

PEER ASSISTS

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT BRIEFS

Selected information in this guidance document was adapted from the Food and Agricultural Organization's "Field Tools" and the [Knowledge Sharing Toolkit](#).

These briefs are written to support USAID and partners with Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) throughout the Program Cycle. They utilize experience from the KDMD project to share good practices, how-tos, and lessons learned about concepts and activities related to knowledge management and learning.



The USAID Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project designs and implements state-of-the-art knowledge management (KM), learning, and collaboration tools and approaches and promotes collaboration among practitioners to speed innovation and adoption. KDMD seeks to maximize the impact of USAID's knowledge and learning investments, and implements strategies and processes to coordinate learning and knowledge sharing across the full range of investments and activities for our USAID programs.



ABOUT PEER ASSISTS

What are peer assists?

Peer assists are face-to-face or virtual gatherings that bring colleagues together to share knowledge, best practices, or lessons learned on a particular topic. In a peer assist, an individual or group presents an issue or challenge that they are facing in their work to another group with experience in that issue. By sharing their thoughts and suggestions, the experienced group and the hosts engage in participatory learning. Peer assists are customizable depending on the topic, location, and available time. Regardless of the subject matter, it is important to clearly define the session's objectives to ensure that they can be met within the designated timeframe.

When are they useful?

Peer assists can be an extremely useful learning activity to facilitate knowledge sharing, participatory learning, and collective problem solving. They create a designated space for learning and knowledge sharing and can help prevent individuals and projects from making the same mistakes others have made. Specifically, peer assists are most useful when:

- A project manager starting a new activity would like to learn from others with prior experience in similar areas
- A project manager has a problem that another project has solved
- A project manager would like to learn about new approaches another project has used successfully

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Types of peer assists

Traditionally, peer assists were designed for face-to-face interaction between two or more individuals, but with webinar, chat room, and virtual meeting technology, they do not necessarily have to occur in person.

In-person peer assists are valuable if the gathering also involves field visits, local partner meetings and/or discussions with other office staff members, or if the event is taking place over an extended period of time. An in-person peer assist might be a better strategy for individuals who have not met before since it can be easier to develop trust with face-to-face interaction.

Online peer assists are useful for shorter, targeted discussions about a specific issue or concern, or when distance or budget constraints make meeting in person difficult. With both formats, follow-on communications and activities help continue knowledge sharing after the event.

Peer assists can include as few as two or as many as 20 or more participants but are typically comprised of six to eight people. The size of the group dictates the level of formality required, as more participants means more planning and the need for facilitation. Smaller peer assists can be coordinated among the people participating. Larger peer assists, on the other hand, should utilize facilitators who can help to pull out key aspects from the conversations and keep participants on-track with overall learning goals.

ASSUMPTIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

Trust

For a peer assist to be successful, participants should be willing to share their experiences and lessons learned—even past failures or mistakes. Creating a comfortable environment for all participants (whether in-person or online) can help to create a welcoming atmosphere conducive to knowledge exchange. The facilitator or host may plan activities or discussions, such as agreeing to the objectives and agenda before the peer assist, to build participants' comfort level and trust.

Facilitation

For peer assists with larger groups, the host should ideally identify a facilitator. Facilitators can be internal to the organization or hired externally but should not be one of the peers sharing information. A skilled facilitator can help to shape the conversation, draw out key lessons and keep the group focused on their objectives. Facilitators can also help to mitigate any tensions or issues within the group and can expedite a more efficient process. Effective facilitators possess certain skills, including good listening and communications skills and the ability to quickly and clearly synthesize information and conversations.

Time

Adequate time is another requirement for a successful peer assist. Regardless of the format, participants should set aside dedicated time to



participate actively and without distractions. Peer assists can vary in length depending on the topic, the number of participants, and other accompanying activities, and can take as little as one hour or as long as multiple days.

HOW-TOS

The following steps can be followed when setting up a peer assist activity:

Determine the need: Is a peer assist the right format for your group? Think through the type of information you would like to share or the problem you are trying to solve prior to deciding on a learning activity.

Decide on whom: Factors to consider include choosing someone who is familiar with the topic, project, or subject area, as well as someone who is a good communicator. Invite participants who have a diversity of skills, competencies, and experience.

Select a facilitator: If the peer assist will involve more than two to three people, consider utilizing a facilitator who can help to define objectives and organize the activity in an effective and efficient way.

Define objectives: Once the participants have been identified, have the host or facilitator work with the group to agree on objectives and an agenda before the event, if possible.

Choose a location, date, and time: Should the event be held online or in-person? For an in-person event, identify and reserve meeting space, if necessary. For online events, there are many tools available including [Go-To-Meeting](#), AIDConnect (internal to USAID), [Adobe Connect](#), [Skype](#), [Google meet up groups](#), etc. USAID's [Learning Lab](#) provides a number of

tools for peer-to-peer collaboration including collaborative groups, Ask and Answer, and Office Hours with USAID experts. Think through possible connectivity issues and always have a back-up plan, such as a teleconference line.

Cultivate trust and create an environment for sharing: Allow time before or during the peer assist for colleagues to get to know one another and to build a rapport so that they feel more comfortable sharing potentially sensitive information, including mistakes and failures.

Document/record: Document the discussion, issues, and lessons shared during the peer assist. Consider making an audio or video recording of the event, or simply assign someone to take notes.

Follow-up: Don't let the peer assist be a singular learning activity. Organizers of the peer assist or facilitators should try to keep in touch with participants and contact them occasionally to obtain updates on their activities or new lessons learned to share out with the larger group.

Share: The information gained from a peer assist could likely benefit others working on similar issues. Consider sharing the documentation or record of the peer assist on appropriate knowledge sharing platforms.

LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

- ✓ Clearly communicate and agree upon the goals and objectives for a peer assist by allowing enough time during the planning phase for discussion.
- ✓ Talk with others and conduct preliminary research to determine whether the problem you are facing has already been addressed by another group.



- ✓ Allow time for participants to socialize with one another in order to develop rapport and trust and create a conducive environment for sharing.
- ✓ Structure the event to allow a balance between presenting the problem or issue and discussing it within the peer assist group.
- ✓ Consider having the facilitator(s) record notes and observations directly into an electronically accessible format, such as a wiki, blog, forum, or Microsoft Word document. You may want to project the notes to the group as an aid for visual learners.
- ✓ Allow for the unexpected; even though objectives may be outlined before a peer assist, allow conversations about other helpful topics to take place organically.
- ✓ Encourage participants to suggest ideas and propose solutions, even if they are very specific to a particular experience since these ideas can sometimes trigger new lines of thought.

Resources

[The Knowledge Sharing Toolkit](#) sponsored by CGIAR, FAO, KM4Dev, UNCF, and UNDP

[FAO Food Security Information for Action Practical Guides](#)

[ODI Tools for Knowledge and Learning](#)

[IFAD Knowledge Sharing Methods and Tools Facilitator Guide](#)
