



MID-TERM PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF USAID/EUROPE EURASIA BUREAU ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, GOVERNANCE AND ENTERPRISE GROWTH IN EUROPE AND EURASIA (EDGE)

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This publication is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and was prepared by Integra Government Services International LLC for the Europe and Eurasia / Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Decision Support (EE/MELDS) Activity.



MID-TERM EVALUATION OF USAID/EE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, GOVERNANCE, AND ENTERPRISE GROWTH IN EUROPE AND EURASIA (EDGE)

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Photo Credit: Source: IDG Twitter Page (A USAID EDGE/IDG grantee in Moldova launched four new tourist routes for cycling, running, and hiking that highlight regional attractions and gastronomy. Activities like this help the tourism sector overcome pandemic challenges and grow.)

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SYNOPSIS

Program purpose and description: To assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth (EDGE) in Europe and Eurasia project and present recommendations regarding future design(s) of regional economic growth activities in the region.

Key questions: Evaluation Question (EQ)1: To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies integrated into a) regional value chains and b) global value chains? Objectives and targets? EQ2: What lessons were learned from modifying the implementation of interventions during COVID-19 that can be used in future design considerations? EQ3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EDGE management structure? EQ4: To what extent did the leverage requirement contribute to the sustainability of activities? EQ5: To what extent are EDGE activities supporting countries in meeting and fulfilling their European Union (EU) accession criteria?

Methodology: The final evaluation applied a mixed methods design. Key methods used to answer five EQs included key informant interviews (KIIs), quantitative survey, performance monitoring data, and a desk review. Two validation workshops were held with USAID/EE and Missions.

Data Collected: The desk review included 36 documents. This was supplemented by 84 KIIs in Georgia (13) Kosovo (15), Moldova (19), North Macedonia (22) and Washington, DC (15). Fewer than 10 respondents participated in the quantitative survey despite repeated outreach efforts.

Challenges and mitigation strategies: The evaluation did not use statistically representative samples but applied a purposive sampling strategy to engage key stakeholders to draw high-level representative findings to answer the EQs, which was a limitation.

Key findings: EDGE has demonstrated variously effective strengths in its approaches to enhancing regional economic growth and competitiveness; About 83 percent of the nearly 3,000 participants reported to EDGE that they have applied the knowledge and skills acquired from EDGE training in their work, and 93 percent of participants stated in feedback questionnaires that the training was useful. EDGE has proven to be an efficient rapid response and bridging mechanism, but it duplicates some bilateral programs. As of May 2023, EDGE had fully executed 61 grants in its core and buy-in components for a total value of \$3,115,476. EDGE technical assistance indirectly supports and links to each country's EU accession requirements and key aspects of the accession criteria but cannot be measured in the short term.

Key recommendations: Continue and expand technical assistance to associations and organizations experienced in certifying firms to meet emerging the requirements of the EU and private brands for the energy efficiency, waste management, and environmental compliance of products and services; address logistics and internal transportation challenges; incorporate training taxonomy and digital data collection instruments within the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning system; use EDGE grants and training to fill gaps in bilateral programming and hew more closely to country and regional-level private sector engagement strategies; refine EDGE grant management processes and better address the needs of grantees; and adapt continuously to maximize the program's impact for countries pursuing EU integration by meeting accession criteria.

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ACRONYM LIST

AEO	Authorized Economic Operator
AMELP	Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
B2B	Business-to-Business
BSO	Business Support Organization
BSP	Business Service Provider
CATALYZE	USAID CATALYZE Blended Finance Mechanism
CEFTA	Central Europe Free Trade Agreement
CLA	Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting
CO	Contracting Officer
COI	Conflict of Interest
COR	Contracting Officer's Representative
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DMO	Destination Management Organizations
EDGE	Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth in Europe and Eurasia
EE	Europe and Eurasia
EQ	Evaluation Question
EU	European Union
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GUC	Grants Under Contract
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDG	International Development Group
IP	Implementing Partner
JBCP	Joint Border Crossing Point
KII	Key Informant Interview
MAP REA	Multi-Annual Action Plan on Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MELDS	Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Decision Support
POC	Point of Contact

SMEs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SOW	Statement of Work
SWG	Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group
TFA	Trade Facilitation Agreement
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WCO	World Customs Organization
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment

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Our team was composed of Team Leader Brenda L. Pearson, Senior Data Analyst and Georgia Subject Matter Expert Maia Giorbelidze, Kosovo Subject Matter Expert Arben Qirezi, Moldova Subject Matter Expert Silvia Morgoci, and North Macedonia Subject Matter Expert Vlatko Danilov. Also, we acknowledge the support of our home-office staff, Ganyapak (Pin) Thanessnant, EE/MELDS Project Officer, and Penelope Norton, Senior Associate.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Europe and Eurasia Bureau (EE) requested that the Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Decision Support (MELDS) team conduct a performance evaluation of the Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth in Europe and Eurasia (EDGE) project implemented by International Development Group (IDG). The evaluation assesses the performance of ongoing activities in four countries: Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, and North Macedonia. This evaluation sought to answer five evaluation questions (EQs). It provides key findings aligned to these questions and a set of actionable recommendations that can inform any adjustments that USAID/EE makes going forward.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the evaluation is to answer five EQs focused on EDGE implementation achievements related to the project's effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and contributions to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the selected countries. The evaluation team used a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative, in-depth remote, and in-person interviews with key stakeholders and local partners. All proposed semi-structured interviews and group discussions were organized around the EQs and supported with detailed instruments. The team developed each tool for a specific group of interviewees and mixed common questions and other questions unique to a particular group to obtain a full range of opinions regarding specific projects and to ensure that data was comparable across all respondent groups. In addition, the evaluation team carried out a desk review and analysis of performance monitoring data. Many of the baseline assumptions and market analyses that informed the design in 2018 are no longer valid due to the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, and newly increased funding levels of bilateral Missions in the region. This evaluation focuses on the period of performance from July 29, 2019, through July 2023.

PROGRAM FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the evaluation team found that most EDGE capacity building and training activities were properly designed and relevant, delivering assistance aligned with local partners' needs. The team also found EDGE coordination efforts to be effective, with demonstrated evidence of how the project worked with some bilateral USAID economic growth activities and other donors to address the policy and regulatory barriers that its priority sectors and value chains face. EDGE's current modes of implementation may require revision in response to changed economic circumstances inherent in regional disruptions due to war and new security challenges. It may be necessary to revisit the selection criteria for future buy-ins for follow-on programming once USAID completes its new design, which will focus more on addressing systemic gaps or market failures than supporting individual firms. Similarly, grant solicitation themes may need to shift to a greater focus on automation, climate-smart agriculture, digitization, internal logistics, and more targeted investments in light manufacturing subsectors in anticipation of reconstruction and infrastructure needs in the region.

USAID investments across three value chains (fruits and vegetables, wood processing and textiles, and tourism) may benefit from more pilots that involve regional public sector organizations, private sector

partners, and associations. In general, EDGE has been efficient in achieving its goals and creating a supportive ecosystem for established companies that seek to increase the volume of exports. To varying degrees, each of the 61 current grants has successfully contributed to reducing barriers to cross-border trade and investment, improved business sophistication and market integration, and expanded market linkages. More detailed findings are outlined below and discussed throughout this report.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings and consultations with USAID/EE, the team organized the key findings under four main themes: 1) effectiveness, 2) efficiency, 3) sustainability, and 4) Euro-Atlantic Integration.

TABLE 1: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
EQ1: EFFECTIVENESS OF IMPLEMENTATION	
<p>EDGE has demonstrated various strengths in its approaches to enhancing regional economic growth and competitiveness.</p> <p>EDGE has provided training and capacity building support to individuals and firms to advance their integration into regional and global value chains.</p> <p>EDGE support was most useful in subsidizing participation in trade shows and other venues.</p> <p>Business service providers (BSPs) said their participation in EDGE training events was good for networking and gaining insights into financing issues in the targeted value chains.</p> <p>EDGE has been active in providing firm level support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region to obtain export certifications and fostering best practices in quality control and management.</p> <p>Ten SMEs received EDGE grants under contract (GUCs), which they utilized to improve financing, human resources, and automated production technology to engage in larger-scale production.</p> <p>EDGE training and mentoring indirectly assisted SMEs in countering investors' perceptions of high risks in the region and concerns about consistent quality of products.</p> <p>Demand for organic products is increasing in regional and global markets, and the need for certification of organic products is increasing.</p>	<p>Continue and expand technical assistance to associations and organizations that are experienced in certifying firms to meet emerging the requirements of the EU and private brands for the energy efficiency, waste management, and environmental compliance of products and services.</p> <p>Address logistics and internal transportation challenges by prioritizing the identification and resolution of logistics and internal transportation challenges that impede competitiveness.</p> <p>Strengthen government partnerships, because they play critical roles in facilitating linkages to multilateral structures and addressing political challenges that hinder cross-border movement of goods and services.</p>

<p>Support for regional tourism received the most mixed assessments from key stakeholders, who stated that national policies, investment by local government partners, and higher levels of customer services are necessary prerequisites for scaling any activities.</p>	
<p>EQ2: EFFECTIVENESS OF DELIVERY MODALITIES</p>	
<p>About 83 percent of the nearly 3,000 participants reported to EDGE that they have been applying the knowledge and skills acquired from training in their work, and 93 percent of participants stated in feedback questionnaires that the training was useful.</p> <p>Opinions favoring in-person or online training varied among stakeholders in different regions and value chains.</p> <p>Women and non-urban populations, in particular, reported that their self-described low levels of digital literacy and technological proficiency made online learning events and presentations less effective for them.</p> <p>Participants reported that many training instructors were unfamiliar with delivering online training and struggled to adapt their curricula and create interactive learning experiences.</p>	<p>Incorporate training taxonomy and digital data collection instruments within the EDGE monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system and develop a hierarchical training taxonomy that categorizes and classifies training programs based on their characteristics, objectives, and content.</p> <p>Establish a structured legacy archive through a systematic approach to curating training and learning materials, recordings, and photo galleries of trade fairs and exhibitions. Select a suitable digital platform or system for storage and accessibility.</p>
<p>EQ3: EFFICIENCY OF THE EDGE MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE</p>	
<p>EDGE has proven to be an efficient rapid response and bridging mechanism, according to USAID/Moldova.</p> <p>EDGE activities should better complement ongoing USAID bilateral activities and include the leadership of flagship economic growth programs in work planning and learning events.</p> <p>Two part-time EDGE subregional representatives liaise with Missions in the Caucuses, Ukraine and Moldova to advance cooperation and identify partnering opportunities.</p> <p>The EDGE management structure is more effective in providing a range of technical support at the firm level rather than implementing a systems approach, according to USAID Mission staff and local partners. The number of active partners collaborating across border is difficult to assess at the output and outcome levels.</p>	<p>EDGE should consult with other USAID economic growth programs to ensure that EDGE grants and training are complimentary and contribute to regional-level private sector engagement strategies.</p> <p>EDGE's grants procedures and AMELP output indicators and targets should be reviewed to ensure that important internal collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) opportunities are being identified to generate important lessons and promising practices for the region.</p> <p>EDGE should be inclusive in its hiring to reflect the diverse needs, cultural sensitivities, and contextual issues in the region.</p>

<p>Donor partners characterized collaboration with EDGE as positive and useful in avoiding duplication of activities that support customs agencies and value chains.</p> <p>The EDGE team does not reflect the diversity of the E&E region and focus countries.</p> <p>Grantees raised concerns regarding the EDGE team's competency in managing grants.</p> <p>The EDGE Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan (AMELP) could be better utilized to capture lessons and feedback from partners so best practices and innovations are scaled and replicated in GUCs and training.</p>	
<p>EQ4: INFLUENCE OF GRANTS' LEVERAGE REQUIREMENT ON SUSTAINABILITY</p>	
<p>Only 16 grants in the core component had been fully executed as of May 2023, although the EDGE work plan anticipated issuing about 30 grants during its period of performance. The buy-in component had executed 45 small grants in the total amount of \$1.4 million.</p> <p>Most grantees, local partners, and USAID staff viewed EDGE's leverage requirements positively. The cost share requirement compelled grantees to think creatively about resources and seek collaborations that they might not have considered otherwise.</p> <p>Stakeholder feedback indicated that EDGE grants facilitated the creation of connections that might not have occurred organically and are likely to generate sustainable partnerships.</p>	<p>EDGE should refine its grant management processes and better address the needs of grantees. The leverage requirement ratio of cost-sharing should be adjusted for different types of stakeholder groups.</p>
<p>EQ5: SUPPORTING INTRA-REGIONAL AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION</p>	
<p>In the short term, it is difficult to assess the relevance of technical support provided by EDGE activities in enabling Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, and North Macedonia to meet their EU accession.</p> <p>EDGE technical assistance indirectly supports and links to each countries' EU accession requirements and key aspects of the accession criteria.</p> <p>EDGE activities in support of relevant trade associations such as the Central Europe Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), national customs agencies, and inputs to the revision of the Multi-Annual Action Plan on Regional</p>	<p>EDGE, with its vital contributions and rapid response potential, must continue to evolve in its strategies and interventions, adapt to changing dynamics, and overcome interconnected challenges. This is essential for EDGE to maximize its impact and assist the participating countries in their pursuit of EU integration by meeting accession criteria.</p>

<p>Economic Area in the Western Balkans (MAP REA) are perceived as important policy-oriented investments.</p> <p>Obtaining relevant export certificates such as Global Gap is an important achievement because it demonstrates the producers' compliance with international standards for exports to EU countries.</p> <p>EDGE's facilitation of the introduction of the Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) program helped Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, and North Macedonia progress toward meeting their EU accession criteria.</p> <p>The effectiveness of EDGE's activities has been tempered by significant political and regulatory challenges that include political disagreements, insufficient compliance with World Trade Organization (WTO) trade facilitation agreement (TFA) regulations, unsynchronized regulations among CEFTA countries, and mutual non-recognition of certificates.</p> <p>EDGE has been instrumental in bolstering the capacity of business associations and individual companies in understanding and meeting EU regulations.</p>	
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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

I.1. PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The EDGE project is designed to employ a flexible and adaptive learning approach that will make it possible to create and respond to economic growth opportunities as they arise. EDGE is implemented in the EE region. It works to create inclusive, sustainable economic growth and to support intra-regional and Euro-Atlantic integration. EDGE is managed by USAID's EE Bureau in Washington, D.C. and works closely with USAID Missions and projects in the region. EDGE is designed to generate synergies among the USAID projects working in economic growth and to bring together stakeholders across countries to work on mutual problems, adding regional dimension to the EE portfolio. EDGE has three objectives:

1. Reduced barriers to cross-border trade and investment;
2. Improved business sophistication; and
3. Improved market integration and expanded market linkages.

Under EDGE, International Development Group LLC (IDG) is implementing regional economic development activities in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia); Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus; and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). Activities are rolled out through the Core Component and the Buy-in Component, a flexible mechanism that individual Missions, USAID Operating Units, and other donors can utilize with their own funds.

All core activities engage participants from at least two countries. Both components include a GUC mechanism to promote the capacity building and sustainability of local organizations, government entities, and private sector firms. Further, Core Component activities promote regionalization, reduce barriers to trade, and support the growth of SMEs in three key value chains: 1) fruits and vegetables; 2) eco-, agro-, and cultural tourism; and 3) light manufacturing in wood/furniture and textiles. Across the three value chains, EDGE promotes information communication and technology (ICT) opportunities for digitization. The buy-in component allows for quick mobilization of activities in any EDGE country and may be appropriate for bilateral or multi-country/regional activities. Buy-ins can fall under any of EDGE's three objectives. The total budget ceiling for the core and buy-in components is \$21 million.

I.2. PROGRAM CONTEXT

EDGE was launched in 2019 during a period of great turmoil and economic uncertainty that had negative effects on both regional and global economies. Events during this period were extremely unpredictable; the COVID-19 pandemic set in motion major disruptions in the supply chains, distribution problems, and difficult communication, resulting in the failure of many companies. In February 2022 Russia attacked Ukraine, initiating the greatest conflict in Europe since World War II. Energy and food prices in the region soared due to disrupted trade routes, sanctions against Russian energy and grain, and an influx of more than 5 million refugees into the region¹ to flee from war or escape poor economic conditions. Domestic politics are influenced by Russian and nationalist parties' disinformation campaigns, further exacerbating

¹ World Bank, 2022 World Development Indicators; European Central Bank Access to Finance (2022); Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SME) Policy Index (2022).

underlying ethnic, religious, and pro-Russian tensions in many countries.² The massive influx of refugees has affected local economies and political stability in the region, especially in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Concurrently, outmigration of youth in the region has increased labor shortages. The breakdown in regional cross-border trade reduced the availability of inputs for industry, agriculture, energy, and consumer goods. Households in the region are becoming more vulnerable because quickly rising costs of energy and food require them to spend a significantly higher percentage of their income on essential goods than before the pandemic and war in Ukraine.³ Evidence suggests that disruptions in supply chains in one country led to increased costs in neighboring countries.

In response to the multiple crises, countries in the region are introducing measures to protect their economies, overcome liquidity problems, and subsidize energy costs. For example, central banks are raising interest rates to fight inflation—although doing so offsets the advantages of investing in the region because of traditionally low labor costs.⁴ Climate change impacts and sanctions against Russian energy imports affect the prices and availability of energy and other inputs needed for production.

