of quality criteria or principles.

3.4 During monitoring and evaluation

To meet your Code compliance requirements, the QAF requires an M&E framework, tools and templates that ensures or approaches that consistently show evidence of:

- (1.2.3) the assessment of progress addressing the needs, rights and inclusion of those who are vulnerable and those who are affected by marginalisation and exclusion in context-specific ways.
- (2.1.3) the assessment of the participation of primary stakeholders.
- (2.3.4) the assessment of progress in promoting gender equality and equity.
- (2.4.4) the assessment of progress in promoting empowerment of people with disabilities.
- (4.3.2) consistently show evidence of monitoring and evaluation in practice

The QAF's verifiers require either

- 'M&E framework, tools and templates that require..... '
- or

- ‘approaches which consistently show evidence of.....’

Having two options as verifiers recognises the diversity of ACFID Members and their varied size, evolution and scope.

Using an M&E framework and tools and templates:

- enables good planning and resourcing of monitoring and evaluation functions;
- provides transparency as they can be shared with partners, primary stakeholders and donors;
- ensures that certain thematic, sectoral or safeguarding issues are consistently considered; and
- maintains a standard of quality desired by your organisation regardless of who is undertaking the process.

Having an M&E framework, tools and templates in place does not suggest that these must be followed blindly or rigidly. Good process should always allow for adaptation and improvement over time as programs evolve or in order to monitor and evaluate new aspects of a program or practice that were not planned at the outset.

An M&E framework is a document which could relate to a program/initiative or to a broader thematic area such as gender or social inclusion or a sectoral area such as WASH. It might include:

- the key monitoring and evaluation functions or events
- the aspect of a program/initiative, thematic or sectoral area to be tracked, measured, assessed or analysed (e.g. an objective or an outcome)
- what will be measured to indicate progress or success (e.g. performance or results indicators)
- the information or data that will be needed to make the assessment
- how the information or data will be gathered
- who will undertake each task or event and when
- how the information, data or findings will be disseminated and utilised.

Tools and templates could include:

- terms of reference and report formats for monitoring events such as field visits
- progress reporting templates
- case study guidance tool or template
- standard terms of reference and report formats for evaluations

For some younger or smaller organisations who are either yet to develop a framework, tools and templates or who chose not to perhaps because they only have a few programs/initiatives, it is also possible to comply with this Code requirement by demonstrating **‘approaches that consistently show evidence of....’**. This means that your organisation must still consider all of the issues and themes outlined in the Code and the QAF, but that this can be operationalised directly through your practices. These approaches or practices should be reasonably consistent while still allowing for contextual adaptation.

Regardless of whether your organisation has a ‘M&E framework, tools and templates’ or ‘approaches’, both must consistently show evidence of the assessment of the issues listed in the Compliance Indicators at the beginning of this section.

3.5 During reflection and learning

To meet your Code compliance requirements, the QAF requires:

- (4.4.2) Documented process or evidence of consistent reflection on results and lessons and how these are used to inform and improve practice.

Monitoring and evaluation is done well when the 'doers' and the 'users' can see the value-add. Using the results and findings from monitoring and evaluation to inform reflection, learning and adaptation of our work is the reason we do monitoring and evaluation and is the 'value-add'. Without the reflection, learning and improving part of the process, there is no point in doing the monitoring and evaluation.

The results of reflection and learning can be used to celebrate success, share good practice, inform better practice, satisfy accountabilities, and enable the participation and contribution of other stakeholders such as partners and primary stakeholders.

The reflection and learning process itself can be undertaken in a variety of ways. Some organisations will have more elaborate, structured and well documented processes, while others may approach this on a smaller scale. There is always benefit in spending dedicated, face-to-face time, where all parties have the space and permission to reflect, learn and re-calibrate. This can be done periodically (annually) or following a significant evaluative event. Bringing together a wide range of stakeholders enables useful sense making of results and lessons, validation (or not), consensus building and shared momentum for change. If bringing stakeholders together physically is not possible, organisations could also consider a structured documented process that could be done remotely or virtually. There is also much benefit in undertaking reflections processes within your own staff group in Australia if that is what's possible within limited resources.

It is also important to identify ways that learning can be shared most meaningfully with different types of stakeholders. This might include, for example, a formal report for donors, a workshop with local partners, a research paper published in a journal to share learnings with peer organisations, or community based discussion where learnings are shared in local languages using community based methodologies. The key to reflection and learning is using information in a way that informs future strategies and practice.

3.6 In relation to collaborations and partnerships

To meet your Code compliance requirements, the QAF requires:

- (5.3.2) Documented evidence of the periodic and joint review of key collaborations and partnerships (with partners).

All partnerships will have internal accountabilities amongst the partners, and external accountabilities to other stakeholders such as community members or donors. The partnership and its effectiveness should therefore be regularly reviewed, reflected on and adapted as required. Like most review and reflection, it won't happen in a meaningful way unless it is documented, planned and resourced.

This reflection process relates to the partnership as distinct from the program or initiative it was established to achieve.

What the 'effectiveness' of the partnership might look like needs to be defined at the outset although of course this can be adapted as the partnership matures or changes. Over the course of a partnership, partners will continue to develop their own ideas about what constitutes effective practice and will refine their approaches accordingly.

This should be defined jointly by the partners and may even involve agreeing on indicators of success or effectiveness which can be tracked and measured over time. If done at the beginning of a partnership, this is also an excellent way of identifying or flushing out any hidden agendas, assumptions or unreasonable expectations.

The reflection process itself can be undertaken in a variety of ways. Ideally, there should be frequent and ongoing opportunities for partners to provide feedback to each other on the strengths and challenges of the partnership. If there is already some clarity around what 'effectiveness' or 'success' looks like, partners may be able to contribute their views and assessments separately or remotely. This can be enhanced through the use of a documented tool or template. There is always benefit though, in spending dedicated time, face-to-face, where all parties have an opportunity to reflect, learn and re-calibrate.

Critical to this process are the principles of equity, respect, transparency and mutual accountability. A good partnership assessment/reflection process will be mindful of power differentials and ensure all partners are able to safely and honestly reflect on the performance of all other partners.