ANNEX 2: DETAILED PROGRAM CYCLE LEARNING STUDY METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the Program Cycle Learning Study, as noted in the full PCLS report, was to complement learning activities to answer critical learning questions around the Program Cycle. It tracked how the Program Cycle is implemented by Missions over time (including the recent changes to Program Cycle procedures in the revised ADS 201), and provided evidence and insight into the long-term effects of the Program Cycle processes. The study builds off a 2013 EnCompass evaluation of Program Cycle implementation.

The study was designed to inform PPL's support for Program Cycle implementation at both Mission and Agency levels. It investigated two main questions:

- How is the Program Cycle implemented by Missions?
  - How well are strategies, projects, and activities aligned (with each other) as envisioned in the ADS 201 guidance?
  - How interconnected are they with monitoring, evaluation, and learning in practice?
  - How do Missions, in practice, integrate learning and adapting within the Program Cycle?
  - To what extent are Missions adapting strategies, projects, and activities in response to new information and changes in context?
  - What sources of evidence and learning are most frequently used to inform adaptation?
  - What facilitates and hinders adaptation?
  - What factors facilitate/hinder Program Cycle implementation? How? Why?
  - Are there differences over time? How? Why?
- Are there differences between Missions? How? Why?
  - What are the effects of the implementation of the Program Cycle?
  - What benefits does the implementation of the Program Cycle afford?
  - What drawbacks does the implementation of the Program Cycle present?
  - To what extent and in what ways are the expected benefits of Program Cycle implementation being realized? ("Expected benefits" should include, for instance, the realization of the Program Cycle Principles in ADS 201.3.1.2 and benefits expected by field staff.)
  - Are the effects of the implementation of the Program Cycle intended or unintended?
  - Are there differences over time? How? Why?
  - Are there differences between Missions? How? Why?

RELATIONSHIP WITH ONGOING INITIATIVES

To ensure that USAID is learning from the implementation of the Program Cycle and filling in knowledge gaps around what can be improved in the current iteration of the Program Cycle

Operational Policy, PPL developed a learning agenda. The agenda has five learning questions around key assumptions or critical processes within the Program Cycle. The learning agenda also details how PPL will answer these questions, and how it plans to use this process to inform periodic reflection and support adaptive management to improve PPL's support to Missions and Operating Units. This study also complements and supports additional Program Cycle learning activities under the PCLA and Partner Country Partnership arrangement with Uganda.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The PCLS used a qualitative case study approach. Given finite resources and time, the research team drew up a list with the USAID Activity Manager of potential participating Missions based on several criteria such as budget size, staff size, and geographical location to provide a diverse set of attributes across cases. Following outreach and discussion with potential Missions, four Missions agreed to participate: USAID/Uganda, USAID/El Salvador, USAID/Guinea and Sierra Leone, and USAID/Vietnam. Data collection involved four main activities: (1) Mission staff interviews across all offices; (2) observation of meetings, events, and activities related to the Program Cycle; (3) a review of Program Cycle-related documents; and (4) USAID/Washington staff interviews, including Regional and Technical Bureau staff as well as PPL staff who have experience in these Missions.

Mission	Region	2017 Mission Budget[1]	2018 approx. staff size	Largest Technical Sector	Trip Timeframe
El Salvador	Latin America and the Caribbean	$103 m	126	Governance	June 2018
Guinea & Sierra Leone	Africa	$77 m	61	Health	October 2018
Uganda	Africa	$385 m	143	Health	April–May 2018
Vietnam	Asia	$78 m	70	Economic Growth	December 2018

Table 1: PCLS Participating Mission Characteristics

RECIPROCITY

Each participating Mission received reciprocal support for its PCLS engagement ranging from five to ten days of in-country support in the form of specific, tailored technical assistance (TA) related to the Program Cycle. Technical Assistance was provided by USAID PPL or LEARN staff. USAID/Uganda received TA for its Mission leadership transition; USAID/El Salvador received TA for its RDCS

[1] Data obtained from the USAID Foreign Aid Explorer.

midcourse stocktaking process; USAID/Guinea and Sierra Leone received TA for its CDCS midcourse stocktaking process; and USAID/Vietnam received TA for its CDCS development process.