1.3. PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess EDGE's effectiveness and efficiency in addressing activity objectives and to develop recommendations to inform the EE Bureau's thinking regarding the future design of regional economic growth activities. Of EDGE's three objectives, this evaluation focuses primarily on Objective 1, reduced barriers to cross-border trade and investment, and Objective 3, improved market integration and expanded market linkages. The evaluation focuses on the period of performance from July 29, 2019, through July 2023. This report outlines actionable recommendations drawn from the key findings of each EQ; it suggests opportunities and possible adjustments that could enhance current program activities and help prioritize future regional activities in the USAID/EE portfolio.

1.4. EVALUATION QUESTIONS

This evaluation assesses specific programmatic approaches in achieving intended life-of-program results. To accomplish this task, the evaluation team developed an evaluation approach to address the five EQs listed below and outlined in the Evaluation Work Plan found in Annex A.

TABLE 2: EVALUATION QUESTIONS

1: To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies and organizations integrated into a) regional value chains and b) global value chains? Objectives and targets?

2: What lessons were learned from modifying the implementation of interventions during COVID-19 that can be used in future design considerations?

² USAID Congressional Testimony of Assistant Administrator for EE Erin E. McKee before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Countering Russian Aggression: Ukraine and Beyond." January 26, 2023.

³ According to a Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) discussion on May 9, 2023, about 35 percent to 45 percent of household income in the region was spent on food from 2020-2022, whereas the average in Western countries is less than 15 percent according to the United Nations Development Programme.

⁴ World Bank, Europe and Central Asia Overview, April 6, 2023.

3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EDGE management structure?

4. To what extent did the leverage requirement contribute to sustainability of activities?

5. To what extent are EDGE activities supporting countries in meeting and fulfilling their EU accession criteria?

I.5. EVALUATION AUDIENCE

The primary audience of the evaluation is USAID/EE and the 12 USAID Missions in the region. USAID/EE may share the results of this evaluation with other stakeholders, such as government partners, industrial associations, nongovernmental organizations, and other USAID implementing partners (IPs) and donors working in this area.

I.6. HOW THE REPORT IS ORGANIZED

The evaluation report is organized as follows:

- Section 2, Methodology, outlines the methods used to inform this review, in addition to the sampling approach and data limitations.
- Section 3, Key Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations addresses each learning question.
- Annex A provides the evaluation design for this review.
- Annex B provides a statement of differences, if any.
- Annex C presents the bibliography for the desk review.
- Annex D lists individuals who participated in key informant interviews (KIIs).
- Annex E presents the interview protocols for KIIs and the electronic survey related to MEL processes.
- Annex F provides disclosure of conflicts of interest forms signed by members of the evaluation team.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. EVALUATION METHODS

The MELDS evaluation team conducted this mid-term performance evaluation in Washington, D.C., and through fieldwork in Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, and North Macedonia from April to July 2023. The team consisted of five core members: the team lead, senior data analyst and Georgian subject matter expert, Kosovar subject matter expert, Moldovan subject matter expert, North Macedonian subject matter expert, and a regional logistics coordinator. The evaluation team conducted KIIs with selected stakeholders from USAID; the IP, IDG; grantees; government partners; local partners;⁵ and other donors. The team used a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative KIIs, small group discussions, and reviews of performance monitoring data. This approach reflects USAID's similar combinations approach, which uses different methods to collect and analyze information that is then synthesized to answer evaluation questions.⁶

The evaluation team was briefed on data collection protocols, as outlined in USAID's Human Subject Protection Policy and USAID's Evaluation Policy, regarding the rights and welfare of human subjects. The team leader trained the team in survey methodology, USAID's survey regulations, relevant regulations, and the data collection plan. To start, the evaluation team held consultative meetings with the IP and USAID staff to gain inputs and solicit feedback, which it used to finalize the evaluation design.

2.1.1. SECONDARY DATA

The evaluation team conducted desk research before beginning fieldwork to identify and analyze secondary information that it could triangulate with data collected in the field. The team conducted an extensive desk review of key program and external documents to become familiar with key activities and build understanding of private sector engagement to situate the evaluation. The team worked with USAID/EE to retrieve relevant program documents including secondary data and background documents (relevant academic periodical publications, other donor reports, project surveys, monitoring and evaluation plans, work plans, and quarterly and annual reports). In total, the evaluation team reviewed 36 documents to obtain a comprehensive picture of the development context, challenges and priorities, economic policies, laws, and regulations, as well as insights into the business enabling environment, and competitiveness in the selected countries. These are listed in Annex C.

2.1.2. QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

To obtain complementary and supplemental qualitative data focused on processes and results, the evaluation team conducted fieldwork from May 1–26, 2023, with team members based in Kosovo, Moldova, and North Macedonia. KIIs were conducted remotely in Georgia via online meeting platforms. During the three-week fieldwork, the evaluation team held KIIs and small group meetings with 71 stakeholders (48 percent women, 52 percent men). Figures 1 and 2, respectively, show the disaggregation of KIIs by sex and country. Key informants included IP leadership, MEL team members, and team leaders;

⁵ Local partners include businesses, business service organizations, trade associations, BSPs, policy institutes, and professional associations.

⁶ See *USAID Technical Note: Conducting Mixed-Method Evaluations*, Version 1, June 2013.

subcontracting partners, including MEL and communications support; and representatives from USAID and other donors (see Figure 3). Evaluators captured responses using semi-structured and open-ended questions and used targeted probing questions and techniques to deepen the discussion and capture rich, high-quality data. The evaluation team sent brief discussion guides to the interviewees in advance of conducting KIIs.

FIGURE 1: KEY INFORMANTS DISAGGREGATED BY SEX

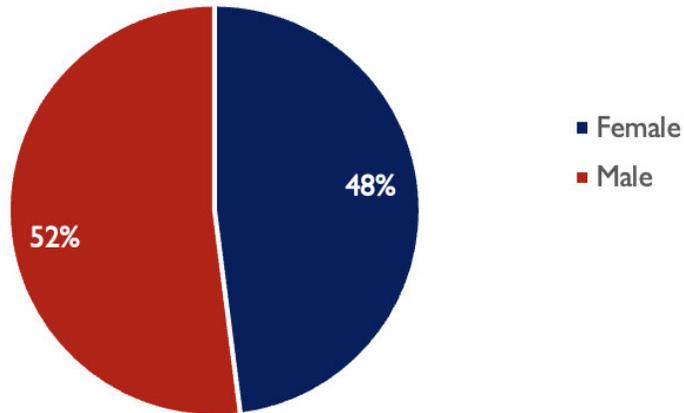


FIGURE 2: KEY INFORMANTS DISAGGREGATED BY COUNTRY

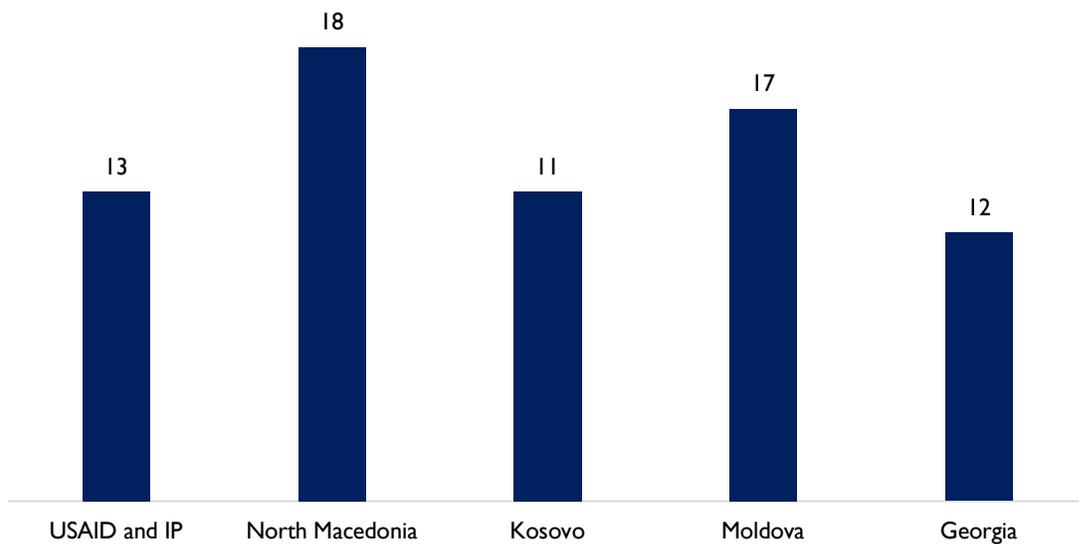
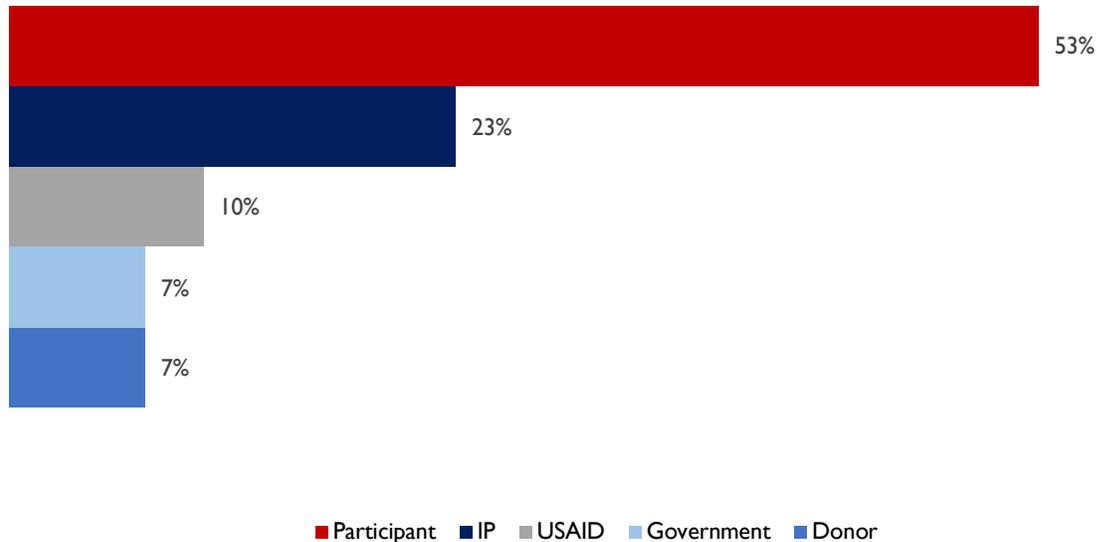


FIGURE 3: KEY INFORMANTS DISAGGREGATED BY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS



2.2. ANALYSIS

At the macro level, data analysis and synthesis were guided by an abductive reasoning approach advocated by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow.⁷ Unlike inductive and/or deductive modes of inquiry, which typically follow a more linear logic, abductive reasoning entails a more circular or spiraling process and represents a simultaneous puzzling-out of insights from data gained through the desk review and KIs. The team's approach to analyzing and triangulating findings used four distinct protocols to analyze data:

- Content and comparative analysis of document review;
- Descriptive statistical analysis of quantitative MEL and survey data (using Survey Monkey);
- Coding and content/thematic analysis of KIs (manually, through notes); and
- Data triangulation.

2.3. LIMITATIONS

Selection bias: Nearly all the key informants for this evaluation were based in four countries, although EDGE covers 12 countries in the EE region. Not all were familiar with the overall portfolio of activities. The evaluation team mitigated this limitation by conducting multiple interviews with IP and USAID staff who had high-level knowledge and understanding of EDGE.

Limited responses to the quantitative survey: The evaluation team designed an online quantitative survey (see Annex E) that it disseminated to more than 100 individuals who participated in EDGE training activities. However, with fewer than 10 responses, the response rate did not meet a 30 percent threshold

⁷ Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow. *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

for statistical significance. Therefore, the evaluation team was unable to use additional data to validate qualitative findings. The team considered lessons learned during recent evaluations regarding extensive use of qualitative collection methods.

Limitation of data comparability in two collection methods: The study was planned for data collection through two methods, in-person interviews and remote (online) surveys. The evaluation team understood that potential differences in the quality and depth of responses collected through these methods might influence the generalization of findings across the entire population of interest. The team acknowledges this limitation and considers ways to minimize its impact, such as by comparing the findings obtained through different methods and using appropriate statistical techniques to adjust for potential biases.

Difficulty assessing progress to sustainability and long-term objectives: The evaluation was conducted while implementation was ongoing. However, EDGE's work to influence sustainability, such as leveraging funds and contributions to intra-regional and Euro-Atlantic integration, may take years to deliver the intended results. The period of performance for the activities ranges from less than two years to four years, and implementation is at various stages. The team assessed progress to date and highlighted potential gaps to be addressed in the remaining period of performance and in future design considerations.

2.4. GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION CONSIDERATIONS

The evaluation findings captured the situations and experiences of males and females who participated in and/or benefited from EDGE activities. The evaluation team engaged with women and men regarding the effects of this engagement, including any unintended consequences for women—whether positive or negative. The evaluation design and methodology ensured that data collection did not disproportionately reach men or women participants by assessing the universe of participants and sampling from this group proportionally by sex. Data collection instruments and protocols were gender-sensitive and reflected an understanding of gender roles and constraints in local contexts, including an acknowledgement that 50 percent of EDGE participants are women.

3. EVALUATION FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The five subsections below present findings, conclusions, and recommendations for each EQ. Each begins by presenting the evaluation question, followed by the findings, then the conclusions, and ends with the recommendations.

EFFECTIVENESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

EQ1: TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE PROJECT PROVED SUCCESSFUL IN ASSISTING COMPANIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INTEGRATING INTO A) REGIONAL VALUE CHAINS AND B) GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS?

FINDINGS

F.1.1. EDGE has demonstrated various strengths in its approaches to enhancing regional economic growth and competitiveness. From helping companies improve their management capacities and export capabilities to organizing high-impact regional forums and facilitating important legislative actions, EDGE's presence has been meaningful and multifaceted. The project's proficiency in working closely with other donor partners in the three targeted value chains (fruits and vegetables, wood products and textiles, and tourism) is evident and contributes to the effective and efficient use of resources. Moreover, its activities are improving trade integration and transparency in the region by facilitating consultations among relevant authorities according to participants in the Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) program. EDGE is demonstrating that systemic changes have the potential to increase and strengthen cross-border trade as a result of the study visit to two joint border crossings between Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina. The EDGE team has shown considerable flexibility and responsiveness to mitigate the impact of economic disruptions affecting SMEs due to COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine.

F.1.2. EDGE has provided training and capacity building support to individuals and firms to advance their integration into regional and global value chains, as indicated by several key performance metrics. The project has reached 1,606 individuals and 520 organizations who participated in trade facilitation events capacity building activities.⁸ Seventy-five firms obtained certifications from international quality control institutions. The certifications, which signify adherence to global product standards, are essential for integration into global value chains. EDGE provided technical support to 231 organizations to improve SME competitiveness and facilitated new buyer linkages for 287 SMEs. Anecdotally, EDGE stakeholders producing textiles, furniture, and organic food products said their exports to EU markets increased, although networking opportunities did not lead to increased exports to regional markets. EDGE performance indicators do not track increases in sales, volume, revenue, or expansion of products, which limits the evaluation team's ability to assess effectiveness outcomes.

F.1.3. EDGE support was most useful in subsidizing participation in trade shows and other events, according to several respondents in all three value chains. One producer shared, "*Promotion and marketing support [was useful], because no one knows what Kosovo produces. Companies need to be present in*

⁸ These reported figures may include instances of double counting, potentially overrepresenting the number of unique entities. This reflects a limitation of the EDGE AMELP and MEL system.

fairs and [business-to-business events] to be closer to buyers.” Apart from supporting participation of textile manufacturers in business-to-business (B2B) events, respondents working in the apparel value chains reported that the most consequential activity was a textile productivity simulation model rolled out in May 2022. In partnership with Axiom-Tech, which specializes in software for optimizing processes, EDGE identified four companies to implement computer modeling, simulations, and optimization of one production line. The goal is to improve productivity efficiency by 30 percent. Using a productivity simulation model should enable companies to identify and eliminate bottlenecks and improve productivity and quality. However, at the time of the evaluation it was not clear if more than four textile and apparel firms would benefit from this activity.

F.1.4. BSPs participated in two training courses that focused on improving SMEs’ access to finance and strengthening their competitiveness. EDGE joined other partners in organizing the regional online Conference on Organic Agriculture to exchange lessons, discuss the latest market trends and requirements related to the EU Action Plan for Organic Production, and explore opportunities to establish closer regional cooperation. BSPs participated in a regional conference, the Digitization in Agriculture Webinar, which introduced digitization in agriculture to regional stakeholders, including agricultural producers and digitization service providers. BSP respondents said their participation in training events was good for networking and gaining insights into financing issues in the targeted value chains. To date, no BSPs have reported gaining new clients as a result of these events, so it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the two trainings. According to EDGE staff, BSPs and business support organizations (BSOs) were “involved in all EDGE activities” but the extent of their involvement cannot be assessed without reported outputs.

F.1.5. EDGE took a three-pronged approach to supporting companies to implement standards and certificates. One was direct support for certification using the grant scheme, through which companies from different value chains were certified. A second approach was direct engagement of certification bodies to certify companies. The third approach was training auditors and BSPs via learning events that informed companies of the procedures for certification and the importance of certificates for their work, especially in exporting to EU countries. Respondents noted that EDGE provided timely and quality support in these activities.

