Landscape Analysis of Learning Agendas: USAID/Washington and Beyond Summary

U.S. government agencies and development organizations around the world are increasingly recognizing and supporting learning activities—often informed by a learning agenda—as important tools for improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency. *A learning agenda comprises a set of broad questions directly related to the work that an agency conducts; when answered, they enable the agency to work more effectively and efficiently, particularly in the areas of evaluation, evidence, and decision-making.*

To inform the work of the Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research (LER) in the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL), a landscape analysis research project was undertaken at USAID and other federal government agencies from September 2016 to February 2017. The research team identified nine USAID/Washington operating units with documented, office-, bureau-, or initiative-wide learning agendas:

1. Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DCHA/DRG)
2. Office of Forestry and Biodiversity (E3/FAB)
3. Feed the Future (BFS/Feed the Future)
4. Office of Health Systems Strengthening (GH/HSS)
5. Local Solutions (PPL)
6. Development Grants Program (DGP)

Landscape Analysis Process

Although there were differences in design, purpose, and process across the learning agendas, interviewees followed most of the five steps below, which were adapted from the Office of Management and Budget's influential document, "Implementing a Learning Agenda Approach."

1. Collaborate with important stakeholders to decide on the formulation process, and then to identify and prioritize the questions that need to be answered.
2. Develop a plan for how to answer the questions using the most appropriate tools and methods.
3. Implement appropriate qualitative and quantitative academic and practitioner research, evaluations, and other data-gathering activities.
4. Involve key stakeholders along the way.
5. Adapt programs and act on the results of what is learned by disseminating findings for program improvement.
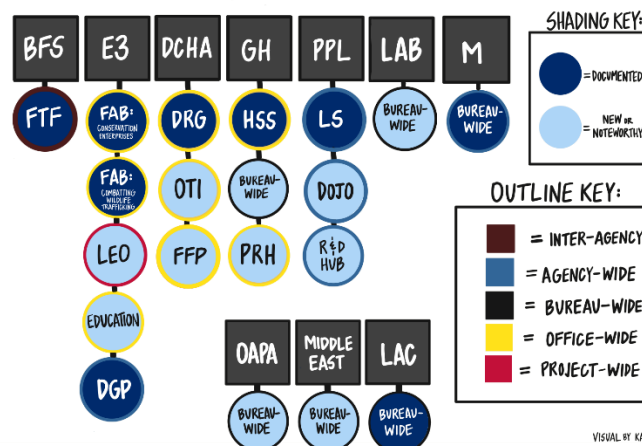
These operating units' learning agendas shared key features, including **learning questions**, which were prioritized and often categorized in thematic areas, **learning activities**, and **learning products**. The research team also located and collected data on an additional 11 relevant learning agendas that were in development. The graphic below shows the USAID learning agendas identified in the landscape analysis.

THE LANDSCAPE OF LEARNING AGENDAS

VISUAL BY KAT HAUGH

In total, the research team interviewed 60 staff from 20 USAID offices and bureaus, as well as staff from five other federal agencies. The report details the interviewees' remarks on the following topics:

- Motivations behind their decisions to pursue a learning agenda, such as expectations of accountability, especially in response to leadership demands

- The key benefits emerging from their learning agenda efforts, which have included identifying gaps in knowledge and evidence, and supporting other cultural and organizational change processes

- The participatory and consultative strategies they used to engage with stakeholders, including engagement with Mission staff and inclusion of academics and other outside experts

- The learning activities and products related to their initiatives

- Challenges and strategies on resources, dissemination, and utilization

Interviewees generated a diverse set of learning activities and products related to their initiatives. Activities included research, evaluations, literature reviews, mid-course stocktaking, portfolio reviews, and pause and reflect sessions. Learning products were often innovative and tailored to specific audiences, and included infographics, two-pagers, webinars, and podcasts. Challenges revolved around limited resources and the dissemination and utilization of learning agenda findings. Interviewees identified many strategies to address these challenges and discussed the need to update agendas regularly to ensure that they remain "living documents."

Interviewees made the following recommendations when formulating, implementing, and disseminating learning agenda findings:

- Where possible, create linkages to strategic objectives or goals when formulating learning agendas.

- The process of formulating and implementing learning agendas often has organizational benefits beyond just the generation of knowledge and evidence.

- Leadership support and adequate resources are critical.

- Incorporating collaborative processes throughout the learning agenda initiative is key.

- The relevance and application of new learning increased when individuals focused right from the start on how the knowledge that the learning agenda generates might inform decisions.

- Learning agenda efforts often benefited from multiple sources and modalities of knowledge, such as experiential learning.

The landscape analysis concludes by noting that there is great interest in and momentum toward the use of learning agendas. As the report details, learning agendas are an increasingly utilized tool in USAID/Washington and the federal government because of their flexibility and scalability to accommodate different levels of inquiry and a mixture of purposes.