SAMPLING

SAMPLING OF MISSIONS

Missions were chosen in consultation with the USAID Activity Manager for the PCLS. First, a set of Missions that could potentially participate was drawn up between the research team and PPL staff, who then reached out to Missions via emails and conference calls. Tailored background documents, including the methodology, were provided to the Missions. Once a Mission agreed to participate in the study, the research team then followed up with an initial request for Program Cycle documents. Using the Mission's organizational chart, the research team developed an initial research TDY agenda, selecting potential respondents. This agenda was reviewed by Program Office staff, who provided feedback and status information to help determine the final selection of respondents. The agendas were organized in line with priority, with Program Office, Technical, and Support Office staff interviewees organized chronologically wherever possible. During the research TDYs, respondents' schedules changed and the research team adjusted schedules to maximize the number of interviewees from whom data could be collected.

Location	Total Number of Interviews	Program Office	Front Office	Technical Office	Other Mission Staff[2]	IPs[3]
El Salvador	26	6	2	9	5	4
Guinea & Sierra Leone	34	7	4	13	4	6
Uganda	45	6	3	21	4	11
Vietnam	26	6	2	10	6	2
USAID / Washington staff[4]	**20**					
Grand Total (including USAID / Washington staff)	**151**	**25**	**11**	**53**	**19**	**23**

Table 2: PCLS Mission Interviewee Details

SAMPLING OF INDIVIDUALS

[2] This includes staff from the Executive Office, Contracting Office, Office of Acquisitions and Assistance, and Office of Financial Management

[3] USAID implementing partners staff, which includes MEL/CLA platform contract personnel.

[4] This included a combination of regional and technical Bureau representatives, including four PPL staff, three PPL contractors, 10 regional Bureau staff, and three Technical Bureau staff, all of whom had been involved in Program Cycle processes with one or more of the study Missions.

Prior to each research trip, the research team drew up an initial list of potential interviewees based on the Mission's organizational chart. In each Mission, the researchers prioritized interviewing all Program Office staff and Front Office staff, followed by a selection of Technical and Support office staff. In addition, one implementing partner from each Technical Office was also identified for an interview, with recommendations provided facilitated by the relevant Technical Office staff. During research trips, individual interviews were conducted, wherever possible, with at least two staff members from each office in the Mission, including the Program Office, Technical Offices, and Support/Lifeline Offices. In most cases, staff members were interviewed individually. In addition, a group interview or multiple interviews with Program Office staff were conducted wherever possible. Wherever available, we also interviewed respondents from implementing partners along with members of any Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning contract that supported the Mission.

DATA COLLECTION

The research team conducted four main data collection activities:

- Interviews of USAID/Washington Regional and Pillar Bureau staff, as well as PPL staff who have experience with the study Missions.
- Interviews of Mission staff across all offices of each study Mission to understand the implementation of the Program Cycle and its effects.
- Ethnographic observation of Program-Cycle-related or Program Office meetings, events, and activities.
- Review of Program Cycle-related documents.

During the Mission TDYs, the research team received relatively unfettered access to the USAID premises, which aided the efficient collection of data. In addition, the provision of a dedicated conference room in each Mission greatly increased the ability to conduct interviews and allow more forthcoming responses from Mission staff. At each Mission, the research team provided an in-briefing and an out-briefing to Mission leadership and/or Program Office staff.

INTERVIEWS

USAID/WASHINGTON STAFF INTERVIEWS

The researchers conducted 20 interviews with USAID/Washington staff members from Regional or Pillar Bureaus, as well as from PPL, in order to acquire a deeper understanding of Mission contexts, Program Cycle policies, and modalities of Program Cycle support. Mission staff identified many of these interviewees, after which the researchers used a snowball method to locate other individuals who were familiar with the participating Missions. The interviews that researchers conducted with Washington-based USAID staff members were useful in providing valuable context.

MISSION STAFF INTERVIEWS

The research team conducted a total of 159 Mission and Washington-based staff interviews with 151 individuals. During research trips, the research team conducted individual interviews, wherever possible,

with at least two staff members from each office in the Mission, including the Program Office, Technical Offices, and Support/Lifeline Offices. Often this involved the office director or deputy office director (or the acting director/deputy director or equivalent) as well as one additional staff member. The research team requested that interviewees have relevant Program Cycle experience working on tasks such as:

- CDCS or PMP development
- PAD design or updates; or manage projects
- Activity design
- Implementation and/or oversight of development projects and activities—AOR or CORs
- Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

In all four Missions, the research team also interviewed respondents from implementing partners. The research team convened IP representatives as individual interviewees or in a group interview, depending on availability. These interviews were typically with the Chief of Party or Deputy Chief of Party from the implementing partner. The research team asked each Technical Office to nominate one implementing partner to participate. The research team also interviewed staff members of any Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning contract that supported the Mission.