According to respondents, the CEFTA framework does not provide clear and transparent rules for trade. Regulatory disparities among CEFTA countries result in non-recognition of mutual standards, which reduces the competitiveness of goods and services produced in the region. For example, it is essential for food products to reach destinations on time, but CEFTA countries do not recognize the phytosanitary certificates and certificates of origin issued by neighboring countries.

Several respondents suggested that it would be preferable (and more efficient) to adhere to EU regulations and ignore the CEFTA framework. One respondent said, “*Certification and training are a regional need because of the EU requirements. We can lose access to EU markets due to lack of certification. There is a space to invest in regional projects that support the certification process, because donors don’t do much here.*” According to World Bank 2021 cross-border trade data, goods worth about \$5.4 million were exported from one country in the Western Balkans subregion to other CEFTA countries, whereas goods worth more than \$20 million were exported from the Western Balkans to EU countries. Many respondents, including staff from USAID and other donors, suggested the political stalemate between Kosovo and Serbia and the

limited technical expertise of the CEFTA Secretariat make the organization ineffectual. Several respondents said further investments in the CEFTA process are not warranted.

F.1.6. EDGE training and mentoring indirectly assisted SMEs in countering investors' perceptions of increased risks in the region due to political instability caused by the war in Ukraine, past inter-ethnic conflicts, insufficient application of the rule of law, extensive corruption, and slow and ineffective public administration. Many firms across the region suffer reputational damage due to uneven productivity and the poor quality of products in the agricultural and wood processing value chains, as well as slow delivery and corruption.⁹ Several respondents commented on the difficulty of finding trade partners due to negative perceptions of the region. Respondents from companies in all three value chains stated that their survival is tied to integration into larger regional and international markets, especially EU countries.

F.1.7. Under the core component, EDGE executed 10 GUCs in Year 2 and six GUCs in Year 4 that were used to improve financing, human resources, and automated production technology to engage in larger-scale production. Grantees and other respondents noted that the region is slow to digitize the entire production process that maps value chain participants and makes the process transparent, traceable, and efficient. One respondent said that digital farming techniques are cost-effective and efficient for improving farm management, which integrates financial and field-level records (data on soil, weather, and crop growth) but that only a few local producers implement them. EDGE delivered online regional webinars on ICT innovations and applications in smart agriculture that introduced digital tools and logical digital bundles for precise irrigation, satellite and drone crop monitoring, and pest monitoring with digital traps. About 20 individuals from 10 farmers' associations participated, but no data is available regarding the application of this learning. According to EDGE staff, the project is actively collaborating with USAID Kosovo Compete Activity and CATALYZE Engines of Growth Activity to establish a secondary market for equipment, but the concept has not become operationalized. According to agricultural stakeholders, there is high demand for this type of technical assistance to improve decision-making and adapt new technologies.

F.1.8. Agriculture-focused activities have started to invest more in organic production of products with high export potential, especially in response to consumer demands in EU markets. Many donor projects support the agriculture sector in this area, but a need remains for large investments in organic production to achieve mass scale. To do so, producers must obtain annual certifications in organic standards, food safety, and quality ingredients. This is a high hurdle, because the process is comparatively expensive and there is a lack of accredited companies to provide certification in the region. EDGE issued a grant to a company in North Macedonia that provides certifications to organic food producers.

F.1.9. USAID Mission staff and other donors noted that legal frameworks are outdated and poorly suited to supporting the development of new niche areas of tourism. The Swiss Development Corporation respondents in Kosovo said that, only after 10 years, could it see a return on the agency's tourism investment in capacity building and adequate local government support in one

⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Business, Corruption and Crime in the Western Balkans, 2021; Freedom House Index for Government Accountability and Transparency. 2022.

municipality for critical investments in infrastructure and workforce development. At the same time, USAID bilateral programming is investing strategically in niche tourism in Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, and other countries in the region. Large economic growth flagship programs like the Economic Security Program in Georgia have robust budgets and are building the capacity of local public and private sector partners to engage in historical, religious, cultural, gastronomic, and adventure sports tourism. EDGE partnered with USAID/Georgia and its bilateral programs to collaborate with Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in Armenia. USAID/Moldova had an EDGE buy-in in the first months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to support local tour operators in providing shelter to Ukrainian refugees. Those tour operators, in turn, upgraded their hotels to make them more energy efficient, thereby extending their tourist season.

CONCLUSIONS

C.1.1. Several aspects of the EDGE project produced tangible results in regional value chain integration. The project has driven capacity building initiatives that show clear positive results for a majority of involved organizations. The project's training sessions have also been largely successful; learnings were applied in 83 percent of cases and deemed useful by 93 percent of participants, suggesting that the initiatives have met relevant needs and delivered significant benefits. The project has also made strides in strengthening regional market integration, notably through the establishment of new buyer linkages for 287SMEs, a clear sign of progress in connecting these businesses to broader regional networks. It remains important to consider the wider regional context when assessing these achievements. Substantial systemic challenges, including the non-recognition of certifications, slow and inefficient customs enforcement, and an underdeveloped regional value chain integration remain major obstacles that the project alone cannot overcome.

C.1.2. EDGE has made notable progress in global value chain integration through its capacity building efforts, as evidenced by the 75 firms that have secured certifications from international quality control institutions. Those certifications are instrumental for companies that seek to integrate into global value chains; they increase the firms' credibility and demonstrate their compliance with international standards, enabling them to participate effectively in international markets.

The project's efforts in promoting digitization have been noteworthy, although they lack a comprehensive approach. This is crucial to consider in targeting competitiveness in the context of an increasingly digitized global economy. Although EDGE activities have demonstrated some success in supporting organizations' integration into both regional and global value chains, the results are varied and face significant challenges. The project has supported individual firms and a few associations, but broader systemic and technological barriers persist. Future design considerations would benefit from a market systems approach to address the challenges effectively and further enhance regional and global integration.

C.1.3. In the absence of national reforms, there is little that a project like EDGE can do other than support individual tour operators or increase the capacity of associations such as Balkan Green and the Balkan Adventure Tourism Association. Therefore, EDGE has promoted the Western Balkans and Georgia-Armenia single destinations, supporting B2B activities and attendance at trade fairs that present tourism opportunities to international buyers and enhance regional cooperation. It will be important to assess lessons learned from investments in this value chain and whether a regional

approach makes sense, given current bilateral programming and the lack of a regulatory framework in the Western Balkans.

C.1.4. Substantial challenges remain to secure mutual recognition of certificates, for which political disagreements have been major roadblocks. Variances in regional regulations have made exports to the EU more straightforward than exports to CEFTA countries.

C.1.5. EDGE has provided firm-level support to SMEs in the region to obtain export certifications and fostered best practices in quality control and management. This approach shows incremental progress but does not address the larger regional challenge of mutual recognition of certificates obtained in neighboring countries. As a result, cross-border trade is anemic compared to trade with EU countries. This issue underscores the essential role of certification in gaining market access, particularly to the European market, with often stringent standards for imported goods. Furthermore, obtaining such certifications not only helps in gaining access to new markets but also contributes to improving the overall quality of products and operational practices. This, in turn, can increase consumer confidence and, potentially, prices for products.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R.1.1. Continue and expand technical assistance to associations and organizations with experience certifying firms to meet the emerging requirements of the EU and private brands for energy efficiency, waste management, and environmental compliance of products and services. This assistance should include capacity building, training, and knowledge sharing to ensure that these organizations can certify and support businesses to meet the required standards.

R.1.2. Address logistics and internal transportation challenges by prioritizing the identification and resolution of logistics and internal transportation challenges that impede competitiveness. Conduct comprehensive market systems analyses and scoping exercises that focus on these issues, and develop actionable plans to improve transportation infrastructure, optimize supply chain processes, and enhance overall efficiency in logistics and internal transportation.

R.1.3. Strengthen government partnerships, because they are critical in facilitating linkages to multilateral structures and addressing political challenges that hinder cross-border movement of goods and services. Foster stronger collaboration with relevant government entities to advocate for policy reforms, streamline regulatory processes, and promote an enabling environment for international trade.

EFFECTIVENESS OF DELIVERY MODALITIES

EQ2: WHAT LESSONS WERE LEARNED FROM MODIFYING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERVENTIONS DURING COVID-19 THAT CAN BE USED IN FUTURE DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS?

FINDINGS

F.2.1. EDGE conducted online, offline, and hybrid training sessions that reached 1,715 participants in 2022 and 1,235 in the first two quarters of 2023. About 83 percent of participants reported to EDGE that they have applied the knowledge and skills acquired from the training in their work. In feedback questionnaires, 93 percent of participants stated that the training was useful. These findings underscore the impact of the training. However, EDGE MEL processes and reporting do not

differentiate between levels of satisfaction with online and offline training modalities. The indicators only track overall satisfaction and whether the participants' needs and expectations were met.

F.2.2. Opinions favoring in-person or online training varied among stakeholders in different regions and value chains. For example, customs officials in Moldova and North Macedonia valued in-person training for networking and relationship building opportunities. In contrast, officials in Kosovo found it more convenient to schedule shorter blocks of time for online training and appreciated online access to resource materials. Rural farmers and exporters working in agricultural value chains expressed a preference for online training because it eliminates travel to urban areas for in-person training. Most tour operators participating in EDGE activities are located away from urban areas and they, too, expressed a preference for online training in the KILs. Nearly all women who participated in both in-person and online training preferred the online format because it was more accessible and convenient for their schedules, despite needing to overcome low levels of technological proficiency prior to the online format. Several female respondents also shared that they were more actively engaged in online training because male participants were less domineering in those format. Exporters of wood products and textiles greatly favored in-person events such as participating in trade fairs and exhibitions in European cities.

F.2.3. Digital literacy and technological proficiency varied among training participants in different value chains and locations. For non-urban participants in all three value chains, internet connectivity speed and affordability posed challenges to participation and affected the effectiveness of online training. In Moldova, for example, tour operators had easy internet access, whereas many tour operators in North Macedonia and Kosovo had unreliable or costly internet access that affected them and their clients. No respondents in Serbia or Georgia cited internet accessibility as an impediment to participation in online training. Non-urban respondents in Kosovo and North Macedonia overwhelmingly stated a preference for online learning platforms because they reduced burdensome travel logistics; at the same time, however, many were less technologically equipped and knowledgeable about how to engage effectively online.

F.2.4. Almost one in three EDGE participants who were interviewed by the evaluation team, observed that the trainer's skills were vital in engaging participants. They noted that many instructors were unfamiliar with online training, struggled to adapt their curricula, and were unable to create interactive learning experiences. A sizeable number of public sector employees who have extensive experience with online meetings and learning venues expressed dissatisfaction with the instructors' teaching quality and inability to engage audiences. According to these respondents, the EDGE team should have put quality assurance measures in place to ensure the instructors and mentors were experienced in delivering content via online learning platforms. There was no indication from IP staff that this feedback had reached them; nor did the IP take steps to guide the trainers in adjusting their delivery of content on new platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

C.2.1. The rapid switch to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic ensured continued delivery of training sessions and implementation of project activities for nearly 3,000 individuals in 2022 and the first half of 2023. The flexibility offered by online learning platforms ensured that project activities moved forward and were implemented promptly, regardless of external circumstances such as the global pandemic, economic disruptions, and the war in Ukraine. However, the

EDGE MEL processes and learning agenda do not differentiate participants' levels of satisfaction with different learning modalities, so these findings are based on qualitative data generated by the 84 KIIs and small group discussions. Rather, the EDGE learning indicators measure outcomes and overall participant satisfaction based on feedback questionnaires.

C.2.2. Online training was a powerful tool for enhancing inclusivity and accessibility, especially for non-urban participants and women. By offering online or hybrid training that combined in-person and online options, the IP effectively removed geographical barriers and ensured greater accessibility and inclusivity. The importance of tailoring interventions to cultural and contextual preferences was highlighted by key informants. Varied preferences for in-person and online training among regions and stakeholders emphasized the need to design interventions that align with cultural norms and individual preferences.

C.2.3. The success of online training depended on factors such as participants' skills, internet access, and facilitator engagement. Online training platforms need to consider participants' internet connectivity, digital literacy, and technological proficiency to ensure equitable access.

C.2.4. The success of online training depended on the ability of trainers and mentors to adapt their curricula to online formats during the early stages of online training. The IP did not seem aware of this feedback and did not have vetting procedures in place that might have exposed training limitations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R.2.1. Incorporate training taxonomy and digital data collection instruments into the project's MEL system. Develop a hierarchical training taxonomy that categorizes and classifies training programs based on their characteristics, objectives, and content. Implement digital data collection instruments, such as online surveys, mobile data collection applications, or electronic data entry systems, to collect quantitative and qualitative data related to training activities. Monitor training outcomes, measure participant satisfaction, evaluate knowledge retention, and track important indicators using these standardized tools. Continuously improve the quality and effectiveness of training interventions across different modalities based on the insights gathered and demonstrated cultural and contextual preferences.

R.2.2. Establish a structured legacy archive through a systematic approach to curating training and learning materials, recordings, and photo galleries of trade fairs and exhibitions. Select a suitable digital platform or system for storage and accessibility. Organize the content in a structured manner for easy navigation and retrieval. Convert physical materials to digital formats for long-term preservation. Establish a curation process for reviewing and approving new content. Encourage stakeholders to document lessons learned. Regularly update and maintain the archive to ensure usability and relevance. Seek feedback to continuously improve its effectiveness. Promote awareness and utilization of the archive within the organization or community.

EFFICIENCY OF THE EDGE MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

EQ3: WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE EDGE MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE?

FINDINGS

F.3.1. The EDGE project team, primarily located in Skopje, North Macedonia, manages core project activities. These include grants, training, B2B events, and coordination with other USAID projects and donors. EDGE headquarters staff in the United States manage buy-ins from Albania, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine and over the life of the project has had local buy-in teams. Two value chain specialists in agriculture and wood processing are engaged as consultants and based in Skopje, and one tourism specialist is based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). USAID's economic growth officers and IPs implementing USAID's flagship economic growth projects characterized the EDGE approach as lacking strategic focus and duplicating many bilateral activities. Mission staff emphasized that EDGE should not engage with individual firms that are supported through bilateral programming. Several USAID implementers suggested that EDGE activities would be more complementary to ongoing activities if USAID implementers of bilateral programs and projects were invited to work planning sessions and consulted chiefs of party, value chain specialists, and grants managers.

Four USAID staff members suggested that EDGE is missing opportunities to expand regional outreach to promote grants, connections to bilateral Economic Growth programming, Global Development Alliances, and inclusive development approaches because it does not engage more directly with Mission staff and the USAID regional Economic Growth Officer based in Skopje. USAID staff suggested that Missions do not perceive EDGE outcomes as consequential. The results are mostly visible at the program officer level at Missions rather than rising to the attention of Mission leadership who are interested in promoting bigger problem-solving outcomes.

F.3.2. EDGE engaged two subregional representatives with Missions to advance cooperation and identify regional partnership opportunities, largely based on recommendations stemming from an evaluation of the earlier Regional Economic Growth Program. One subregional specialist based in Tbilisi, Georgia, covers the Caucasus countries; another based in Kyiv, Ukraine, covers Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. Based on feedback from USAID staff, the subregional representatives add value and are "doing a reasonable job" of coordinating with bilateral economic growth teams but "fully understanding the country context and local ecosystems is not achievable through part-time consulting," according to one. Mission staff added that the subregional representatives did not appear to follow a specific approach that outlines steps they should take to identify and develop potential buy-ins for Missions.

F.3.3. EDGE has proven to be an efficient rapid response and bridging mechanism. USAID/Moldova is satisfied with two buy-ins that supported 60 tour operators that hosted Ukrainian refugees. The EDGE team took two to 23 days to respond to Mission buy-in requests and less than 10 days to launch buy-in activities after receiving USAID approval for technical and cost proposals (see Table 2).

TABLE 3: RAPID RESPONSE TO BUY-IN REQUESTS

Average number of days needed to submit technical and cost proposals after receiving a draft statement of work (SOW) from the buy-in requesting Mission or Bureau	Between 2 and 23 days, with an average six days according to EDGE staff
Average number of days needed to launch a buy-in activity after receiving approval from the EDGE COR and CO.	4 to 5 days

F.3.4. The EDGE management structure is stronger in providing technical support at the firm level than in implementing a cluster or systems approach, according to USAID and local partner respondents. Technical staff, primarily part-time consultants, demonstrated the ability to support individual companies' competitiveness rather than an overarching approach to transforming regional innovations and reforms into sustainable cross-border value chains. In interviews with EDGE staff and technical specialists, they did not demonstrate strong familiarity with the USAID missions' private sector engagement plans and linkages to the Country Development Strategies.

Respondents stated that EDGE was professional in organizing regional forums and conferences and supporting companies' participation in trade fairs, study tours, B2B events, and informational events about requirements for export to EU markets. For example, participants provided positive ratings of awareness-raising workshops about the benefits of the AEO certificate for export companies. Members of two business association suggest the EDGE cost-share requirements were too high and rigidly applied (see the discussion of EQ4 below). For example, EDGE organized three AEO regional workshops, two online training sessions, and a three-day training course for customs administrators that was attended by 55 risk managers from nine countries.

EDGE developed internal capacity building training to enable its staff and consultants to better understand advanced risk management and implementation of value chain security and safety standards for AEOs, which increased their technical capacity.

