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Agricultural fields along the border of Mgahinga Gorilla National Park. Near Kisoro, Uganda. Photo by © Jason Houston for USAID

INSIGHTS FROM THE PROGRAM CYCLE LEARNING STUDY

Operationalizing Self-Reliance through the Program Cycle

This document is intended to promote discussion and highlight the most relevant findings, potential implications, and remaining areas of inquiry for operationalizing self-reliance in USAID Missions.

The **Program Cycle Learning Study (PCLS)** was a qualitative case study research project that engaged four USAID Missions in Uganda, El Salvador, Vietnam, and Guinea and Sierra Leone. Two main study questions guided the research:

- 1) How do Missions implement the Program Cycle?
- 2) What are the effects of Program Cycle implementation?

Despite some notable limitations to the study, its key takeaways may be useful for integrating and further operationalizing the Journey to Self-Reliance (J2SR) in USAID programming.

KEY IMPLICATIONS OF THE PCLS FOR J2SR

- **AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT:** Successful J2SR policy implementation necessitates Mission staff having sufficient knowledge, ownership, skills, and time to understand, integrate, and operationalize self-reliance via the Program Cycle. Designing intentional, appropriate, and tailored processes in Missions to continue to reinforce the vision, concepts, and varied operational focus areas of self-reliance as they apply in a given context can support the successful integration of self-reliance into Program Cycle processes and products.
- **PROJECTS:** The project construct (a set of complementary activities designed and managed to achieve a discrete development result) remains underutilized. Commonly cited reasons for this include a lack of time, staff, incentives, or management plans. Given the potential role for the project in operationalizing self-reliance, USAID may need to consider addressing some of the key constraints in order to make significant progress in achieving this vision.
- **TIME AND EFFORT:** Because Program Cycle processes take a significant amount of time and effort to implement, and yet represent the primary means by which USAID translates policy and resources into programming, integrating the vision, concepts, and varied operational focus areas of the Journey to Self-Reliance into Program Cycle processes and products should be accomplished in a way that seeks to minimize the time or paperwork burden for Mission staff members whenever possible.
- **STAFF TRANSITIONS:** Given Mission staffing shortages and frequent staff transitions, there is a strong need for efficient and timely knowledge management to ensure ownership and continuity during transitions and turnover. As the full PCLS report indicates, staff members have the complex task of weaving in the Journey to Self-Reliance across the Program Cycle, so efficient transfers of knowledge have become even more important. USAID/Washington support in the form of both bandwidth and knowledge management skills can facilitate J2SR integration.

More details on these points, as well as questions for further discussion and inquiry, can be found in the sections below. See the full **PCLS report** and a **table of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the PCLS report** for more information.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SELF-RELIANCE LEARNING AGENDA AND PROGRAM CYCLE POLICY

In support of USAID's Journey to Self-Reliance, the Self-Reliance Learning Agenda (SRLA) generates, collects, synthesizes, and disseminates evidence and learning to inform USAID's policies, programs, and operations. Among various areas of inquiry, the SRLA is exploring the role of USAID's organizational structures and staffing, policies, guidance, technical assistance, and capacity building in enabling the Agency to foster self-reliance.¹ In addition, the SRLA seeks to provide learning with respect to how USAID/Washington can continue to provide effective support to the field and improve its work in operationalizing the Journey to Self-Reliance. One key USAID policy, the Program Cycle Policy (documented in ADS 201), serves as USAID's operational model for planning, delivering, assessing, and adapting development programming. The Program Cycle, along with support to the field for its effective implementation, guides key work processes and procedures for USAID to support and operationalize self-reliance throughout its programming. Therefore, insights emerging from the PCLS, recently completed by USAID, provide important evidence and learning to inform USAID's ongoing work in integrating the vision for self-reliance into the Agency's programs and practices.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROGRAM CYCLE LEARNING STUDY

The PCLS was a qualitative case study research project that engaged four USAID Missions in Uganda, El Salvador, Vietnam, and Guinea and Sierra Leone. These Missions were selected to provide a diversity of geographical location, Mission staff size, portfolio, and budget. Two main study questions guided the research: (1) How do Missions implement the Program Cycle? and (2) What are the effects of Program Cycle implementation? The study relied on four main data sources: (1) 151 Mission staff interviews across all offices in the four Missions; (2) observation of 21 meetings, events, and activities relating to the Program Cycle; (3) a review of 5,948 pages of Program Cycle-related documents; and (4) 20 USAID/Washington staff interviews, including regional and technical Bureau staff as well as Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning staff who have experience in these Missions.

There are notable limitations to the PCLS. Only four Missions were surveyed, so findings cannot be generalized beyond the four Missions studied. However, the qualitative takeaways may be useful to help interpret and contextualize other assessments of Agency operations, especially broader quantitative analyses. 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. Also, due to the timing of the PCLS data collection (April—December 2018), Mission staff members had limited exposure to the vision, concepts, and varied operational focus areas of the Journey to Self-Reliance in the context of the Program Cycle because J2SR had only recently been announced. However, given the centrality of the Program Cycle in operationalizing USAID programming, especially in applying J2SR, the study's findings provide insight into key factors that can support and help the integration and operationalization of J2SR. This document also contains a set of potential implications that are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive but are provided to generate discussion and inform future decision-making related to Program Cycle policy and ongoing support for USAID's Missions in implementing it.

¹ The SRLA's Question #13 focuses on operational issues within USAID; it reads: "How can USAID's organizational structures and staffing, policies, guidance, technical assistance, and capacity building enable us to foster self-reliance? In what ways can USAID/Washington provide effective field services to operationalize the Journey to Self-Reliance?" A list of SRLA questions and illustrative sub-questions, as well as links to the SRLA's evidence products, can be found [here](#).