DIRECT OBSERVATION

During research trips, the research team also conducted observational activities in the following order of research priority, availability permitting:

- If the research trip overlapped with a Program Cycle-related activity, such as a portfolio review, PAD design process, or strategy development process, the priority was to identify appropriate meetings and events related to this activity to observe.
- The team also attempted to observe any regularly scheduled meeting within the Program Office.
- The research team also observed other gatherings or events, such as team retreats, trainings, or Mission All-Hands meetings. When feasible and appropriate, researchers also observed informal interactions and social events.
- Last but not least, the team also conducted in situ ethnographic observations in which the team observed daily life throughout each Mission—in cubicles, cafeterias, hallways, and other locations—to chronicle interactions.

The LEARN research team conducted over 21 formal ethnographic observations of events such as retreats, midcourse stocktakings, and everyday meetings and many more informal observations. Below is a more detailed breakdown of select observation opportunities:

Mission	Type of Observation	Hours
Uganda	Three-day retreat	24
El Salvador	RPO leadership call with LAC	1
El Salvador	RPO weekly huddle	1

El Salvador	RPO meeting	1
El Salvador	RPO weekly staff meeting	1
Guinea	Midcourse stocktaking retreat	9
Guinea	Program Office meetings	2
Guinea	Senior staff meeting	1
Vietnam	Close-out of Green Growth program	1
Vietnam	PDO VTC conversation with Ho Chi Minh City team	1
Vietnam	PDO's AAR of portfolio review process	1
Vietnam	PDO's presentation to MD of proposed CDCS 2.0 process	1

Table 3: PCLS Mission Direct Observation Details

DOCUMENT REVIEW

The research team requested a standard set of Program Cycle-related documents ahead of the research trip and reviewed 5,948 pages of Program Cycle-related documents from across the four Missions prior to and following the research trips. Prior to each research trip the following documents were requested:

MISSION DOCUMENTS:

- Recent staffing list or recent organizational chart

PROGRAM CYCLE DOCUMENTS:

- Internal CDCS
- External CDCS
- CDCS process-related documentation, including CDCS Statements of Conclusions and VTC Notes
- Active and draft PDPs and/or PADs, with amendments if relevant
- PMP
- M&E or MEL support contract scope (if appropriate)
- Program Cycle-related Mission Orders
- Activity Action Memos, activity solicitations, contracts, assessments, and evaluation reports for selected implementing partners

Other documents as deemed relevant by the Program Office

Often, document review requests were ongoing. Activity-level documents were generally the most challenging to obtain. Requests and follow-up requests for documents were made on an ongoing basis prior to and following the research trip.

Name of Document	Uganda (number of documents / total page count)	Guinea and Sierra Leone (number of documents / total page count)	El Salvador (number of documents / total page count)	Vietnam (number of documents / total page count)
Country Development Cooperation Strategy (internal and external)	2 / 198	2 / 121	2 / 98	2 / 155
Project Appraisal Documents	12 / 793	7 / 562	3 / 113	9 / 243
Performance Management Plan	1 / 138	1 / 35	2 / 92	0
Activity Solicitations	6 / 420	2 / 102	4 / 59	4 / 312
Miscellaneous[5]	22 / 1337	38 / 438	16 / 191	39 / 643
TOTAL	**43 / 2886**	**50 / 1156**	**27 / 553**	**54 / 1353**

Table 4: PCLS Mission Program Cycle Reviewed Documents

DATA ANALYSIS

The research team originally intended to focus on data collection before and during the research TDYs, assuming that analysis of the data would take place after all the TDYs were completed. Following the research TDY in Uganda, however, this approach was adjusted to alternate between data collection and data analysis throughout the 18 months of the study. This allowed the research team to incorporate analysis and findings into existing outlets such as the PCLA's quarterly Pause and Reflect sessions as well as to be responsive to opportunities to integrate findings into ongoing developments and briefers. Furthermore, the research team felt an obligation to share preliminary findings with Mission staff on each TDY before returning to Washington. As a result, there was a partial tradeoff between rigor and utilization, a conscious choice made during the PCLS data collection process. The analytical process involved four phrases:

[5] Miscellaneous documents included CDCS process-related documents, including CDCS Statements of Conclusions and VTC Notes, M&E or MEL support contract scopes, and Activity Action Memos, activity solicitations, contracts, assessments, evaluation reports for selected implementing partners, and recent staffing lists or organizational charts.