F.3.5. Donor respondents from the World Bank, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and GIZ characterized collaboration with EDGE as positive and useful in avoiding duplication in support to customs agencies and value chains. Open calls for proposals were additional channels for soliciting programming ideas from SMEs and BSPs, which led to a proposal for facilitating a joint border crossing between North Macedonia and Albania.

F.3.6. The EDGE team does not reflect the diversity of the EE region and focus countries. For example, the evaluation team noted that no one on the EDGE team speaks Albanian, which is spoken in Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and in other parts of the Western Balkans.

F.3.7. Grantees raised concerns about the EDGE team's competence in managing grants. The lengthy decision-making process resulted in missed opportunities for grantees to secure additional cost-sharing options with other donors, as expressed by one grantee: *"We had anticipated quicker decision-making regarding the grants, but the process was quite prolonged. Unfortunately, this timing issue led to the loss*

of a cost-sharing arrangement we had with another donor.” The evaluation team interviewed 16 grantees and found the criticism to uniform across sectors.

Several of the 10 grantees expressed frustration with their limited engagement with EDGE’s value chain experts; they interacted only with the MEL team. They believed they would have seen more significant results and outcomes if EDGE technical experts provided customized business audits and product improvement plans, conducted quarterly site visits, and identified appropriate peer mentors. They noted that, while administrative support was substantial, the program lacked sufficient expert input. A grantee mentioned, “Most of the EDGE support was administrative and less expert support.” This highlights a structural weakness that silos EDGE MEL and grants staff.

F.3.8. EDGE could better utilize its AMELP to capture lessons and feedback from partners so best practices and innovations are scaled and replicated in new GUCs and training. To date in Year 5, EDGE has not developed grant appraisal measurements to document which grants were most successful and the extent to which the Theory of Change remains valid (see EQ4 for further discussion).

TABLE 4: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF EDGE’S MEL AND ADAPTIVE LEARNING APPROACHES

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>Rapid and flexible response: Ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and address quick needs in challenging environments.</p> <p>Dedicated MEL and grants staff: Provision of robust operational and administrative support to grantees and participants.</p> <p>Solicitation of feedback from participants: EDGE staff solicit direct feedback from participants to gauge their levels of satisfaction.</p> <p>Relevance of indicators and target setting: The targets and reported results align with anticipated outcomes.</p>	<p>Limited ability to differentiate between value chains and geographic locations of participants: Stakeholder groups are delineated only by the trainings or events they attended.</p> <p>Indicators not aligned with Missions’ private sector engagement strategies: EDGE staff were not familiar with the private sector engagement strategies developed by the Missions in the region.</p> <p>Diversity deficit: Diverse linguistic and cultural understanding often encourages more nuanced understanding of participants’ experiences and verbal feedback.</p> <p>Complex operational processes: Complex and time-consuming MEL system and operational processes can deter potential grantees.</p> <p>Inefficient use of AMELP: The AMELP is not utilized to its full potential to share learnings, receive feedback, and evaluate the success of grants and the Theory of Change.</p>

CONCLUSIONS

C.3.1. This evaluation found areas for improvement in EDGE’s effectiveness, efficiency, and overall sustainable impact. One significant challenge is the project’s engagement with its stakeholders and the broader regional context. Currently, the EDGE management team engages primarily with Missions’

economic growth staff to advertise its grant opportunities. EDGE extends invitations to learning events and supports coordination across development partners and USAID to coordinate similar economic growth projects of other USAID and donor partners. These gaps in strategic engagement and communication have led to criticisms that the project lacks a strategic focus. The need for a more strategic approach in liaising with USAID Missions will be critical to understand the contexts of different countries and align EDGE's focus with the Missions' bilateral priorities. Further, there is a need to diversify the EDGE team's language skills and cultural knowledge to improve its inclusivity and understanding of the EE region.

C.3.2. EDGE's technical focus is limited; its focus on bilateral partnerships involves individual firms but demonstrates no tangible improvements in strengthening regional value chain systems. *"There is a tendency to duplicate bilateral programming rather than thinking bigger to solve regional problems,"* one respondent explained. USAID Mission representatives unanimously stated that technical support to firms should be closely linked to bilateral programming because flagship economic growth projects establish trusting relationships with local firms to enhance local market systems through in-country presence. For example, investments in regional tourism have increased dialogue and cooperation among tour operators but have not yet produced measurable results, so it is difficult to assess the value of relationship building activities.

C.3.3. The current management structure of the MEL and grants functions is cumbersome and does not allow sufficient time or dedicated resources to capture and disseminate best practices in the final phase of the project before closeout. For example, many respondents said that future EDGE activities should focus on the green economy and facilitating climate adaptation strategies that meet EU environmental standards. However, there is no strong evidence for these types of programming recommendations. According to USAID and IP respondents, the EDGE team is not allocating resources to document lessons learned that can be shared across the region.

C.3.4. Operational processes, while generally demonstrating acceptable timelines, could be optimized further. This includes addressing complexities in reporting systems and redundancies, and better utilizing the AMELP to foster more effective learning and scale successful practices. EDGE's grant management process is another area where improvements could lead to greater efficiency and potentially free up resources for other important activities. To further its impact, EDGE should address its strategic focus, enhance communication, improve inclusivity, and optimize operational processes. By doing so, EDGE can be better positioned to overcome regional challenges and seize opportunities that could accelerate regional economic integration and growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R.3.1. EDGE should focus on regional problem-solving and avoid duplicating bilateral programming. Instead, it should prioritize addressing regional problems. EDGE grants and training should fill gaps in bilateral programming and hew more closely to country and regional-level private sector engagement strategies. By engaging more strategically with USAID Missions and implementers of flagship economic growth projects, EDGE can tackle challenges that have a broader impact.

R.3.2. Simplify grants procedures and improve AMELP output indicators and targets to optimize efficiency. Simplification will enable the MEL and grants teams to dedicate more time to

capturing and disseminating best practices with partners. Strengthening internal CLA opportunities will generate important lessons and promising practices for the region.

R.3.3 Identify and address gaps in language capabilities, such as the lack of Albanian language proficiency in the current team, although it is spoken throughout the Western Balkans. The chief of party and deputy chief of party are female, and five of the six technical experts and subregional representatives are male. EDGE should hire inclusively to reflect the diverse needs, cultural sensitivities, and contextual issues in the region.

SUSTAINABILITY OF EDGE ACTIVITIES

EQ4: TO WHAT EXTENT DID THE LEVERAGE REQUIREMENT CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF ACTIVITIES?

FINDINGS

F.4.1. Only 16 grants had been fully executed as of May 2023, although the EDGE work plan anticipated issuing about 30 grants during its period of performance. The 16 GUCs cover diverse entities. The table below shows the ratio of leverage for the Round I GUCs.

TABLE 5: SUMMARY OF ROUND -I GRANTS AND AMOUNT OF LEVERAGE							
	GUC Name	Cash	In-kind	Total	EDGE Grant Amount	Total Amount	Ratio
1	Active Albania	\$ 24,119	\$ 92,149	\$ 116,268	\$ 110,502	\$ 226,770	51%
2	AHK	-	\$ 123,072	\$ 123,072	\$ 120,145	\$ 243,217	51%
3	CENN	\$ 7,468	\$ 141,811	\$ 149,279	\$ 149,235	\$ 298,514	50%
4	Customs Administration	\$ 5,058	\$ 206,264	\$ 211,322	\$ 100,000	\$ 311,322	68%
5	GFA	-	\$ 149,510	\$ 149,510	\$ 149,400	\$ 298,910	50%
6	ICT Hub	\$10,800	\$ 109,970	\$ 120,770	\$ 120,770	\$ 241,540	50%
7	IQS	-	\$ 795,600	\$ 795,600	\$ 99,250	\$ 894,850	89%
8	LinkAcross	\$ 15,137	\$ 119,538	\$ 134,675	\$ 99,972	\$ 234,647	57%
9	MASIT	\$ 51,913	\$ 102,668	\$ 154,581	\$ 147,708	\$ 302,289	51%

10	SWG	\$ 38,843	\$ 114,247	\$ 153,090	\$ 149,900	\$ 302,990	51%
	TOTAL	\$ 153,338	1,954,829	\$2,108,167	\$1,246,882	\$3,355,049	63%

The primary beneficiaries of these grants have been Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, Georgia and Azerbaijan. EDGE grants in Serbia have focused primarily on the ICT sector. In North Macedonia, grants have been allocated to more diverse sectors, including to a public sector policy institute and agro-business. The textile and apparel sector has also received attention, indicating potential growth in the textile industry. In Albania, the tourism and agro-business sectors have been the main recipients of EDGE grants. Georgia has primarily received grants for the tourism sector, and BIH has been a recipient of grants targeting the wood processing and furniture sector. EDGE GUCs in Round II were awarded to organizations in Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Georgia, and Ukraine.

F.4.2. Most grantees, local partners and USAID staff took a positive view of EDGE’s requirement for grantees to provide leverage. The cost-share requirement compelled grantees to think creatively about resources and seek collaborations that they might not have considered. One grantee shared, *“The [cost share] requirement was initially a barrier because we didn’t have money, but then we understood that without partnerships with the private sector, we cannot survive, so we started to fundraise.”* This led to the establishment of three new partnerships. Another grantee commented, *“Cost sharing was an interesting experience. First it triggered the investment from my side, I felt motivated, the grant was just like an inheritance, received all of a sudden. I did much more work than I planned. For example, we built accommodation for our tourists and a VIP terrace for our special guests.”* This grantee used its cost share to install energy-efficient solar panels.

F.4.3. The EDGE leverage requirement was 50 percent for all GUCs, but grantee and donor partner respondents expressed a need for flexibility in cost share percentages because stakeholder groups have varying financial and resource capacity. A grantee from the private sector and a USAID economic growth officer both suggested that, while the 50:50 leverage requirement may be suitable for private sector grantees, a 30 percent share should be considered for associations and business service intermediaries. One grantee from a small organization commented on the difficulty in meeting the higher cost sharing requirements: *“It is a challenge for us to get 50:50 ratio, and we were lucky that we were able to cover that 50 percent from another donor program ... anything larger than 5 percent would have been very challenging.”*

F.4.4. GUCs in the Western Balkans provided resources for grantees to seek cross-border collaborations to share expertise, explore market expansion, and establish presence in a new country. A grantee stated, *“The grant by EDGE was used to collaborate with partners from Albania and Serbia to improve cooperation, sales, and learn from each other.”* Another grantee shared, *“The collaboration between Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) from Armenia and Georgia through the EDGE program is groundbreaking. It has provided us with a unique opportunity to work together and establish a partnership that has never happened before.”* This feedback indicates that EDGE GUCs facilitated the creation of connections that might not have occurred organically and that are likely to generate sustainable partnerships.

CONCLUSIONS

C.4.1. The leverage requirement, in the form of cost sharing, contributes to the sustainability of activities. This was achieved by fostering cross-border collaborations, encouraging grantees to form partnerships, making additional investments, and enhancing project sustainability. The requirement motivated grantees to creatively source resources and establish new collaborations that they might not otherwise have considered. The requirement cultivated a sense of ownership and commitment among grantees. The mandatory cost sharing component motivated them to invest more resources into their projects, enhancing their commitment and sustainability. It also propelled grantees to expand their networks and build partnerships with various EDGE partner stakeholders.

C.4.2. Flexibility in cost-share percentages is a crucial factor in attracting diverse grantees with different capacities in their value chains. This implies that a more nuanced approach, taking into consideration the type and size of an organization, is likely to lead to more effective engagement and outcomes. A grantee mentioned the positive impact of cost sharing, but also emphasized the need for careful planning: *“Contribution is a measure of commitment and discipline; it is very much welcomed and a normal approach in a development world. The only problem is that the funds should be planned well in advance.”* This reflects that, while cost sharing is valuable, the percentage and timing should be set to reflect grantees’ capacity and planning cycles. By employing a more adaptable approach to cost sharing, EDGE could create a more inclusive environment for a wider range of participants.

C.4.3. The leverage requirement had a positive impact on the sustainability of activities, although with some challenges. It catalyzed grantees to form partnerships, improve their business skills, and invest more in their projects. A more flexible leverage requirement could enhance participation from diverse grantees. On the management side, reducing the time required for decision-making and aligning reporting requirements with grant size could enhance operational efficiencies. Furthermore, increased expert support could better facilitate project implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R.4.1. EDGE should refine its grant management processes and better address the needs of grantees. The leverage requirement ratio for cost sharing should be adjusted for different types of stakeholder groups. It is recommended that the leverage requirement targets should be within a range of 30 percent to 50 percent of cost sharing. EDGE should streamline decision-making, align reporting requirements with grant size, and provide more comprehensive technical support.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

EQ5: TO WHAT EXTENT ARE EDGE ACTIVITIES SUPPORTING COUNTRIES IN MEETING AND FULFILLING THEIR EU ACCESSION CRITERIA DID THE LEVERAGE REQUIREMENT CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF ACTIVITIES?

FINDINGS

F.5.1. In the short term, it is difficult to assess the relevance of technical support provided by EDGE activities in enabling Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, and North Macedonia to meet their EU accession criteria. The effectiveness of EDGE activities in supporting EU accession processes is subject to factors including geopolitical, economic, and EU member states’ dynamics. Understanding and

maneuvering within these complex interactions is key to successful engagement in the EU accession journey.¹⁰ The impact of COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine underscore the importance of maintaining flexibility in EDGE activities to capitalize on unanticipated shifts in global trade trends. The agricultural sector has become increasingly important and adaptive due to escalating food prices, while the apparel sector struggles to meet EU standards for production and waste management. Regional tourism faces many challenges in meeting consistent and higher standards for client services. These regional dynamics illustrate the need for EDGE activities to incorporate context-specific strategies that can navigate complex geopolitical events that influence EU and US Government policies in the region.

F.5.2. EU accession requirements for countries in the region require improvements in key sectors including rule of law and anti-corruption, environmental sustainability, trade, and economic growth. Not all countries in the region have achieved candidate status. There is no easy way to correlate EDGE technical assistance to each country's EU accession requirements, although there are indirect linkages between EDGE support and key aspects of the accession criteria, as follows:

1. **Political criteria:** The EDGE program's efforts to enhance the business-enabling environment indirectly support the development of stable institutions that ensure democracy and the rule of law. The project's emphasis on reducing cross-border trade barriers and fostering regional cooperation contributes to maintaining neighborly relations, which is a critical aspect of the political criteria for EU accession.
2. **Economic criteria:** EDGE support for SMEs in the targeted countries helps improve business sophistication. By enhancing marketing and competitiveness and promoting digital transformation, EDGE activities aim to contribute to the development of a functioning market economy that can cope with competitive pressure within the EU. For example, more than 70 SMEs across the four data collection countries have expanded their strategic management, digital marketing, and export strategies, and 19 companies have created digital transformation strategies.
3. **Legislative alignment and administrative capacity:** EDGE helps countries harmonize with the EU Acquis by reducing barriers to cross-border trade and investment. The program also fosters compliance with international standards by promoting increased use of local business service organizations. For instance, 67 SMEs in the fruit and vegetable sector obtained international food certifications.

¹⁰ **North Macedonia** has had candidate status for the longest time, since 2001. In its 2021 EU Annual Action Plan, the country received €90.45 million in funding from the EU to fight organized crime and strengthen efforts in the green economy. North Macedonia benefits from the EU's large-scale trade, with a trade volume of €10.8 billion and foreign direct investment of €288.8 million in 2021. Furthermore, the EU's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance provides significant technical and financial assistance. The **EU-Georgia Association Agreement** established a foundation for political association and economic integration in 2016. The agreement, underscored by the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, has extended benefits to Georgia in the form of open markets and visa-free travel to the Schengen area. Georgia is also a recipient of large-scale EU grant support, with an allocation of €340 million for 2021–2024. The **EU-Kosovo Partnership** builds trading partnerships; the EU is Kosovo's largest trading partner, providing €344 million in foreign direct investment in 2022. Financial aid from the EU, particularly through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, solidifies its position as the largest provider of financial assistance to Kosovo. **Moldova** exports more to EU countries than to any other region. The Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area complements Moldova's free trade agreements, and domestic reforms aligned with EU standards are expected to augment trade opportunities. Moldova's integration into the EU's regulatory system is evidenced by the adoption of over 27,000 EU technical standards in its national legislation.

- 4. Market integration:** By enhancing market linkages and building the capacity of processors, traders, and exporters, EDGE advances market integration efforts—a critical aspect of the EU accession process. In North Macedonia, EDGE initiatives span diverse sectors, with emphasis on SMEs in fruits and vegetables; eco-, agro-, and cultural tourism; and textiles. Concrete examples of EDGE’s work include the establishment of the GrowBiz training and coaching project, which has amplified the strategic management, digital marketing, and export strategy skills of over 70 businesses. EDGE helped establish the joint border crossing point (JBCP) between North Macedonia and Albania at Kjafasan-Qafe Thane, a critical juncture on the Pan-European Transport Corridor VIII, facilitating smoother cross-border trade. EDGE’s work in Georgia has largely focused on the tourism and agritourism sectors, reflecting the country’s unique economic and developmental characteristics. In Moldova, EDGE has marginally influenced critical foundational elements for regional trade, domestic reform, and socio-economic advancements.

