

Using Data Placemats to Pause and Reflect on Strategy-level Results

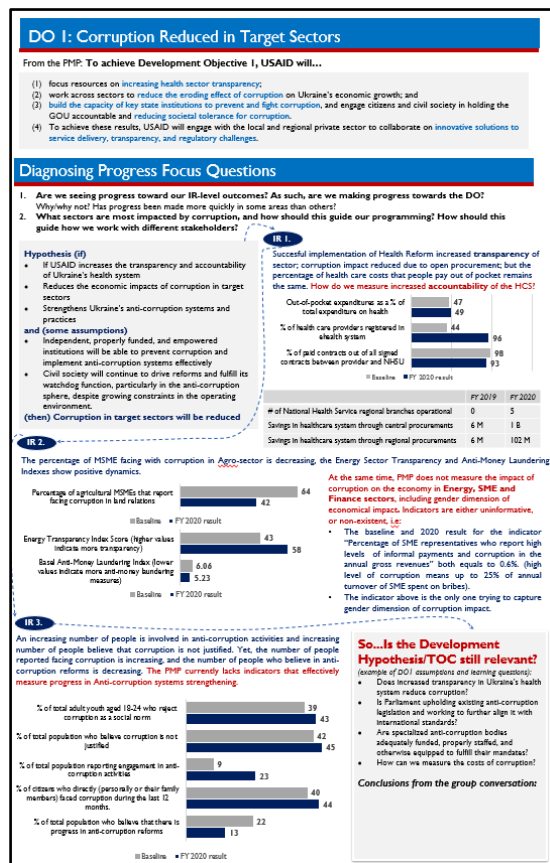
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A data placemat is an effective tool for initiating a data driven conversation. Essentially, a data placemat is a single sheet of paper, often quite large (e.g., 11x17 inches), that presents a collection of data visualizations (i.e., charts, graphs, tables) about a specific theme or category using an intentional structure. The example data placemat to the right, for instance, organizes a Mission's indicator data related to reducing corruption. [This data placemat template](#) can help you create your own. Data placemats can be used to aggregate and visualize performance indicators from your Performance Management Plan (PMP). However, data sources can also range widely and be qualitative as well as quantitative (e.g., themes and quotes from stakeholder engagement meetings, key evaluation or assessment findings, data illustrating major contextual shifts).

For CDCS Mid-Course Stocktaking sessions organized around Development Objectives (DOs), consider creating one data placemat per DO and using it to facilitate conversations about the development hypothesis and progress to date. Alternatively, you could make one data placemat for each of the Learning Priorities in your PMP. You could also cluster the data by technical sector (e.g., economic growth), or by cross-cutting themes (e.g., climate, youth). Another approach would be to create a strategy-level placemat linking the DO-level placemats for use at the start or conclusion of the event.

Whatever your approach, there are four key points to keep in mind while developing your placemat:

1. **Determine your focus question(s) based on the objectives of the strategy-level review.** The point of the placemat isn't to simply display a bunch of data. Rather, its purpose is to provide the necessary information—and parameters—to have a grounded, data-informed conversation about progress to date and possible adaptations. Articulating your focus question(s) up front will help you:
 - Curate the data participants need in front of them in order to reflect on and respond to the focus questions. Equally, scoping and defining the parameters of



what you will—and *won't*—include on the data placemat can help you further hone your focus question(s).

- Provide a hook for colleagues to engage with the data being visualized, framing the conversation so that users understand what they are looking at and why.
2. **Don't overcrowd your placemat.** Condensing multiple years of work onto a single sheet is challenging. In fact, it is probably impossible. You will need to make hard choices about which data to include, and what combination of data visualizations will most help users understand the focus question(s) that you're trying to answer. Be ruthless. A cluttered placemat will only confuse people and distract them from your focus question(s). In making the hard choices, consider:
 - Including data that exposes and highlights relationships (e.g., across technical areas, or between different parts of the development hypothesis).
 - Varying the types of graphs and charts being used, as appropriate to the data.
 - Displaying data that requires further thought and discussion to interpret—sometimes data that may appear to be contradictory can even generate better discussion
 - Highlighting trends over time where relevant to your focus questions
 3. **Identify who will be using/discussing the placemat.** To make the best use of everyone's time, pre-determine the group that will discuss the placemat and let them know in advance about what is expected of them. This is particularly important for cross-cutting conversations where colleagues may not be familiar with data generated by other sectors or offices.
 4. **Finally, leave interpretation up to your users and encourage debate.** The data placemat is really intended to raise thoughtful questions rather than offer all the answers. It provides the building blocks (i.e., focus question, resources for thinking about that question)—but it's really through facilitated discussion that participants will interpret the data in a way that creates shared insight. Facilitators should avoid preemptively offering their personal point of view—on the data or give the impression there is a “right” answer to the focus question(s).

Ultimately the data placement allows for a structured conversation that enables colleagues to interpret the data and determine what story it tells, so the Mission can learn and adapt accordingly.

Below, you can find a list of resources for developing and using a data placemat, including a data placemat template and two sample facilitation plans for data-driven conversations based on data placemats:

- [Data Placemat Template](#)
- [MCST Data Placemat Discussion Slide Deck and Facilitation Plan](#)
- [MCST Data Placemat Scavenger Hunt Activity Facilitation Plan](#)
- Support for the integration of relevant third-party contextual data into data placemats can be provided by [PPL's Analytics Team \(PPLAnalytics@usaid.gov\)](mailto:PPLAnalytics@usaid.gov)