1. First, we reviewed available Mission-specific Program Cycle documents and USAID/ Washington interview transcripts prior to each research trip to inform data collection efforts.
2. Second, during the field research at each Mission, the team reviewed interview transcripts and observation notes just before the end of the trip to draft preliminary findings for presentation to the Mission for feedback. Following the presentation, the researchers incorporated Mission feedback into these documents. After returning to Washington, the researchers conducted additional interviews and reviewed additional Program Cycle documents provided by the study Missions or available on ProgramNet. The research team also shared the draft Mission-specific findings for feedback from the four participating Missions and conducted one final round of interviews by telephone with Program Office staff from each of the four Missions. In total, the research team generated 897 pages of typed notes from its research activities and reviewed 5,948 pages of Program Cycle-related documents from across the four Missions prior to and following the research trips.
3. Third, the research team then re-analyzed the 897 pages of interview notes and documentary evidence collected during the TDYs, along with the Mission summary documents and the available Program Cycle-related documents. Using an Excel spreadsheet, we identified themes and patterns from across the four Missions and triangulated them with other data sources. We also coded interviewee data from all four Missions in NVIVO to validate, expand, or revise these qualitative findings.
4. Lastly, we selected for inclusion in this report those findings, responsive to the study questions, that emerged from the interviewee data across all four Missions and were supported by direct observation and document review. The researchers then drew conclusions based on multiple findings and made recommendations based on the findings and conclusions.

During the analytical process, the research team employed best practices in qualitative research to ensure that interpretive judgments are documented and validated. The research team used the following methods to ensure the integrity of the data collection and analytical method:

- Triangulation:
  - Methods: The research team members attempted to validate interview data through direct and independent observation and review of documentation, as well as vice versa.
  - Analysis: The research team members attempted to triangulate findings across individuals within the Missions as well as across the four Missions in order to understand the diversity and preponderance of views.
- Prolonged engagement: The research team continued engagement with individuals in the Missions over time. There was ongoing contact with staff in each Mission's Program Office, often as part of the reciprocity-related Program Cycle support.
- Peer debriefings: The research team periodically shared findings from its data collection with LER and SPP staff to obtain feedback on both the methods and the findings themselves. This occurred during Pause and Reflect sessions.

- Thick description: Through the varied and rich data collection process, the research team obtained sufficient detail to ensure findings and conclusions derived from the data were adequately documented and robust.

NOTABLE ADAPTATIONS TO THE STUDY

Since the PCLS took place over more than a year, a number of adaptations were made. First, the interview protocol was adjusted during the course of the study. After the first Mission TDY to Uganda, the research team reviewed and revised the protocol, streamlining the number of questions and adding additional questions on self-reliance. Second, the original methodology allowed for data to be collected, analyzed, and reported on in that order. But owing to a desire to allow more frequent feedback loops, for each TDY, the research team produced a tailored overview of the overall PCLS work with the Mission along with drafting potential scoping of any additional support to the Mission. This included an in-depth scoping document that described the planned TDY, along with a Key Informant Plan that described the planned pre-TDY and during-TDY interviews. Finally the most notable adaptation was the change of the previously planned longitudinal aspect of the study to a shorter time period with only one round of TDY research trips. This greatly reduced the ability of the study to address the second major question concerning the effects of the Program Cycle.

CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

The PCLS has a number of important caveats and limitations regarding the sampling of Missions and individuals, as well as analytical considerations.

There are several limitations to this study:

1. No inferences can be drawn about the prevalence of the phenomena observed beyond the sample of Missions selected for study. The small number of participating Missions allowed for in-depth focus but prevented a broader exploration of Program Cycle practices at a wider array of Missions. Although the four Missions selected for the PCLS constitute a range of staff sizes, sectoral emphases, and development budgets, they may or may not be representative of all Missions. However, the PCLS does include a range of Missions with diverse country contexts, and the study provides opportunities to surface additional questions and areas of inquiry for other Program Cycle learning efforts.
2. The single research trip made to each Mission and the sometimes-limited availability of interviewees during these trips restricted the number of interviews and direct observations that could be conducted. Nevertheless, the research team sought views from as many staff as possible across each Mission, particularly Program Office staff, to the degree practicable.
3. While the researchers obtained almost all documents requested, they prioritized documents that were easy to access, and thus the documents reviewed are not comprehensive or representative.
4. As is the case with all methodologies that rely on interviews, the individuals interviewed were subject to universal processes such as social desirability, availability, and recall bias, which may have influenced the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the details they provided. Wherever possible, the research team triangulated findings through other interviews, observations, or documents.

