THE PROGRAM CYCLE
LEARNING STUDY

Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations
from Four Missions

SUGGESTED CITATION

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COVER PHOTO CREDIT: Jason Houston for USAID. Agricultural fields along the border of Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, near Kisoro, Uganda.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYM LIST

ADS	Automated Directives System
AMELP	Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning Plan
AOR	Agreement Officer's Representative
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
CLA	Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting
COP	Chief of Party
COR	Contracting Officer's Representative
DO	Development Objective
DOAG	Development Objective Agreement
DQA	Data Quality Assessment
FSO	Foreign Service Officer
FSN	Foreign Service National
ICS	Integrated Country Strategy
IL	Implementation Letter
IP	Implementing Partner
IR	Intermediate Result
KM	Knowledge Management
LER	Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research, USAID/PPL
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MCST	Midcourse Stocktaking
MD	Mission Director
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MO	Mission Orders
OP	Operational Plan
PAD	Project Appraisal Document
PC	Program Cycle
PDP	Project Design Plan
PCLA	Program Cycle Learning Agenda
PCLS	Program Cycle Learning Study
PEPFAR	President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
PMELP	Project Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning Plan

PMP	Performance Management Plan
PPL	Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning, USAID
PPR	Performance Plan and Report
PR	Portfolio Review
RDCS	Regional Development Cooperation Strategy
RF	Results Framework
SRLA	Self-Reliance Learning Agenda
TA	Technical Assistance
TCN	Third Country National
TDY	Temporary Duty Assignment
TOC	Theory of Change
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WOPE	Whole-of-Project Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Program Cycle Learning Study (PCLS) used a qualitative case study approach to provide a systematic and holistic understanding of how four Missions understand and implement the Program Cycle. The study offers examples of how Missions implement the Program Cycle on a day-to-day basis and provides evidence and insight into the effects of Program Cycle processes on the Missions' work. The Missions involved in the study were: USAID/Uganda, USAID/El Salvador, USAID/Guinea and Sierra Leone, and USAID/Vietnam.

Two main study questions guided the research: (1) How do Missions implement the Program Cycle? (2) What are the effects of Program Cycle implementation? The PCLS was not intended to formally assess or evaluate Missions. Rather, the focus of this report is on identifying common themes across Missions regarding staff members' implementation of Program Cycle processes in order to inform USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning's (PPL) overall understanding of, and support for, the Program Cycle. The goal was also to inform future inquiry.

Data collection involved four main activities:

1. Interviews of 131staff across all offices within the four Missions;

2. Observation of 21 Mission events and activities relating to the Program Cycle, such as retreats, midcourse stocktakings, and everyday meetings;

3. A review of 5,948 pages of Program Cycle documents; and

4. Twenty USAID/Washington staff interviews, including Regional and Technical Bureau staff as well as PPL staff who have experience in these Missions.

The 20 findings are organized into three categories. First, nine findings relate to the overall implementation and effects of the Program Cycle in the four study Missions. They concern the roles of Mission leadership, Program Office and technical staff, and others, as well as their awareness of the principles and components of the Program Cycle and its relationship to the Journey to Self-Reliance. Other findings pertain to attitudes and experiences around Program Cycle challenges and Missions' reliance on external support to complete required Program Cycle processes and documents. Second, the next nine findings focus on the individual components of the Program Cycle as it is implemented in the four study Missions. Drawing on interviewees' comments as well as observations and document analysis, this section describes attitudes and practices around strategies, projects, activities, as well as monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) and collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA). Several findings in this section relate to alignment across the components of the Program Cycle and considerations surrounding the adaptation of strategies, projects, or activities. The final two findings focus on PPL's support to Missions for the implementation of Program Cycle processes.

The report details five conclusions:

1. The most important factors influencing a Mission's ability to implement the Program Cycle in a coherent, integrated manner are supportive Front Office and Program Office leadership, and high levels of Mission staff engagement.

2. Program Cycle processes take a significant amount of time and effort to implement, which can affect alignment and adaptation. The timing of these processes can also impact other required Mission tasks, leading to increased stress for staff.

3. Staffing is often insufficient to support consistent and coherent implementation of the Program Cycle. As a result, Missions often turn to USAID/Washington or to contractors for assistance with Program Cycle processes and documents.

4. Unlike strategies and activities, the concept, benefits, and management of projects are not well understood, nor are projects consistently valued or commonly operationalized.

5. Program Cycle processes and convenings benefit Missions and their development programming by providing staff with relational and structured ways to make coherent and aligned decisions, build relationships, create shared understandings, and support employee engagement.