F.5.3. Respondents perceive EDGE activities that support relevant trade associations such as CEFTA, national customs agencies, and its inputs to the revision of the MAP REA as important policy-oriented investments. EDGE supported the implementation of the EU transitional rules of origin in CEFTA countries and was assisted BiH, Moldova, and North Macedonia in preparing their national lists of customs fees and charges to improve transparency overall in cross-border trade. The EDGE team and consultants supported CEFTA efforts to harmonize and reduce trade costs in the region, although exporters and donor partners said the CEFTA Secretariat is ineffective in fostering cross-border trade. Customs agencies and CEFTA jointly asked EDGE to organize consultations among relevant authorities of the six Western Balkans countries to help them formulate trade integration activities under MAP REA for the period 2021–2024. EDGE provided recommendations to authorities to address specific barriers to cross-border trade and investment with the aim of accelerating trade facilitation reforms in EDGE countries. EDGE has also supported the opening of a single border stop with joint controls, analyzing current procedures and providing grants to Macedonian and Albanian customs to facilitate the opening of JBCPs.

F.5.4. Obtaining relevant export certificates such as the Global Gap is an important achievement that designates a producer’s compliance with international standards for exports to EU countries. A key barrier that producers face, especially in the agriculture sector, is meeting the stringent quality and safety standards required for entry into international markets. Global Gap is one of the most recognized certifications; it addresses plant protection, environment protection, waste management, and other critical issues, making it almost a necessity for producers looking to export their goods. One grantee mentioned the critical importance of EDGE’s support in obtaining Global Gap certification: “*the EDGE grant was very useful since it enabled us to get the Global Gap certificate which is literally a passport for the EU for goods.*” Acquiring certifications like Global Gap and BRC (a global for food safety standard) can be cost-prohibitive and logistically challenging, particularly for smaller producers. EDGE assisted four SMEs in obtaining these certifications.

F.5.5. USAID considers the AEO program a strategic element in facilitating cross-border and global trade in the region. EDGE’s facilitation of the introduction of the AEO program helped Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, and North Macedonia progress toward meeting their EU accession criteria. Obtaining an AEO certificate means that a company involved in the international

movement of goods complies with World Customs Organization (WCO)¹¹ or equivalent requirements and supply chain security standards. AEO status provides firms myriad benefits, including faster cargo processing and clearance, fewer physical and document-based controls, deferred duty payments, and prioritized checking lines. AEO registration is a complex process; EDGE supported 35 firms in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia at various stages of their applications. AEO registration began in North Macedonia in 2019, and 24 companies have registered to date. A North Macedonian customs official noted, “EDGE’s support in the AEO implementation process has significantly facilitated our companies’ operations and has made us more compatible with EU standards.”

F.5.6. The effectiveness of EDGE activities has been tempered by significant political and regulatory challenges including political disagreements, insufficient compliance with WTO TFA regulations, unsynchronized regulations among CEFTA countries, and mutual non-recognition of certificates. While some of these issues, such as WTO TFA compliance, have been a focus of EDGE activities, others—particularly those of a political nature—are outside its mandate. Notable challenges remain within the CEFTA region. CEFTA’s current political landscape does not facilitate full mutual recognition of documents such as certificates issued by national authorities, labs, and certification bodies. This absence of harmonization in the CEFTA region impedes trade within the region, even though the EU, with clearer import standards, remains a more straightforward export destination. Fairly or not, some public officials who are key stakeholders criticized EDGE’s inability to tackle political stalemates (see textbox above).

F.5.7. EDGE has been instrumental in bolstering the capacity of business associations and individual companies to understand and meet EU regulations. Additionally, EDGE has promoted sustainable practices, such as waste management and circular economy models, and organized specialized trainings that are relevant to EU requirements. The GUC component has been particularly effective in supporting regional companies, notably SMEs, in the certification process. This support includes grants and facilitated engagement with certification bodies. Training for auditors on essential standards and support for certification bodies to secure accreditations are other notable EDGE initiatives. Respondents shared both approval and criticism of EDGE initiatives. Satisfaction with support for certification and capacity building processes is noted, alongside calls for additional, specialized training to improve productivity and market competitiveness. This finding underscores the importance of ongoing efforts to address regional trade barriers and enhance compliance with the higher standards required by the EU and private brands.

CONCLUSIONS

C.5.1. EDGE contributes positively to participating countries’ journey toward EU accession. The path is multifaceted, requiring improvements and reforms in standardization, certification, and regulatory compliance—areas that EU member states often manage more effectively. These challenges present considerable obstacles to integration into EU markets. In meeting EU accession criteria,

¹¹ The AEO program is a vital component of the EU accession criteria, specifically in trade facilitation measures and customs compliance. Mutual recognition of AEOs facilitates trade as well as bolstering supply chain security— both of which align with EU goals.

participating countries face challenges beyond the scope of the EDGE project design. Thus, while EDGE provides some support to EU accession, those ongoing challenges indicate that there is a long path ahead.

C.5.2. EDGE addresses key aspects of cross-border and regional trade by improving the business environment and promoting trade competitiveness within value chains. The project has done so through numerous capacity building activities for customs agents and by fostering stronger collaboration between WTO TFA and CEFTA governments and promoting business sophistication. EDGE's work to improve compliance with global trade standards and support certification has demonstrated an adaptive and multi-pronged strategy. This has enhanced many firms' export-readiness, strengthening their competitiveness in the international market. Respondents have also highlighted EDGE's commitment to delivering timely and quality support, reinforcing its standing as an effective partner for individuals if not market systems.

C.5.3. EDGE investments in value chains have contributed to improved competitiveness through activities including awareness raising events, trade missions, market linkage events, and webinars. These activities have familiarized companies with trade prerequisites in the CEFTA region and the EU. EDGE has also contributed to improving the regulatory framework at the government level, fostering an environment conducive to certification for EU export.

C.5.4. Problems remain regarding mutual recognition of exports between countries. CEFTA, as a regional Free Trade Agreement facilitator, should be an appropriate forum for raising the non-recognition of other countries' certificates, but the issues are mostly political. Mutual recognition of AEOs could be amplified if more AEO-certified companies exerted pressure on government to accelerate mutual recognition of AEO certificates. For example, the EU now recognizes Moldova's AEOs, a significant milestone in its EU accession journey. Kosovo and Georgia have also made progress in this area through their AEO programs.

C.5.5. While the EDGE program has successfully aligned its activities with common EU Action Plan priorities, individual countries' alignment and linkages with their action plans appear limited. This finding underscores the need for additional efforts, collaboration, and comprehensive reforms across sectors for those countries to fully meet EU accession criteria. Although EDGE has supported the participating countries' journey toward EU accession, it is clear that underlying political constraints greatly influence their action plans. This highlights the importance of contextual understanding and foresight in navigating complex geopolitical and economic environments.

RECOMMENDATION

R.5.1. EDGE, with its vital contributions and rapid response potential, must continue to evolve in its strategies and interventions and adapt to changing dynamics and overcoming interconnected challenges. This is essential for EDGE to maximize its impact and support participating countries in meeting accession criteria as they pursue EU integration.

ANNEX A: AAR AND EVALUATION WORK PLAN

I. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

USAID EDGE: INCLUSIVE, SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH & SUPPORTING INTRA-REGIONAL AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

The Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth in Europe and Eurasia (EDGE) project is designed to employ a flexible and adaptive learning approach that will make it possible to create and respond to economic growth opportunities as they arise. EDGE is a regional activity in the Europe and Eurasia (E&E) region that aims to create inclusive, sustainable economic growth and to support intra-regional and Euro-Atlantic integration. EDGE is managed by the E&E Bureau in Washington and works closely with USAID Missions and projects in the region. EDGE generates synergies among the USAID projects working in economic growth and brings together stakeholders across countries to work on mutual problems, giving the E&E portfolio a regional dimension. There are three objectives:

- Reduced barriers to cross-border trade and investment
- Improved business sophistication
- Improved market integration and expanded market linkages

EDGE is implementing regional economic development activities in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia), Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) through its “Core Component,” as well as through the “Buy-in Component,” which is a flexible mechanism that individual Missions, other USAID Operating Units and other donors can utilize using their own funds. All Core activities engage participants from at least two countries. Both components include a grants-under-contract (GUC) mechanism to promote capacity building and sustainability of local organizations, government entities, and private sector firms.

Core component activities promote regionalization, reduce barriers to trade, and support the growth of SMEs in three key value chains: 1) fruits and vegetables; 2) incoming eco/agro/cultural tourism; and 3) textiles and wood processing/furniture production. Across the three value chains, ICT opportunities for digitization are promoted. The budget ceiling is \$9.7 million.

The Buy-in component allows for quick mobilization of activities in any EDGE country and may be for bilateral or multi-country/regional activities. Buy-ins can fall under any of EDGE’s three objectives. The budget ceiling: \$11.3 million.

PURPOSE OF THE MID-TERM PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The purpose of this evaluation is to firstly, assess the efficiency and effectiveness of EDGE in addressing activity objectives and secondly, develop recommendations to inform the Bureau’s thinking regarding future design(s) of regional economic growth activities. Of EDGE’s three objectives, this evaluation will focus primarily on reduced barriers to cross-border trade and investment and improved market integration and expanded market linkages. The evaluation will focus on the period of performance starting

from July 29, 2019, through July 2023. The Bureau will use the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this evaluation to assess EDGE in addressing activity objectives, new opportunities and priorities as a result of the conditions brought about by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and develop recommendations to inform the Bureau’s thinking regarding future design(s) of regional economic growth activities.

KEY QUESTIONS AND DATA SOURCES

The key questions are categorized by effectiveness of implementation approaches, efficiency of the EDGE management structure, sustainability and advancing intra-regional and Euro-Atlantic integration. In particular, the performance evaluation will:

- Assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the activities in the context of COVID-19 and more generally;
- Analyze how implementation approaches compared for in-person, remote and hybrid delivery modalities;
- Assess the extent to which the leverage requirements for GUCs accelerated results and contribute to sustainability;
- Determine to what extent the EDGE approach has been inclusive and targeted vulnerable populations such as women, youth, indigenous or minority groups, people with disabilities, etc.
- Assess the implementing partner’s (IP) management systems, including (processes, implementation team performance, relations with USAID OUs, donor partners, performance feedback loops, reporting, timely management decisions, etc.);
- Provide recommendations on adjustments and/or corrective actions for the remaining years of program implementation and future design considerations;
- Identify any external factors that might have impacted activity performance such as political, economic, sector dynamics, etc. influences, as relevant;

The table below lists five Evaluation Questions (EQs) and suggested data sources that will be finalized in discussions with the Evaluation Manager and/or Contracting Officer’s Representative (COR).

KEY QUESTIONS AND DATA SOURCES	
QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCES
EFFECTIVENESS OF IMPLEMENTATION	
Question 1: To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies integrated into a) regional value chains and b) global value chains? objectives and targets?	Desk review of program documents, work plans, quarterly and annual reports Performance Monitoring data: indicators related to number of SMEs with linkages to new buyers; percentage of SMEs supported to participate in B2B, trade fairs, etc.; increase in exports of assisted firms

	<p>Quantitative Survey of firms supported by EDGE.</p> <p>Key Informant Interviews with selected staff from USAID, IP, public and private sector, other donor partners</p>
EFFECTIVENESS OF DELIVERY MODALITIES	
<p>Question 2: What lessons were learned from modifying the implementation of interventions during COVID-19 that can be used in future design considerations?</p> <p>Probe: effectiveness of different delivery modalities</p>	<p>Desk review of market assessments, training assessments and delivery of technical assistance, business enabling environment support</p> <p>Quantitative Survey (1-2 questions) of firms supported by EDGE.</p> <p>Key Informant Interviews with selected activity participants and GUCs; USAID staff</p>
EFFICIENCY	
<p>Question 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EDGE management structure?</p> <p>Probe: relationships with missions and other donor partners</p>	<p>Desk review of calls for proposals, application process, contract/award reports</p> <p>Performance Monitoring data: indicators related to number of days to launch activity after COR/CO approval; number of days to submit technical and cost proposal after IP receives SOW; percentage of OUs reporting satisfaction with implementation of buy-in</p> <p>Key Informant Interviews with selected USAID staff, donors</p>
SUSTAINABILITY	
<p>Question 4: To what extent did the leverage requirement contribute to sustainability of activities?</p>	<p>Desk review of targeted activities in portfolio, calls for proposals, application process, contract/award reports</p> <p>Quantitative Survey (1-2 questions) of firms supported by EDGE.</p> <p>Key Informant Interviews with USAID staff, government officials, regional and multilateral organizations, GUCs, IP</p>
SUPPORTING INTRA-REGIONAL AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION	

<p>Question 5: To what extent are EDGE activities supporting countries in meeting and fulfilling their European Union (EU) accession criteria?</p>	<p>Desk review of internal and external reporting, Results Framework, MEL Plans</p> <p>Key Informant Interviews with USAID staff, government officials, regional and multilateral organizations, EU staff, GUCs, IP</p>
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2. SCOPE OF WORK AND METHODOLOGY

Our approach to the EDGE multi-country performance evaluation is based on a mixed-methods design that was used for regional and global portfolio performance evaluations: US-SEGA, CATALYZE and W-GDP conducted between 2020 and 2023. Based on our experiences in conducting evaluations of multi-country programs, the design includes both primary and secondary data collection sources utilizing key informant interviews (KIIs), quantitative survey, and analyzing performance monitoring data. The main data collection will be through a comprehensive desk review that is supplemented with targeted KIIs. Online will be used to collect primary data from firms supported by EDGE. The sampling of these stakeholders will be determined in collaboration with USAID and the IP. The hybrid data collection plan is based on collecting primary data through in-person interviews in Kosovo and North Macedonia and remotely through online interviews in Georgia and Moldova.

The strength of this approach lies in the ability to triangulate the pre-existing data on EDGE activities with insights gained from a select sampling of key USAID stakeholders, implementing partner staff, key public and private sector partners, participants, and other donor partners. This design does not anticipate the use of statistically representative samples. Accordingly, the evaluation team will employ a purposive sampling strategy to engage key stakeholders and to the extent possible partners and direct beneficiaries who can provide information on results and implementation experiences that can allow the team to draw high-level representative findings to answer the key questions in a comprehensive manner.

Draft survey instrument and structured interview guides have been developed by the evaluation team and are shared with USAID as Annexes. The EE/MELDS team will hold a validation workshop in April 2023 to USAID to receive feedback on the proposed survey instrument prior to data being collected in May 2023. The data sources used will include but are not limited to annual and quarterly reports and key activity documents, monitoring data, staffing data, calls for proposals and applications, interviews, and survey responses.

The methodology includes a review of key documents and programmatic information including performance indicator data, an online survey, and key informant interviews (KIIs). Both quantitative and qualitative data will be collected from key USAID stakeholders, prime implementing partners, beneficiaries and funding partners. Use of best practices will be included in the approach and is detailed in the next section.

2.1 DATA COLLECTION SOURCES AND METHODS

- A. Document Review and Performance Indicator Data:** The review team will analyze original documents such as activity design and planning documents, concept notes, annual and quarterly progress reports, activity monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plans, profiles and periodic

performance surveys and activity-level and aggregated performance indicator data provided by USAID. It will also include relevant USAID and United States Government (USG) policy documents as applicable. The evaluation team recognizes that the level of documentation and data across all activities may not be consistent and will take this into consideration when determining its findings. Data sources include:

- Annual Work Plans;
- Activity M&E Plan (MELP);
- Annual and Quarterly Reports;
- Market and Sector Assessment Reports;
- Calls for Proposals and selected applications;
- Grants manual;
- Subcontractor contact list;
- Key partners' contact list;
- Documentation of SOO changes and technical direction;
- Original and modified Theory of Change (if applicable);
- Mission Private Sector Engagement Strategies; and
- Information on program CLA approach and efforts to date.

B. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): To provide complementary and supplemental qualitative data focused on processes and results, the evaluation team will also conduct approximately 20-25 stakeholder interviews affiliated with the four activities (Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, N. Macedonia) selected by USAID. The KIIs will follow the online survey data collection and draw upon the data from the online survey. The evaluators will ask semi-structured questions and capture the information with open-ended questions and will use targeted probing questions and techniques to deepen the discussion and capture rich, quality data. The team will send brief discussion guides to the interviewees in advance of the KIIs. The team will work with USAID to introduce the evaluation team to USAID staff and request their participation and necessary assistance.

The evaluation team will work closely with USAID and the IP to develop a sampling of key stakeholders, including staff from USAID, IP, GUCs, donor partners (EU, World Bank, EBRD, bilateral donors), EDGE participants, selected public sector ministries and agencies, including Customs Administrations, Ministries of Economy, Transport and Infrastructure, Secretariat of the Central Europe Free Trade Agreement, Chambers of Commerce, Authorized Economic Operators, traders, transporters and freight forwarders.

C. Online Survey for Firms Supported by EDGE: The survey will be sent to all companies that have been supported by EDGE. (Note: depending on the availability of monitoring data by Implementing Partners). The survey will be structured and utilize a combination of closed-ended questions, i.e. "Yes/No/Don't Know" or Likert scale (using a 5-point rating scale) response

options. interviews that can provide critical details and validation to help explain processes and results. The online survey focus will be the firms' integration into regional and global value chains (EQI).

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS, AND INTERPRETATIVE PROCESS

At a macro-level, data analysis and synthesis will be guided by an abductive reasoning approach advocated by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow.¹² Unlike inductive and/or deductive modes of inquiry, which typically follow a more linear logic, abductive reasoning entails a more circular or spiraling process and represents a simultaneously puzzling-out of insight from data gained through the desk review, survey and KIs. Potential limitations will be highlighted. Our approach to analyzing and triangulating findings uses four distinct protocols to analyze data.

