



ESTABLISHING A LEARNING AGENDA

A learning agenda includes a (1) set of questions addressing the critical knowledge gaps impeding informed design and implementation decisions and (2) plans for learning activities to help answer those questions.

A basic process for a learning agenda is below; three key steps in developing a learning agenda include:

I. Set the Context.

- a. **Determine How This Fits in the Bigger Picture.** Determine at what level (activity, project, or strategy) the learning agenda will be used. If it is for a specific activity or project, associate the activity with the project or strategy within which it falls. If the learning agenda is at the strategy level, it can be connected to USAID’s overall goal and/or relevant host government goals. Making these connections at the onset ensures that learning at each level remains aligned. It may also help you determine the internal and external stakeholders you should engage to develop the learning agenda.
- b. **Review / Clarify the Theory of Change.** The development hypothesis at the strategy level or the theories of change at the project and activity level are the starting point for a learning agenda. Review whether the theories of change are still valid, and identify assumptions embedded within the theory. Articulate the theory of change in an ‘if, then’ statement if that has not already been done.

2. Develop and Prioritize Learning Questions. The process for developing learning questions is an opportunity to be intentionally curious about our activities, projects, and strategies. When developing learning questions, think about key decision points that will likely arise during planning and implementation. What questions, if answered, would help you make better, more informed decisions at these key points? This reminds us that learning is not the end goal, but a means by which we achieve our development outcomes more effectively and efficiently. There are three main types of learning questions that can be incorporated into a learning agenda:

Types and Examples of Learning Questions from USAID Missions

| Types | Purpose | Examples |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Theories of Change</i> | Test and explore theories of change | <i>USAID/Uganda Theory of Change:</i> If Ugandans have a strong health system and high-quality service delivery that is accessible, then they will use health services and Ugandans will become healthier. <i>Learning Question:</i> In what ways does the strengthening of Uganda’s health systems improve the quality, availability and accessibility of health services in the country? |
| <i>Technical Evidence Base</i> | Fill critical gaps in our technical understanding | <i>USAID/Pakistan:</i> What are the barriers to women receiving higher education scholarships provided by USAID/Pakistan’s Merit & Needs Based Scholarship Program (MNBSP)? |
| <i>Scenario Planning</i> | Develop scenarios and identify game changers | <i>USAID/DRC:</i> What, if any, unanticipated game changers developed during the life of the country strategy and impacted results? Other examples: What if conflict worsens? How will we adjust approaches? What if a specific law passes? How can we support targeted groups? |

3. Plan and Resource Learning Activities. Learning activities are the means by which we generate, analyze, and synthesize learning to answer our priority learning questions. There are various types of learning activities, including:

- Situational analyses, including political economy, sustainability, conflict, etc. and special studies
- Performance and impact evaluations
- Performance monitoring data, including establishing regular feedback loops with stakeholders and reviewing context indicators
- Literature reviews or syntheses of existing research
- Generating and capturing tacit and experiential knowledge through facilitated dialogues and other participatory methods, including Before Action Reviews, After Action Reviews, mid-course reviews, regular reflection exercises, peer assists, etc.

Determine what mix of learning activities could best help you answer learning questions. In determining priority learning activities, consider when learning is needed (and at what frequency) to inform key decisions. Additionally, ensure that learning activities align with available resources.

Good Practices in Establishing Learning Agendas

- Learning activities must also include analysis and synthesis to make sure learning gets used; sharing learning with decision-makers and stakeholders also supports use.
- Collaboration is critical in establishing and implementing learning agendas. Bringing stakeholders into the design process will increase buy-in and their willingness to contribute to implementation of learning activities and ease sharing of key learning. Moreover, checking whether other stakeholders have already explored your learning questions will help you avoid reinvestigating a question that has already been adequately explored.
- Starting with learning ensures we focus on what knowledge is most important to our effectiveness. Learning agendas can then feed into existing business processes, including the development of research agendas, performance management plans (PMPs), monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plans, and evaluation plans.

Featured Example: Learning Agenda in Action - USAID/Pakistan

| Learning Question | Learning Activities | Key Decisions / Impact |
|--|---|--|
| What are the barriers to women receiving higher education scholarships provided by USAID/Pakistan’s Merit & Needs Based Scholarship Program (MNBSP)? | Findings from a performance evaluation report led to a special study looking at this question. The special study included a literature review as well as interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders. | The evaluation and subsequent study led USAID to make key modifications to the design and implementation of MNBSP. This included expanding the number of fields and universities to include those more attractive to female applicants. In just one year, these modifications (and others) increased the female scholarship recipient rate from 23% to 50%. In addition, because of this success, Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission adjusted its scholarship implementation model nation-wide to achieve higher female participation rates as well. |

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LEARNING AGENDA TEMPLATE

CONTEXT

Institutional Relevance

How will the strategy / project / activity contribute to:

- *USAID's / organization's overall mission?*
- *development objectives?*
- *And to the goals or objectives of key stakeholders, such as the host government or other major development actors?*

Development Hypotheses / Theories of Change

What is the development hypothesis or theory of change tied to this strategy / project / activity? (and sub-theories of change as applicable)

LEARNING QUESTIONS & LEARNING ACTIVITIES

| <p>Learning Questions</p> <p><i>What are the key learning questions to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Explore, challenge, or validate the development hypotheses and underlying assumptions?</i> <i>Fill gaps in our technical evidence base?</i> <i>Develop scenarios and identify game changers?</i> | <p>Timing / Key Decision Points</p> <p><i>At what key decision-making points will learning from answering these questions be relevant? How will we apply learning during design and implementation?</i></p> <p><i>If limited applicability / relevance to key decisions, reconsider whether this should be a priority learning question.</i></p> | <p>Learning Activities</p> <p><i>What learning activities will we implement to answer these learning questions? When / how will they be implemented? When / how will we analyze and synthesize our learning?</i></p> <p><i>Prior to finalizing learning activities, determine whether anyone else has already investigated the learning question. If no one else has, consider who else might have this question and how might you collaborate with them to answer it.</i></p> | <p>Resources</p> <p><i>Who will be responsible for implementing learning activities? What additional resources do we need? (event/activity budgets, etc.)? Identify which of the resources needed are already available and which would need to be obtained.</i></p> |
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| Learning Questions | Timing / Key Decision Points | Learning Activities | Resources |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|
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