FINDINGS AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR USAID'S ONGOING EFFORTS TO OPERATIONALIZE THE JOURNEY TO SELF-RELIANCE

The study identified supportive Mission leadership, appropriate Program Office capacity and skills, and Technical Office staff awareness and engagement as key enabling factors to effective Program Cycle implementation.

Mission leadership, including but not limited to the Mission Director, influences the timing, manner, pace, and scope of Program Cycle implementation through messaging, decisions, and priorities. In the early phases of this research, the concept of self-reliance was noticeably more familiar to staff members in Missions where the leadership had made efforts early on to socialize the concept across the staff. The study also found that Program Office leadership, capacity, and skills are critical in implementing the Program Cycle. The manner and pace of Program Cycle implementation within the Mission are strongly influenced by the Program Office staff's available time and capabilities. The study found that a high level of Mission staff engagement was important in supporting effective Program Cycle implementation. For example, while the documents that result from Program Cycle processes serve important functions in each Mission, the processes related to the Program Cycle—especially strategy development and portfolio reviews—can play an even more important role in providing opportunities for Mission staff to be involved, informed, and “bought into” Mission-wide programming decisions.

Potential Implications for Ongoing Efforts to Operationalize J2SR: Successful J2SR policy implementation necessitates Mission staff having sufficient knowledge, ownership, skills, and time to understand, integrate, and operationalize self-reliance via the Program Cycle in Missions. Designing appropriate and tailored processes in Missions to continue to reinforce the vision, concepts, and varied operational focus areas of self-reliance can support the integration of self-reliance.

The Project construct (a set of complementary activities designed and managed to achieve a discrete development result) remains underutilized.

Project management as envisaged in the ADS 201 remains rare; commonly cited reasons for this include a lack of time, staff, incentives, or management plans. Some interviewees noted the positive implications when projects were successfully managed as portfolios of activities and supported higher-order results.

Potential Implications for Ongoing Efforts to Operationalize J2SR: Given the potential role for the project in operationalizing self-reliance, USAID may need to consider addressing some or all of these key constraints in order to make significant progress in achieving this vision.

Program Cycle processes take a significant amount of time and effort to implement. Often clearance processes, along with competing priorities within Missions, can delay Program Cycle implementation.

Many interviewees from all four Missions noted the impact of clearance processes for finalizing and executing Program Cycle decisions. These clearance processes are often heavily influenced and guided by Mission leadership and driven by factors such as leadership preferences, staffing contexts (or shortages), and organizational configurations. In addition, the study found that time is required for the consistent alignment of Program Cycle elements among strategy, project, and activity. This alignment supports consistent and coherent development program planning and implementation. Alignment, however, can remain uneven and challenging to implement because of multiple, concurrent processes that necessitate ongoing updates and amendments of Program Cycle documents, such as Project Appraisal Documents.

Potential Implications for Ongoing Efforts to Operationalize J2SR: The integration of the vision, concepts, and varied operational focus areas of the Journey to Self-Reliance should be accomplished in a way that does not increase the time or paperwork burden for Mission staff members. A supportive change management approach for the J2SR vision that focuses on streamlining Program Cycle processes (and accompanying clearances) could enable Missions to more easily integrate self-reliance in their work. For example, the new project design process will aim to reduce lengthy Project Appraisal Documents (PADs) as well as onerous clearance processes associated with PAD amendments. Streamlining other processes, such as those associated with activity design, could further facilitate operationalization of J2SR.

Mission staffing shortages and frequent staff transitions can affect the consistency and coherence of Program Cycle implementation.

Program Cycle implementation is often hampered by an insufficient number of positions, a lack of appropriate skills, and frequent turnover of staff. Even when a Mission does have an adequate number of positions, they can remain vacant for a number of reasons, including regular staff leaves, transitions between staff, lengthy hiring processes, and an inability to attract appropriately skilled applicants. As a result, Missions often turn to USAID/Washington or to contractors for assistance with Program Cycle processes and documents, leading to trade-offs in continuity, knowledge management, and ownership.

Potential Implications for Ongoing Efforts to Operationalize J2SR: USAID/Washington support—in the form of both skills and bandwidth—is often critical in supporting Mission-based Program Cycle implementation. This creates an even stronger need for efficient and timely knowledge management to ensure ownership and continuity during transitions and turnover, and through varied USAID/Washington and contractor engagements. An efficient knowledge transfer procedure would bolster the efficacy of Program Cycle implementation, especially towards implementation of the J2SR vision.²

REMAINING QUESTIONS AND AREAS OF FUTURE INQUIRY

Based on the above study findings, potential areas for future inquiry are:

- How can Mission leadership, Program Office, and Technical Office staff improve their understanding and ability to use Program Cycle processes to integrate the vision and operationalize the concepts of the Journey to Self-Reliance?
- What are some of the most promising approaches already developed in Missions to advance project management as a way to support self-reliance outcomes?
- How can USAID and its partners ensure strong alignment across Program Cycle components such that self-reliance priorities and practices flow from strategy to project to activities?
- How can Missions most effectively prepare, review, and approve Program Cycle documents to effectively engage varied perspectives and authorities while working as efficiently as possible in clearing key documents?
- What are the most useful types of Program Cycle support to Missions from USAID/Washington Bureaus, including reducing work burden to free up staff time?
- How can knowledge management practices better support periodic Washington and contractor support, as well as staff transitions within Missions, such that self-reliance principles and practices are effectively integrated into USAID's work?

² The [Handover Note Template](#), which outlines a systematic and intentional approach to managing the transfer of knowledge for the departure and arrival of staff, could be a useful tool for this purpose.