- Content and Comparative Analysis of Document Review
- Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Quantitative MEL and Survey Data (using Survey Monkey)
- Coding and Content/Thematic Analysis of KIs (manually through notes)
- Data Triangulation

2.3 GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION CONSIDERATIONS

The evaluation design, methodologies, data collection, analysis, and report will explicitly consider and capture the situations and experiences of both males and females that participated in and/or benefitted from EDGE activities. The review team will explicitly consider how the program engaged with women and men and the effects of this engagement, including any unintended consequences for women – whether positive or negative. The design and methodology will ensure that data collection does not disproportionately reach men or women participants by assessing the whole universe of participants and sampling from this set proportionally by sex. Data collection instruments and protocols will be gender sensitive – they will reflect an understanding of gender roles and constraints in local contexts, including an acknowledgement that 50 percent of EDGE participants are women.

2.4 POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

Selection bias: As some key informants may decline to be interviewed, there is a possibility of selection bias. Those respondents who chose to be interviewed might differ from those who did not in terms of their attitudes and perceptions, affiliation with government/non-government structures, and socio-demographic characteristics and experience. The team will mitigate by developing a purposive sampling of key informants.

Recall bias: Some participants may present inaccurate or incomplete recollection of events in self-reporting their experiences or past behaviors due to the time that has elapsed since their engagement with the EDGE activities. The team will mitigate by using well formulated survey questions, triangulate KI analysis with performance monitoring data, and piloting the survey instrument.

¹² Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora. Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Limited Fieldwork: Due to timing limitations, the evaluation will be conducted remotely in Georgia and Moldova, which poses some disadvantages because the team members cannot be in-country to speak with stakeholders in-person and experience the activities on the ground. The team will take into consideration lessons learned during recent evaluations using remote data collection methods.

Difficulty assessing progress to sustainability and long-term objectives: The evaluation will be conducted while the implementation is ongoing, and the influences on sustainability through leveraging funds and contributions to intra-regional and Euro-Atlantic integration may take one to years longer to deliver intended results. The team will assess progress to date and highlight potential gaps that should be addressed in the remaining period of performance and to guide future design considerations.

Limitation of Data Comparability in Two Different Collection Methods: The limitation of the study is that data collection will be done through two different methods, in-person interviews and remote (online) surveys. This introduces a potential source of bias as the two methods may not capture the same information or be equally effective in eliciting responses from the participants. The potential differences in the quality and depth of responses collected through these two methods may also make it difficult to compare or generalize the findings across the entire population of interest. Therefore, the evaluation acknowledges this limitation and considers ways to minimize its impact, such as by comparing the results obtained through different methods and using appropriate statistical techniques to adjust for potential biases.

2.5 COLLABORATION, LEARNING AND ADAPTING

The team will work closely with USAID/E&E to present its preliminary findings and recommendations with USAID mission staff and the IP. The evaluation team proposes that a recommendations workshop be held after the data analysis has been completed and prior to report writing.

Recommendations Workshop: The team will facilitate a validation workshop with selected staff from USAID/E&E to include the COR, POC, and other selected staff. The purpose of this workshop is to improve the learning and utilization through group discussion and shared understanding of the findings, conclusions, and key learning points. The format of the workshop will be determined one week in advance of the date, which will allow time to prepare either an in-person or virtual discussion. Any feedback will be taken into consideration for the final report.

Design of Electronic Measurement Instruments: The team will develop a survey instrument to assess participants' satisfaction with different delivery modalities of training, learning exchanges, and other participatory technical assistance. The team will utilize *Kobotoolbox* as the survey platform, which will be shared with USAID for future use. This survey instrument will not be piloted or used for this mid-term performance evaluation. This instrument will allow USAID to continuously track feedback related to EQ2.

Value-Chain Integration Infographic: The evaluation team will engage its graphic artist to create an infographic that illustrates the findings from EQ1, which will visually depict the regional and global integration of three selected value chains in four countries: Georgia, Moldova, N. Macedonia, Romania.

Post-Evaluation Action Plan: The evaluation team will support the USAID Evaluation Manager and COR in developing a post-evaluation action plan. The evaluation team will populate the Post-evaluation Action, Dissemination and Utilization Template with the evaluation recommendations. The evaluation

team will be available to co-facilitate a group discussion to ensure a shared understanding of the potential action items, management decisions and key learning points. See Annex I for the facilitation guide and templates for utilization and dissemination.

3. TASKS AND DELIVERABLES

3.1 TASK LIST AND DESCRIPTIONS

DEVELOPMENT OF AN ACTIVITY AUTHORIZATION REQUEST (AAR) AND EVALUATION WORK PLAN (EWP)

Due to timing limitations, Integra will submit a combined AAR and Evaluation Work Plan for review and approval (i.e., this document). This joint AAR/EWP outlines the background, technical approach, anticipated timeline, and budget for the assessment. The AAR components serve as a working document and can be refined and edited per USAID's comments and feedback. The EWP components are presented in Section 2; which includes the final sample size, list of potential interviewees and field work schedule are pending inputs from the IP and USAID and will be finalized prior to data collection. The EE/MELDS team will work alongside the COR who will provide technical guidance and administrative oversight of all deliverables. Integra will finalize this AAR/EWP within one week of receiving USAID comments.

RESOURCE AND STAFF KEY POSITIONS

Integra will seek highly qualified candidates to fill the key positions on the strategic review team. All key staff member recommendations will be submitted for review by USAID for feedback and approval. Some are provided below and other positions will be filled as required, however the budget ceiling will remain the same.

CHECK-INS WITH THE USAID EVALUATION TEAM

In order to increase communication and mitigate any technical or management missteps, the EE/MELDS team requests biweekly check-in calls with the USAID designated point of contact (POC). These meetings will be approximately 45 minutes long and will include agendas to guide the discussion.

DATA COLLECTION

The EE/MELDS team expects to conduct about 30 working days of data collection, which is primarily focused on primary data collection after the completion of the desk review. The timeline provided in the chart below accounts for holidays from April 2023 – August 2023.

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION MILESTONES/DELIVERABLES

- AAR/EWP approval by USAID (no later than May 1, 2023)
- Sampling size and list of potential interviewees approval by USAID
- Preliminary Findings Workshop (due no later than May 31, 2023) with key bullet points of the findings for use at the June 2023 Conference
- Draft Evaluation Report
- Recommendations Workshop

- Value-Chain Integration Infographic
- Design of Electronic Measurement Instruments for delivery modalities
- Post-Evaluation Action Plan

DRAFT AND FINAL STRATEGIC REVIEW REPORT

Within 20 working days of the recommendations workshop, the EE/MELDS team will provide USAID a draft of the final report. An outline of the draft Final Report is available in Annex I. The strategic review should include a copy of the AAR/EWP; conflict of interest (COI) statements, either attesting to a lack of COI or describing existing COI, signed by all members of the team; the tools (in English) used such as questionnaires, checklists, and discussion guides; in-depth analyses of specific issues; properly identified sources of information; and statement(s) of differences regarding significant unresolved differences of opinion (if any) reported between review team members, by IP stakeholders involved in the review of the draft evaluation report, or by USAID.

The final report will be due 10 working days after the receipt of USAID's and the IP's comments on the draft and the EE/MELDS team will conduct in depth quality assurance prior to submission. The report will be written in English, single-spaced in Gill Sans MT, and size 11 font with the main content no longer than 25 pages not including the cover page, table of contents, executive summary and annexes. All data and materials are to be surrendered to and will remain the property of USAID. The final report will then be uploaded on the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC) within three months of the final approval.

3.2 DELIVERABLES AND TIMELINE

Under this Mid-term Performance Evaluation, the EE/MELDS team will submit the following deliverables:

DELIVERABLE	DUE DATE
AAR and Evaluation Work Plan: This document outlines the methodology, limitations, timeline, and travel logistics for USAID/E&E's review and approval.	April 26, 2023
Sampling of Key Informants: Draft AAR/EWP does not include sampling size and distribution of key stakeholders; Evaluation Team will work with IP to finalize this list. USAID approval requested before May 1. Remote Data Collection: Evaluation team will utilize a limited distribution of electronic survey and online meeting methods to conduct KIs in Georgia and Moldova.	No later than April 28, 2023 Weeks of May 1 – May 22, 2023
In-person Data Collection: Evaluation team will conduct in-person KIs and small group discussions in Kosovo and N. Macedonia. Preliminary Findings Workshop: The team will also facilitate a Recommendations Workshop. The exact date will depend on the	Weeks of May 8 and May 15, 2023 Exact date TBD ~no later than May 31, 2023

<p>schedules of USAID/E&E will be determined later. The team will provide key bullet points to be used as talking points for the June 2023 conference.</p>	
<p>Draft Performance Evaluation Report: The Draft Report will adhere to USAID Evaluation Policy guidelines. Within 21 working days after data collection, the EE/MELDS team will provide to USAID a draft of the report.</p> <p>Design of Electronic Measurement Instruments: Will be included in the draft evaluation report.</p> <p>Value-Chain Integration Infographic: Will be included in the draft evaluation report.</p>	<p>Approximately July 15, 2023</p> <p>Approximately July 15, 2023</p> <p>Approximately July 15, 2023</p>
<p>Recommendations Workshop</p> <p>Final Evaluation Report: Upon the receipt of USAID/E&E's comments on the draft report, the EE/MELDS team will finalize the report for submission.</p> <p>Post Evaluation Action Plan: Templates will be populated and submitted to USAID with the final report.</p>	<p>TBD</p> <p>Within 10 days of receiving comments on the final report.</p> <p>Approximately mid-August 2023</p>

3.3 ENGAGEMENT AND PLANS WITH USAID/W, USAID/GEORGIA, USAID/KOSOVO, USAID/MOLDOVA AND USAID/NORTH MACEDONIA

Under the EDGE Mid-term Performance Evaluation, the EE/MELDS evaluation team requests the following engagement and support:

USAID STAFF ENGAGEMENT	PROPOSED TIMING
<p>Key Informant Interviews with USAID/W, USAID/Georgia and USAID/Moldova: Approximately one-hour KII with relevant EDGE Activity Managers and MEL specialists from Economic Growth. Senior mission leadership and program officers may participate if they are involved in the oversight of EDGE. More than one KII may be needed for each mission.</p>	<p>USAID/W May 1, 2023</p> <p>USAID/Georgia May 3, 4, or 5</p> <p>USAID/Moldova May 3, 4, or 5</p>
<p>In-brief and Key Informant Interviews with USAID/Kosovo: The evaluation team will meet with EDGE Activity Managers, MEL specialists, and other staff who are engaged. Approximately one hour for in brief and one hour for KII with relevant Mission staff.</p>	<p>USAID/Kosovo May 8 or 9, 2023</p> <p>Kosovo/KIIs with EDGE partners</p>
<p>In-Brief and Key Informant Interviews with USAID/N. Macedonia: The evaluation team will meet with EDGE Activity Manager, MEL specialist and other staff who are engaged.</p>	<p>USAID/Skopje May 10 or 11, 2023</p> <p>Macedonia/KIIs with EDGE partners</p>

<p>Approximately one hour for in brief and one hour for KII with relevant mission staff.</p>	
<p>Out-brief with USAID/Kosovo: Approximately 1 hour to present high level initial findings. If mission staff are not available, they can participate in a recommendation workshop in late May.</p> <p>Out-brief with USAID/N. Macedonia: Approximately 1 hour to present high level initial findings. If mission staff are not available, they can participate in a recommendation workshop in late May.</p> <p>Recommendation Workshop for USAID/W, USAID/Georgia, USAID/Kosovo, USAID/Moldova, USAID/N. Macedonia: The team will also facilitate a recommendations workshop of 90-minutes in duration. The exact date will depend on the schedules of USAID/E&E will be determined later.</p>	<p>May 18 or 19, 2023</p> <p>May 18 or 19, 2023</p> <p>Exact date TBD ~no later than May 31, 2023</p>

4. PROPOSED STAFFING PLAN

TEAM LEAD AND SENIOR EVALUATION SPECIALIST, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] will serve as the Team Lead and will manage the evaluation team and the production and delivery of all activity deliverables. She will lead in drafting the evaluation work plan, collecting data, writing of the draft and final report as well as producing key findings for the preliminary and recommendations workshops.

[REDACTED] brings technical expertise in private-sector partnerships, gender equality and women’s economic empowerment, youth engagement, public finance, and governance to the team. She is a regional expert and has served as Chief of Party in Croatia and North Macedonia and provided extensive short-term technical assistance to countries in the Europe & Eurasia region, including Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine. In the past three years she has served as the Team Leader or Subject Matter Expert for five USAID mid-term performance evaluations: Support for Economic Growth in Asia (US-SEGA), Economic Security Program in Georgia, Competitive Economy Program in Ukraine (CEP), Georgia Youth/Gender Economic Support Program (YES), and the global Women’s Economic Empowerment Program (WEE) and CATALYZE, which included a case study of the Western Balkans Engines of Growth activity.

[REDACTED] technical expertise is in supporting and accelerating the transition to market-oriented democracies with a focus on inclusive growth, especially for private sector and capital market development and agricultural value chains. As recent Team Leader of the global CATALYZE and WEE programs, she examined the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of USAID buy-in mechanisms and how they functioned at the country, regional and global sectoral levels. [REDACTED] has extensive experience in catalyzing private sector investment and trade in Eastern Europe by strengthening government and civil society organizations to implement improved and streamlined policies and processes for economically viable enterprises. Under the SEGIR Global Business, Trade, and Investment IQC, she was a business enabling advisor for Carana Corporation (and later Palladium) in Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Poland, and

Ukraine; she focused on improving macroeconomic policy and public financial management, making the labor market more flexible and competitive for FDIs, privatizing state-owned enterprises and de-collectivization of agriculture, and putting monitoring mechanisms in place to encourage inclusive growth.

Earlier in her career, M██████████ was a Chief of Party in Cambodia, Croatia, Macedonia, Tanzania, and Yemen, and served as a Director at the UN World Food Programme in Rome. She holds M.A. degrees in International Economics and American Foreign Policy from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. She is fluent in Italian and proficient in French, Spanish and Egyptian Arabic.

SENIOR SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT, NORTH MACEDONIA, ██████████ ██████████

██████████ will serve as the Evaluation Specialist for North Macedonia, with more than 15 years' experience in conducting evaluations and working with a host of donor countries such as the EU, USAID, WB, UNDP, GIZ, EBRD, and REF. ██████████ has held such positions as an Evaluator for Final Evaluation of - the Nordic Support for Progress of North Macedonia Project and Evaluation Expert for USAID's evaluation of the Civic Engagement Project (CEP). ██████████ has also worked with the UNDP developing local economic development plans for three municipalities and design of the mechanism for collaboration of institutions within the municipality. Vlatko has a master's degree in financial management and is fluent in both English and Macedonian.

██████████ will support the Team Leader in conducting Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) using approved survey instruments, provide written notes from each interview, and draft sections of the final report. He will be responsible for conducting KIIs with key staff from relevant government agencies and regional organizations, grantees, USAID, and other international donors. The majority of interviews will be conducted in-person. He will also provide inputs for key deliverables (i.e. workshops and draft and final report).

SENIOR SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT, KOSOVO, ██████████

██████████ has more than 25 years' experience working in development programming in Kosovo, with specific experience as an Evaluation Specialist. He has held positions in project management, government, academia, international development and international affairs. Experienced project evaluator and researcher with outstanding English writing skills and interviewing experience. Experiences include serving as Project Manager at UNDP Kosovo, and Project Evaluator for Edutask Kosovo. ██████████ has extensive experience working both internationally and in Kosovo. ██████████ has a PhD from the University of Galway and is fluent in English and Albanian.

██████████ will support the Team Leader in conducting Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) using approved survey instruments, provide written notes from each interview, and draft sections of the final report. Approximately 20 KIIs will be conducted with key staff from relevant government agencies and regional organizations, grantees, USAID, and other international donors. The majority of interviews will be conducted in person. He will also provide inputs for key deliverables (i.e. workshops and draft and final report).

SENIOR SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT, MOLDOVA, ██████████

██████████ has more than 8 years of experience in evaluation of projects and programs independently and part of an international team. She has advanced training in development evaluation (IPDET 2014) at

Carleton University in Canada and more than 10 years of experience in management of international projects (WB, WHO, SDC). Most recently, she has worked as an evaluation consultant on the Civic, Voter, and Human Rights Education Evaluation implemented by NDI Moldova.

██████████ will support the Team Leader in conducting Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) using approved survey instruments for the country of Moldova, provide written notes from each interview and draft sections of the final report. KIIs will be conducted with key staff from relevant government agencies and regional organizations, grantees, USAID and other international donors. The majority of interviews will be conducted remotely. ██████████ will also provide inputs for key deliverables (i.e. workshops and draft and final report).

EVALUATION REGIONAL LOGISTICS COORDINATOR, ██████████

██████████ has more than five years' experience in operations, logistics, and coordination in the international development field. His work experience is inclusive of positions at the UN and the World Bank. ██████████ has a master's degree in international relations from Syracuse University and speaks English, Macedonian, and Albanian fluently.