5. PPL originally conceived of the study as a multi-year longitudinal study, but shifts in Agency priorities and resource levels led to adjustments to the study, including shortening its duration to 18 months. This limited the ability to study the Program Cycle over time in individual Missions. In addition, topics were refined over the course of the research implementation. For instance, interviewees mentioned self-reliance only occasionally in the first two Missions visited (Uganda and El Salvador). As the concept was increasingly prioritized across the Agency, however, the researchers incorporated questions about the Journey to Self-Reliance more systematically into interviews, and they observed sessions on the concept in the two later Missions (Guinea/Sierra Leone and Vietnam). Follow-up interviews with Program Office staff in all four Missions also included discussions on self-reliance.

SAMPLING OF MISSIONS

There are biases regarding the participation of Missions. Missions were not selected at random but were selected by convenience or availability sampling. This approach used a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relied on data collection from Missions that were able and willing to participate in the study. Convenience sampling is a type of sampling where the first available primary data source will be used for the research without additional requirements. Missions were contacted using the personal relationships of the study's Activity Manager. Despite this limitation, we did obtain geographic distribution in the selected Missions along with a range of Mission sizes by staff and budget as well as a variety of sectoral foci.

SAMPLING OF INDIVIDUALS

The most important limitation to interviewees was availability. In some cases, potential respondents were not in the country or in the Mission itself due to travel. There are many potential individual level biases that could influence the quality and quantity of data collected. Chief among these is the social desirability bias, where respondents are inclined to provide a favorable view of their Mission and their work. However, many respondents—once informed of the anonymity and confidentiality of their remarks—did provide relatively unvarnished opinions of their experiences and views. Another common bias is outcome bias, where the focus is on the end result as opposed to the process that generated the result. Recency bias also may have impacted the ability of respondents to effectively recall processes accurately. These biases were mitigated by employing best practices in qualitative research to ensure that interpretive judgments are documented and validated. These included triangulating data in both:

- Methods: The members of the research team attempted to validate qualitative data through direct and independent observation and review of documentation.
- Analysis: The research team members attempted to triangulate findings across individuals within Missions as well as across Missions in order to understand the diversity and preponderance of views.

In addition, the nature of the study provided an opportunity to produce a "thick" description of the Program Cycle processes. This was achieved by the research team using interviews, direct observation, and document review to obtain sufficient detail to ensure conclusions derived from the data are adequately documented and robust. In addition, in recognition of the challenge of differing interpretations by interviewees, the research team has included rival explanations where applicable, by

attempting to test any themes or trends by eliciting and exploring possible alternative interpretations of events or processes during and subsequent to interviews.[6]

ANALYTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Analytical biases by the research team may also be present in the findings, conclusions, and recommendations listed. For instance, representativeness bias may appear where the research team extrapolates from one Mission's experience to other participating Missions. The team has attempted to appropriately caveat the findings to reduce this potential bias. The non-generalizability of the findings is often raised in assessing qualitative research outputs.[7] This report does not purport to provide generalizable findings about Missions. Rather, the report provides an opportunity for the reader to leverage the detailed insights based on the diverse range of qualitative data collected, through the concept of analytical generalization. This involves making projections about the likely transferability of findings from this study, based on a theoretical analysis of the factors producing outcomes and the effect of context. Since many findings relate to perceptions, the applicability of these findings and conclusions will be open to the interpretation of individual readers.

Despite these limitations, the PCLS has generated insights about the Program Cycle that are worth discussing and investigating further in order to inform future Program Cycle learning.

[6] While observer effects are often also cited as pitfalls in ethnographic work that involves direct observation, there are many scholars who argue that these observer effects can yield valuable data. See Monahan, T. and J.A. Fisher (2010). Benefits of "Observer Effects": Lessons from the Field. Qualitative Research, 10(3), 357–376.

[7] See Goggin, M. (1986). The "Too Few Cases/Too Many Variables" Problem in Implementation Research. The Western Political Quarterly, 39(2), 328–347.