██████████ will support the Team Leader and other team members in coordinating all data collection efforts and logistics across the region for Macedonia, Kosovo, Georgia, and Moldova. He will be scheduling Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and will send introductory emails to the interviewees (lists will be provided), coordinate the meetings, and follow-up as needed by phone or email. All scheduling information will be updated daily and a final list of participants will be required. He will also assist in other administrative tasks as required under this evaluation.

MEL EXPERT AND EVALUATION SPECIALIST FOR GEORGIA, ██████████

██████████ is a senior level evaluation professional with 14 years' experience of conducting evaluations in the areas of economic empowerment of women and youth, access to livelihood opportunities, social service delivery, social impact measurement for international partners including USAID, UNDP, Asian Development Bank. She recently served as the Sr. Evaluation Specialist for the mid-term performance evaluations: USAID/DDI CATALYZE, USAID/Georgia YES, USAID/Georgia Economic Security Program. Dr. Giorbelidze possesses extensive experience in performance monitoring, results-based management, developing MEL frameworks, Theory of Change, Outcome Metrics, coordinating data collection processes from partners and service providers and capacity building. She has the experience of setting up a pay-for-results mechanism in Georgia (social impact bond) and has been supporting UNDP Istanbul Hub in designing the Alternative Financing Knowledge Hub. ██████████ has worked both collaboratively and independently to design and execute research projects (qualitative and quantitative) and presented to high-level stakeholders from different sectors in Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Jordan, Philippines, Canada. She has strong data analysis and data visualization skills. She holds a PhD in Business Administration and a degree in Business Analytics.

██████████ will be responsible for supporting the AAR and workplan preparation, monitoring evaluation progress, and reviewing draft and final evaluation reports. Due to ██████████ background in Georgia and fluency in Georgian, she will support the Team Leader by serving as the Evaluation Specialist for Georgia. She will conduct Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) using approved survey instruments for the country of Georgia, provide written notes from each interview and draft sections of the final report (in English). KIIs will be

conducted with key staff from relevant government agencies and regional organizations, grantees, USAID and other international donors. The majority of interviews will be conducted remotely. In addition, [REDACTED] will also serve as the MEL Expert, using her previous expertise to design and develop both the Training Taxonomy and Electronic Instruments and help for inputs in all key deliverables.

OTHER POSITIONS

In addition to the core team members, the EE/MELDS team may bring on an additional senior subject-matter expert, data analyst, or technical specialist to support the team leader and subject-matter experts and supplement their technical expertise. The possible addition of these team member(s) would not require additional funding from the mission.

These positions may assist in conducting any KIIs that may be conducted remotely and/or in English. This person can also administer the survey where applicable in a remote setting can contribute to writing sections of the report as needed.

EE/MELDS SUPPORT PERSONNEL

EE/MELDS is a demand-driven task order. Therefore, core operations and administrative functions of the project are billed directly to the activity (e.g., activity authorization development, recruitment, contracting and fielding consultants, quality assurance, and invoicing). [REDACTED] EE/MELDS Project Officer, will serve as Activity Manager and provide technical quality control and work with USAID/E&E on all communications, and [REDACTED] will oversee all activity operations and provide administrative support.

ANNEX B: STATEMENTS OF DIFFERENCES

Annex B will be populated following the review period of this evaluation report, if necessary.

ANNEX C: DESK REVIEW BIBLIOGRAPHY

- GLCC Solutions LLC, IDG. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project: Final Report WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) Assessment.
- EDGE. The Trans-Dinarica Cross-Border Cycling Route Connecting the Western Balkans Slovenia >> Croatia >> Bosnia and Herzegovina >> Montenegro >> Albania >>Kosovo >> North Macedonia >> Serbia.
- EDGE. A New Ukraine: Catalyzing Investment In Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity. April 13, 2023.
- EDGE. Moldova Competitiveness Transition Activity (MCTA) Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project: Final Report July 2021–February 2023. March 27, 2023.
- EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Manual for Providing Accommodation Services in Households: How to Start and Build a Small Business in Rural Tourism. January 20, 2023.
- EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Grants Under Contract Report July 1, 2020–December 31, 2021. October 2022.
- EDGE. Armenia Business Enabling Environment (ABEE) Activity Economic Development, Governance, And Enterprise Growth (EDGE) Project Quarterly Report January 1–March 31, 2022. April 15, 2022.
- EDGE. Newsletter: Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth (EDGE) Project. Issue IV, Volume II. December 2021.
- EDGE. State-Owned Enterprises Reform Rapid Response (SOERR) Activity and Grants for Advocacy on Privatization (GAP) USAID/Ukraine Buy-In Under the Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise (EDGE) Growth Activity: Final Report–February 2020- November 2021. October 26, 2021.
- EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE) Joint Border Crossing Point Between North Macedonia and Albania: Assessing the Current State of Play and Identifying Next Steps. September 3, 2020.
- USAID. Grants Manual Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE). July 2020.

USAID MATERIALS

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- EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Activity Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan (AMELP). October 13, 2019.
- EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Activity Monitoring, Evaluation And Learning Plan (AMELP). October 2022.

ASSESSMENTS

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE) Value Chain Assessment for EDGE Countries. January 31, 2020.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Workforce Assessment Report for Selected Sectors. November 2021.

USAID. Trade Exposure of E&E Countries to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. May 18, 2022.

FINAL REPORTS

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Annual Report: Year 3 (July 29, 2021–July 28, 2022). October 24, 2022.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Annual Report: Year 2 (July 29, 2020–July 28, 2021). September 12, 2021.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Annual Report: Year 1 (July 29, 2019–July 28, 2020). June, 2021.

QUARTERLY REPORTS

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report October 1–December 31, 2022. Fiscal Year 2023, Quarter 1. January 15, 2023

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report July 1–September 30, 2022. Fiscal Year 2022, Quarter 4. October 15, 2022.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report April 1–June 30, 2022. Fiscal Year 2022 Quarter 3. July 15, 2022.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report January 1–March 31, 2022. Fiscal Year 2022 Quarter 2. April 15, 2022.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report October 1–December 31, 2021. Fiscal Year 2022 Quarter 1. January 15, 2022.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report July 1–September 30, 2021. Fiscal Year 2021, Quarter 4. October 15, 2021.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report April 1–June 30, 2021. Fiscal Year 2021, Quarter 3. July 15, 2021.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report January 1–March 31, 2021. Fiscal Year 2021, Quarter 2. April 15, 2021.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report October 1–December 31, 2020. Fiscal Year 2021, Quarter 1," January 15, 2021.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report July 1–September 30, 2020. Fiscal Year 2020, Quarter 4. October 15, 2020.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report
 April 1–June 30, 2020. Fiscal Year 2020, Quarter 3. July 15, 2020.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report
 January 1–March 31, 2020. Fiscal Year 2020, Quarter 2. April 15, 2020.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project Quarterly Progress Report
 October 1–December 31, 2019. Fiscal Year 2020, Quarter 1. January 15, 2020.

WORK PLANS

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE) Year 1 Work Plan.
 December 24, 2019.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE) Year 2 Work Plan.
 August 30, 2020.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE) Year 3 Work Plan.
 July 22, 2021.

EDGE. Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE) Year 4 Work Plan.
 August 5, 2022.

ANNEX D: LIST OF KIIS

KII LIST				
#	NAME OF ORGANIZATION	TYPE OF STAKEHOLDER	NAME	POSITION TITLE
1	USAID/Washington/EE Bureau	USAID	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
2	USAID/Washington/EE Bureau	USAID	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED] evaluation specialist
3	USAID/North Macedonia	USAID	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
4	USAID/Kosovo	USAID	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
5	USAID/North Macedonia	USAID	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

6	International Development Group	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
7	International Development Group	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
8	International Development Group	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
9	International Development Group	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
10	International Development Group	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
11	International Development Group	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
12	International Development Group	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
13	USAID Kosovo Compete Activity	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
13	USAID Rural Competitiveness and Resilience Activity	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
14	USAID/Georgia	USAID	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
15	USAID/Moldova	USAID		
16	USAID Economic Security Program	IP	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
17	USAID Economic Security Program	IP	[REDACTED]	

18	USAID Economic Security Program	IP	[REDACTED]	
19	GIZ	Donor	Kar [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
20	Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in SEE	Grantee	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
21	Textile Trade Association of Macedonia–Textile cluster	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
22	Mustseedonia	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
23	ILINO PROMET, Kavadarci	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
24	Macedonia Experience	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
25	Rural Development Network of North Macedonia	Public	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
26	Macedonian Association of Agriculture Cooperatives	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
27	FEYDOM	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
28	Balkan Biocert Macedonia DOOEL Skopje	Participant	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
29	World Bank	Donor	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
30	Stoby Winery	Participant		[REDACTED]
31	Mavrovo365Adventure	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

32	Winery Chateau Sopot	Participant		
33	Insider ID			
34	International Management Group			
35	Customs Administration	Grantee		
36	Association of Wood Processors of Kosova			
37	Customs Administration			
38	FRAKTON, Interactive Thinking	Participant (ICT)		
39	Outdoor Kosovo	Participant		
40	Destination Kosovo	Participant		
41	New CO Toka Bujqesore dhe Pemetari Kravarica	Participant		
42	Billion Stars Glamping	Participant		
43	Swiss Foundation for Technical Cooperation	Donor		
44	ELNOR	Participant		
45	Balkan Natural Adventure	Participant		
46	Customs	Government		

47	World Bank	Donor	[REDACTED]	
48	ZIPHOUSE	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
49	Aniscenco Consulting/ Casa Veche	Grantee	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
50	Il Ardasan Iurie /La Prisaca	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
51	Invest Moldova	Government	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
52	APUIS the Light Industry Association	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
53	Mimi Castle	Participant	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
54	Vatra Dumestilor SRL/ Vatra Dumeniului	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
55	Mihail Sava GT/Mihai Sava Winery	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
56	Purcari Wine	Grantee	[REDACTED]	
57	Customs Administration of Moldova	Government/public sector	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
58	Inline USAID Rural Competitiveness Project	IP	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
59	USAID Moldova	USAID	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
60	MCTA	IP	[REDACTED]	

61	Ministry of Culture	Government/public sector	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
62	ANTRIM	Government/public sector	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
63	Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
64	Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
65	Samtskhe-Javakheti DMO	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
66	Visit Kakheti DMO	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
67	Visit Kakheti DMO	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
68	GFA	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
69	People in Need (PIN)	Grantee	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
70	Lori DPO	Participant	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
71	GFA	Donor	[REDACTED]	

ANNEX E: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENTS AND TOOLS

INTERVIEW TRACKING

SECTION I: RESPONDENT INFORMATION	
Interviewer Name	
Interview #	
Date of Interview/Location	
Platform & Mode of Interview	
Name of Respondent	
Respondent Position Affiliation	
Respondent Sex/Prefer not to Answer	
How long respondent has been involved	

SCRIPT FOR START OF THE INTERVIEW

Hello, _____. My name is _____ and I am working with Integra at the request of USAID/Washington to conduct an evaluation of the Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Program known as EDGE. Just to reiterate some of the information we shared with you by email, the purpose of this evaluation is to help you and USAID and its partners to gain a better understanding of how EDGE has worked, what results have been achieved to date, and how it might be improved in a follow-on program.

We are also interviewing staff at USAID missions who have been involved in activities, their implementing partners, and participants in four countries. Are there others with you on the call today who will be participating? (If so, ask for them to introduce themselves) I anticipate that the interview will take about one hour to complete.

Participant Rights and Consent to the Interview

Before starting our interview, I want to inform you of your rights as an interview respondent. First, we acknowledge that your participation is voluntary. If there are any questions that you prefer not to answer, just let me know and I will move on to the next question. If you would like clarification on any question or aspect of the interview, stop me and let me know. We can end the interview at any time. With regard to your responses to my questions, only the evaluation team will have access to your answers. In our analysis and in the report your answers will be

combined with those of others and will not be associated with you in a way that would personally identify you. Do I have your consent to proceed with the interview (and the consent of each of you)? Y/N

Participant Consent to Recording

I would also like to obtain your consent to audio record the interview. We are doing this only to ensure we have accurate documentation of our conversation, as we said in an email sent to you before this call. We will not share the recording or transcript with anyone outside the evaluation team. Those materials will be stored securely at the Integra office, consistent with USAID guidelines. Do I have permission to audio record the interview (and the consent of each of you)? Y/N

Thank you. Let's get started.

INTERVIEW GUIDES

USAID STAFF INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTION	NOTES
<p>EQ 1: To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies integrated into a) regional value chains and b) global value chains? objectives and targets? (EFFECTIVENESS)</p>	
<p>A. What are the key barriers and constraints to cross border trade and investment that cut across all value chains?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> compliance with regional accords WTO TFA, EU Acquis, CEFTA Additional Protocol 5, Common Regional Market Action Plan</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> capacity of customs agents</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> border cooperation (JBCP model)</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> streamline cross-border procedures & fees</p>	
<p>B. To what degree has the activity addressed these trade constraints so that SMEs can enter and expand their presence in new export markets?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> expansion in sub-regions and beyond</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> fruits & vegetables</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> eco/agro/cultural tourism</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> textiles & wood processing/furniture</p>	

EQ 2. What lessons were learned from modifying the implementation of interventions during COVID-19 that can be used in future design considerations? (EFFECTIVENESS)	
A. Could you please guide us through the selection process for identifying participants for training, workshops, study tours?	
B. Which capacity gaps needed to be addressed? <i>Probe: market analyses and research</i> <i>Probe: compliance with regional and international protocols</i> <i>Probe: increase capacity of Business Service Providers (BSPs)</i> <i>Probe: improve market information and linkages</i>	
C. In what ways did the IP demonstrate adaptive management during COVID-19 and what lessons were learned? <i>Probe: modalities of training online, in-person or hybrid</i>	
EQ 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EDGE management structure? (EFFICIENCY)	
A. What is working well after three years of implementation?	
B. How would you assess your Mission's engagement in the core and buy-in components? <i>Probe: was the process smooth or required significant negotiations with the IP?</i>	
C. What are the benefits and challenges of a regional procurement mechanism? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incentives ● Innovation ● Reduced Risk 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Scalability ● Communications ● Flexibility 	
<p>D. Do you have suggestions for new/scaled/replication of EDGE? What will be some of the future challenges?</p>	
<p>EQ 4: To what extent did the leverage requirement contribute to sustainability of activities? (SUSTAINABILITY)</p>	
<p>A. How did the leverage requirement for cost-sharing affect the applicant pool for grants under contract (GUCs), if at all?</p> <p><i>Probe: how does having “skin in the game” affect the partners’ business model, if at all?</i></p>	
<p>B. Does the leverage requirement contribute to sustainability?</p> <p><i>Probe: what is the calculation for the amount of leverage requirement that could strengthen the possibility of sustainability?</i></p>	
<p>C. What does USAID success look like for EDGE? Is it the amount of funds leveraged? Or the number of USAID buy-ins to EDGE? Or specific indicators?</p> <p><i>Probe: any cross-border cooperation or business sales/arrangements that resulted from EDGE support?</i></p> <p><i>Probe: is there evident expansion of operations across national borders within the sub-region (Western Balkans for example)?</i></p>	
<p>EQ 5. To what extent are EDGE activities supporting countries in meeting and fulfilling their European Union (EU) accession criteria? (INTRA-REGIONAL AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION)</p>	
<p>A. Which donor partners’ programming is most aligned with supporting the</p>	

<p>countries' accession to the European Union?</p> <p><i>Probe: is EDGE sufficiently engaged with these donor partners?</i></p>	
<p>B. Has EDGE accelerated intra-regional and/or Euro Atlantic integration? How so?</p>	
<p>C. Which economic disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine will be significant factors in the next 2 years?</p> <p><i>Probe: which continuing or new contextual factors need to be considered in the next design?</i></p>	

IMPLEMENTING PARTNER INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTION	NOTES
<p>EQ 1: To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies integrated into a) regional value chains and b) global value chains? objectives and targets? (EFFECTIVENESS)</p>	
<p>A. What are the key barriers and constraints to cross border trade and investment that cut across all value chains?</p> <p><i>Probe: compliance with regional accords WTO TFA, EU Acquis, CEFTA Additional Protocol 5, Common Regional Market Action Plan</i></p> <p><i>Probe: capacity of customs agents</i></p> <p><i>Probe: border cooperation (JBCP model)</i></p> <p><i>Probe: streamline cross-border procedures & fees</i></p>	
<p>B. To what degree has the activity addressed these trade constraints so that SMEs can enter and expand their presence in new export markets?</p> <p><i>Probe: expansion in sub-regions and beyond</i></p>	

<p><i>Probe: fruits & vegetables</i></p> <p><i>Probe: eco/agro/cultural tourism</i></p>	
<p>C. To what extent has training been effective in improving value chain security and safety?</p> <p><i>Probe: support to authorized economic operators (AEOs)</i></p>	
<p>EQ 2. What lessons were learned from modifying the implementation of interventions during COVID-19 that can be used in future design considerations? (EFFECTIVENESS)</p>	
<p>A. Could you please guide us through the selection process for identifying participants for training, workshops, study tours?</p>	
<p>B. What are the criteria for success in providing capacity development to local partners?</p> <p><i>Probe: did expectations differ for in-person or remote learning events?</i></p> <p><i>Probe: how was partner satisfaction measured?</i></p> <p><i>Did the IP Were adequate feedback loops provided for assessing technical assistance?</i></p> <p><i>Probe: did the IP practice adaptive management in adjusting its learning agenda and delivery modalities?</i></p>	
<p>C. Which capacity gaps have had to be addressed? How has the project done this?</p> <p><i>Probe: compliance with regional and international protocols</i></p> <p><i>Probe: increase capacity of Business Service Providers (BSPs)</i></p> <p><i>Probe: improve market information and linkages</i></p>	
<p>D. In what ways did the IP utilize adaptive management during COVID-19 and what lessons were learned?</p>	

<p><i>Probe:</i> modalities of training online, in-person or hybrid</p>	
<p>EQ 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EDGE management structure? (EFFICIENCY)</p>	
<p>A. What is working well after three years of implementation?</p>	
<p>B. How did you engage Missions in the core and buy-in components? <i>Probe:</i> was the process smooth or required significant negotiations with the IP?</p>	
<p>C. What are the benefits and challenges of a regional procurement mechanism?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incentives ● Innovation ● Reduced Risk ● Scalability ● Communications ● Flexibility 	
<p>D. Do you have suggestions for new/scaled/replication of EDGE? <i>Probe:</i> what will be some of the future challenges?</p>	
<p>EQ 4: To what extent did the leverage requirement contribute to sustainability of activities? (SUSTAINABILITY)</p>	
<p>A. How did the leverage requirement for cost-sharing affect the applicant pool for grants under contract (GUCs), if at all? <i>Probe:</i> how does having “skin in the game” affect the business model of partners, if at all?</p>	
<p>B. Does the leverage requirement contribute to sustainability?</p>	

<p><i>Probe:</i> what is the calculation for the amount of leverage requirement that could strengthen the possibility of sustainability?</p>	
<p>C. What does USAID success look like for EDGE? Is it the amount of funds leveraged? Or the number of USAID buy-ins to EDGE? Or specific indicators?</p>	
<p>D. How are expectations and/or available resources for sustainability communicated to partners?</p>	<p>For GUCs add question on recommendation how does “sustainable leverage” look like</p>
<p>EQ 5. To what extent are EDGE activities supporting countries in meeting and fulfilling their European Union (EU) accession criteria? (INTRA-REGIONAL AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION)</p>	
<p>A. To what extent is EDGE working with other donor partners’ that are supporting the countries’ accession to the European Union?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> how does EDGE engagement align with EU accession criteria?</p>	
<p>B. Has EDGE accelerated intra-regional and/or Euro Atlantic integration? How so?</p>	
<p>C. Which economic disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine will be significant factors in the next 2 years?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> which continuing or new contextual factors need to be considered in the next design?</p>	

GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC SECTOR AND OTHER DONOR PARTNERS INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTION	NOTES
<p>EQ 1: To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies integrated into a) regional value chains and b) global value chains? objectives and targets? (EFFECTIVENESS)</p>	
<p>A. What are the key barriers and constraints to cross border trade and investment that cut across all value chains?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> compliance with regional accords WTO TFA, EU Acquis, CEFTA Additional Protocol 5, Common Regional Market Action Plan</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> capacity of customs agents</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> border cooperation (JBCP model)</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> streamline cross-border procedures & fees</p>	
<p>B. To what degree has the activity addressed these trade constraints so that SMEs can enter and expand their presence in new export markets?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> expansion in sub-regions and beyond</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> fruits & vegetables</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> eco/agro/cultural tourism</p>	
<p>EQ 2. What lessons were learned from modifying the implementation of interventions during COVID-19 that can be used in future design considerations? (EFFECTIVENESS)</p>	
<p>A. Which capacity gaps need to be addressed? How has the project done this?</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> compliance with regional and international protocols</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> strengthen cross-border cooperation and streamline procedures</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> increase capacity of Business Service Providers (BSPs)</p> <p><i>Probe:</i> improve market information and linkages</p>	

<p>B. How would you assess the actions taken by the IP (IDG) to adapt to the pandemic and what lessons were learned?</p> <p><i>Probe: modalities of training online, in-person or hybrid</i></p>	
<p>EQ 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EDGE management structure? (EFFICIENCY)</p>	
<p>A. What is working well after three years of implementation?</p>	
<p>B. Do you have suggestions for new/scaled/replication of EDGE?</p>	
<p>EQ 4: To what extent did the leverage requirement contribute to sustainability of activities? (SUSTAINABILITY)</p>	
<p>A. In your experience, does cost-sharing between USAID (or donors) and local partners increase the likelihood of sustainability?</p> <p><i>Probe: how does having “skin in the game” affect the business model of partners, if at all?</i></p>	
<p>B. Which types of partnerships with international donors have been the most enduring for trade and investment assistance?</p> <p><i>Probe: what are some success stories</i></p>	
<p>EQ 5. To what extent are EDGE activities supporting countries in meeting and fulfilling their European Union (EU) accession criteria? (INTRA-REGIONAL AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION)</p>	
<p>A. Which donor partners’ programming is most aligned with supporting the countries’ accession to the European Union?</p> <p><i>Probe: is EDGE sufficiently engaged with these donor partners?</i></p>	

<p>B. Has EDGE accelerated intra-regional and/or Euro Atlantic integration? How so?</p>	
<p>C. Which economic disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine will be significant factors in the next 2 years?</p> <p><i>Probe: which continuing or new contextual factors need to be considered in the next design?</i></p>	

INTERVIEW WITH GRANTEES AND PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTION	NOTES
<p>EQ 1: To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies integrated into a) regional value chains and b) global value chains? objectives and targets? (EFFECTIVENESS)</p>	
<p>A. What are the key barriers and constraints to cross border trade and investment that affect your business sector?</p> <p><i>Probe: compliance with regional accords WTO TFA, EU Acquis, CEFTA Additional Protocol 5, Common Regional Market Action Plan</i></p> <p><i>Probe: capacity of customs agents</i></p> <p><i>Probe: border cooperation (JBCP model)</i></p> <p><i>Probe: streamline cross-border procedures & fees</i></p>	
<p>B. To what degree has the activity addressed these trade constraints so that your business can enter and expand their presence in new export markets?</p> <p><i>Probe: expansion in sub-regions and beyond</i></p> <p><i>Probe: fruits & vegetables</i></p> <p><i>Probe: eco/agro/cultural tourism</i></p>	
<p>EQ 2. What lessons were learned from modifying the implementation of interventions during COVID-19 that can be used in future design considerations? (EFFECTIVENESS)</p>	

<p>A. Which capacity gaps have had to be addressed? How has the project done this?</p>	
<p>B. What types of learning were the most beneficial in strengthening capacity and expertise?</p> <p><i>Probe: did expectations differ for in-person or remote learning events?</i></p> <p><i>Probe: did the IP provide adequate feedback loops for assessing technical assistance?</i></p> <p><i>Probe: did the IP practice adaptive management in adjusting its learning agenda and delivery modalities?</i></p>	
<p>C. What were some of the things that worked well with on-line learning?</p> <p><i>Probe: what was better about in-person learning?</i></p> <p><i>Probe: what could be improved for on-line learning?</i></p>	
<p>EQ 3: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EDGE management structure? (EFFICIENCY)</p>	
<p>A. What is working well with EDGE programming?</p> <p><i>Probe: any cross-border cooperation or business sales/arrangements that resulted from EDGE support?</i></p> <p><i>Probe: is there evident expansion of operations across national borders within the sub-region (Western Balkans for example)?</i></p>	
<p>B. How did you find the application process for grants or participation in learning events?</p> <p><i>Probe: was the process smooth or required significant negotiations with the IP?</i></p>	
<p>C. Do you have suggestions for new/scaled/replication of EDGE?</p>	

EQ 4: To what extent did the cost-share requirement contribute to sustainability of activities? (SUSTAINABILITY)	
<p>A. How did the requirement for cost-sharing affect your ability to apply for grants under contract (GUCs), if at all?</p> <p><i>Probe: how does having “skin in the game” affect the business model of partners, if at all?</i></p>	
<p>B. Does the cost-share requirement influence longer term sustainability?</p> <p><i>Probe: what is the calculation for the amount of leverage requirement that could strengthen the possibility of sustainability?</i></p>	
<p>C. Which types of support do you believe could improve cross-border cooperation or business sales?</p>	
EQ 5. To what extent are EDGE activities supporting countries in meeting and fulfilling their European Union (EU) accession criteria? (INTRA-REGIONAL AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION)	
<p>A. Is your firm or organization aligned with supporting your country’s accession to the European Union?</p> <p><i>Probe: how so?</i></p>	
<p>B. Is there any cross-border cooperation or business sales or arrangements that have resulted from EDGE?</p> <p><i>Probe: is there evident expansion of operations across national borders within the sub-region (Western Balkans for example)?</i></p>	
<p>C. Which economic disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine will be significant factors in the next 2 years?</p> <p><i>Probe: which continuing or new contextual factors need to be considered in the next design?</i></p>	

ONLINE SURVEY FOR PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED IN VALUE CHAIN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

**ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EDGE-SUPPORTED COMPANIES AND ORGANIZATIONS.
(WILL BE PILOTED PRIOR TO DISSEMINATION)**

EQ 1 - To what extent has the project proved successful in assisting companies integrating into non-EU regional value chains, in Western Balkan countries, the South Caucasus and Ukraine-Moldova-Belarus?

1. Has your company participated in **EDGE**-supported interventions? Yes or No
2. Sex
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Prefer not to state
3. Youth: Yes or No (18 - 29 years)
4. Country of headquarters:
5. Partner Country/Countries:
6. What is your company's main business activity?
 - a. Fruits and vegetables production
 - b. Eco/agro/cultural tourism
 - c. Textiles production
 - d. Wood processing/furniture production
 - e. Other (please specify)
7. How many people are employed at your company?
 - a. 1-10
 - b. 11-50
 - c. 51-99
 - d. 100-150
 - e. More than 150
8. Roughly what percentage of your company's products are sold in the following?
 - a. Local market
 - b. Regional markets in the Western Balkans, South Caucasus or Ukraine-Moldova-Belarus
 - c. International market
 - d. Other, please specify

9. What are some of the challenges in your industry/business related to international trade and investment? (select all relevant responses)
- a. Burdensome customs regulations and compliance regulations
 - b. Disrupted supply chains due to war in Ukraine
 - c. Capacity levels of customs agents and staff of border agencies
 - d. Risk management of cargo and transportation of products
 - e. Complex system of fees and charges for exporting goods
 - f. Needed trade facilitation reform of the transitional rules of origin
 - g. Value chain security and safety for authorized economic operators in the Central Europe Free Trade Agreement
 - h. Market linkages to foreign purchasers and meeting purchaser demands for supply and quality of products
 - i. Standards, certification requirements
 - j. Other, please specify
10. How useful was the cooperation with the EDGE-supported Program to address the challenges identified above?
- a. Very useful
 - b. Useful
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Not useful
 - e. Not at all useful
11. Have you experienced any changes in your value or volume of exports in the last 3 years?
- a. Increased integration
 - b. Decreased integration
 - c. No change in integration level
12. To what extent has EDGE helped your company in regional trade?
- a. Not at all
 - b. Slightly
 - c. Moderately
 - d. Very much
 - e. Extremely
13. To what extent has EDGE helped your company in integrating into global value chains?

- a. Not at all
 - b. Slightly
 - c. Moderately
 - d. Very much
 - e. Extremely
14. Have you established any new markets in neighboring countries in the last 3 years?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. In process
15. Have you established any new markets outside of your region in the last 3 years?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. In process
16. How likely is it that you would recommend an EDGE event to a friend or colleague?
- a. Very likely
 - b. Somewhat likely
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Not likely
 - e. Not at all
17. If you participated in on-line learning or an activity, how beneficial was it to you?
- a. Very useful
 - b. Useful
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Not useful
 - e. Not at all useful
18. Which types of EDGE learning events have been the most beneficial? (indicate all that are relevant)
- a. In-person training
 - b. Participation in remote events
 - c. Mentorship and coaching from the project staff
 - d. Mentorship and coaching from Business Service Providers

- e. Introductions to potential partners in other countries
 - f. Study tours and/or marketing trips
19. In your opinion, to what extent has EDGE helped to reduce barriers to cross-border trade and investment?
- a. Not at all
 - b. Slightly
 - c. Moderately
 - d. Very much
 - e. Extremely

POST-EVALUATION ACTION PLAN TEMPLATES AND FACILITATION GUIDE

EE/MELDS GUIDE TO SUPPORTING THE COMPLETION OF THE POST EVALUATION ACTION AND UTILIZATION/LEARNING PLAN

Purpose: This guide supports the completion of the ADS 201 required post evaluation action plan and aims to foster improved evaluation learning and utilization. The form can be completed independently but a group discussion is encouraged to ensure a shared understanding of the action items, management decisions and key learning points. This guide was developed to assist USAID evaluation managers to plan and facilitate a meeting around the action plan.

Preparation

1. Disseminate evaluation report and post-evaluation action plan template.
 - a. Pre-populate the recommendations from the report into the template in advance--if too many, select the most important ones. Staff can fill out as much as possible in advance and reserve meetings for those needing discussion.
 - b. Remember to make a copy of the Master Copy template, rename it to the evaluation and move to the designated evaluation folder. Do not type into the master template.
2. Schedule Meeting
 - a. If using the google version of the action plan, ensure room has laptop and LCD projector to work directly on the document.
 - b. Remind staff to read the report before the meeting.
 - c. Identify Roles & Participants
 - i. Facilitator (can be either the designated Program Office or Technical Office Evaluation Manager)
 - ii. Note taker
 - iii. Participants (A/COR, project/activity team, M&E staff, management)
 - iv. Observers (other offices M&E staff, program assistants)

Meeting agenda (example)

- I. Introduce the purpose of the evaluation action plan (5 min).
 - a. Discuss purpose of and ADS 201 requirements for action plans. Suggested talking points:
 - i. We want to ensure evaluations are used and learn how to better support the adoption and application of findings/recommendations into our programming.
 - ii. COR or POC role to track completion of these post evaluation plans in evaluation management tracker.
 - iii. Information about evaluation utilization may be discussed at DOQRs as well as documented in the annual PPR/evaluation registry.
 - iv. Often there are data calls on evaluation utilization from mission or HQ leadership and previously had no way to track how findings and recommendations were used. Use this template to track and file information.
 - b. Action Plan Template available in PO eval folders (accessible for everyone). Completed action plan should be stored in the appropriate evaluation folder. These are organized by DO--one for each evaluation.
 - c. Clarify role of Evaluation Manager to facilitate the process, document actions and learning and track follow up items.
2. Review key recommendations (20 min)
 - a. Identify any that were only partially accepted or rejected
 - b. Note reasons why or caveats to acceptance
 - c. If there's significant disagreement, ask staff to schedule offline discussion and move on.
 - d. Identify if and how any recommendations have been applied or utilized to date.
 - e. Note: this may take more than one meeting if recommendations are extensive or require input from various individuals before deciding on any action.
3. Review the dissemination plan for the report (10 min)
 - a. Ideally the dissemination plan was completed during the SOW development stage but, if not, then list key stakeholders who should receive the report and the status of dissemination. (If it was completed, then bring up the former document for reference)
 - b. Note if there was any feedback from partners or stakeholders regarding the findings and recommendation.
 - i. If report hasn't been disseminated, discuss who will send it out and how feedback/comments will be collected if applicable.
 - c. Identify if there are alternative approaches to disseminating the findings/recommendations such as in meetings, summary briefs in local language, newsletters, websites, or integrated into other mission communication materials.

- d. Confirm report was put on the DEC and any data sent to DDL as required.
4. Identify management and program actions needed (15 min)
 - a. This is the main section of the action plan--summarize key tasks and who will complete action
 - b. Discuss who will track the status of action completion and when/frequency of updates needed.
 - c. Note: a follow up meeting may be needed to complete these actions if key individuals are not present or haven't been previously consulted.
 5. Discuss any additional opportunities to future evaluation utilization and learning (5).
 - a. Put tasks in an action plan and identify the best time for updating (e.g., PPR, portfolio reviews, stakeholder meetings, CCIR meeting, etc.).
 6. Wrap-up (5 min)
 - a. Summarize any next steps for completing plan or discussing issues that weren't resolved during meeting.

Post meeting follow-up

1. Ensure access to updated post evaluation plan on shared google evaluation folders.
2. Share plan and key decisions with key staff who were unable to make meeting.
3. Schedule and plan any follow up actions and times for follow up on status.
4. Compile key points on evaluation utilization and learning for upcoming portfolio reviews, CCIR meetings or other management meetings.
5. Be sure your google evaluation folder has all the final documents (reports, presentations, notes, action plan, etc.) --do not keep these documents solely on your individual drives.

POST-EVALUATION ACTION, DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION TEMPLATE

Evaluation Title: Mid-term Performance Evaluation of the Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth in E&E (**EDGE**)

Evaluation Completion Date: TBD (estimated completion August 2023)

Date action plan completed: TBD

Evaluation Manager:

Name of person(s) completing plan:

THIS POST-EVALUATION ACTION PLAN IS REQUIRED FOR ALL COMPLETED EVALUATIONS PER ADS 201.3.5.18.

LIST SELECTED EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS TO DISCUSS FOR FOLLOW UP				
Evaluation Recommendation	Management Response: <i>Accept / Partially Accept / Reject</i>	If not accepted, give reasons for rejection or, if partially accepted, describe any amendments	What actions have been taken to apply or use the findings or recommendations?	What has been the result of these actions (e.g., change in intervention, TOC/logic model, new activities, incorporated into?)