The report makes the following five recommendations:

1. The Agency should review the generalizability and validity of the study's findings and conclusions beyond the four Missions studied here.

2. The Agency should review ADS 201 requirements and assess the necessary time, level of effort, benefits, and trade-offs and resources needed to conduct Program Cycle processes.

3. PPL and other Bureaus, with Agency leadership backing, should review connections, inconsistencies, and dependencies between the Program Cycle and other policies, initiatives, and processes to support efficient Program Cycle implementation.

4. The Agency should determine the most effective and efficient ways to ensure adequate staffing with enough capacity and understanding of the Program Cycle.

5. The Agency should develop a Program Cycle implementation strategy that prioritizes leadership, learning, and communication regarding the Program Cycle, especially projects, for all staff and implementing partners.

The report below describes these conclusions and findings in greater detail. Annex 1 contains a table that notes the data sources for the findings and outlines which findings support which conclusions and recommendations. Annex 2 contains additional details about the study's methodology. Annex 3 contains the interviewees' PPL-specific recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

The Program Cycle Learning Study used a qualitative case study approach to provide a systematic and holistic understanding of how four Missions understand and implement the Program Cycle. The study offers examples of how Missions implement the Program Cycle on a day-to-day basis and provides evidence and insight into the effects of Program Cycle processes on the Missions' work. The Missions involved in the study were: USAID/Uganda, USAID/El Salvador, USAID/Guinea and Sierra Leone, and USAID/Vietnam. Annexes to this report include a table listing the study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations (Annex 1), a detailed methodology (Annex 2), and PPL-specific recommendations (Annex 3).

Two main study questions and their respective sub-questions guided the research:

(1) How do Missions implement the Program Cycle?

- How well are strategies, projects, and activities aligned (with one another) as envisioned in the ADS 201 guidance?
- How interconnected are monitoring, evaluation, and learning in practice?
- How do Missions, in practice, integrate collaborating, 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?

(2) What are the effects of Program Cycle implementation?

- 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?
- What effects of Program Cycle implementation are expected? What additional unintended effects emerged?

As the research proceeded, other topics, such as the Journey to Self-Reliance, were incorporated into interviews and observations. The findings presented in this report, while addressing all of these questions and sub-questions, are therefore organized according to three general sections: (1) Overall Implementation and Effects of the Program Cycle, including the Journey to Self-Reliance; (2) Individual Components of the Program Cycle, Alignment, and Adaptation; and (3) Support from PPL for Program Cycle Implementation.

The PCLS report draws on a set of 159 interviews with 151 individuals in Washington and participating Missions, along with a review of 5,948 pages of Program Cycle documents, to provide a rich picture of the implementation and implications of the Program Cycle. (See Table 2 below for a breakdown of interviewees.) In addition, the research team conducted direct observation of Program Cycle-related

events, activities, and meetings to supplement this data. The PCLS was not intended to formally assess or evaluate Missions. Rather, the focus of this report is on identifying common themes across Missions regarding staff members' implementation of Program Cycle processes in order to inform PPL's overall understanding of, and support for, the Program Cycle. The goal was also to inform future inquiry.

WHAT IS THE PROGRAM CYCLE?

The Program Cycle (see figure at right), codified in the Automated Directives System (ADS) 201, is USAID's model for "planning, delivering, assessing, and adapting development programming." (201.1) The policy "encompasses guidance and procedures for: (1) making strategic decisions at the regional or country level about programmatic areas of focus and associated resources; (2) designing projects and supportive activities to implement strategic plans; and (3) learning from performance monitoring, evaluations, and other relevant sources of information to make course corrections as needed and inform future programming." (201.1) According to ADS 201, these individual elements of the Program Cycle are (or should be) "interconnected and mutually reinforcing." (201.3.1.3) The Program Cycle "systemically links all aspects of development programming and integrates them through learning and adapting." (201.3.1.3) In addition, while often represented as a cycle, it is "neither linear nor sequential; Missions are often engaged in the various components simultaneously." (201.3.1.3) The Program Cycle policy centers on four principles that are essential for good development:

- Apply analytic rigor to support evidence-based decision making: make strategic choices based on conclusions supported by evidence.

- Manage adaptively through continuous learning: make adjustments in response to new information and context changes.

- Promote sustainability through local ownership: generate lasting changes that are sustained by local actors.

- Utilize a range of approaches to achieve results: use a range of modalities to address diverse development challenges.
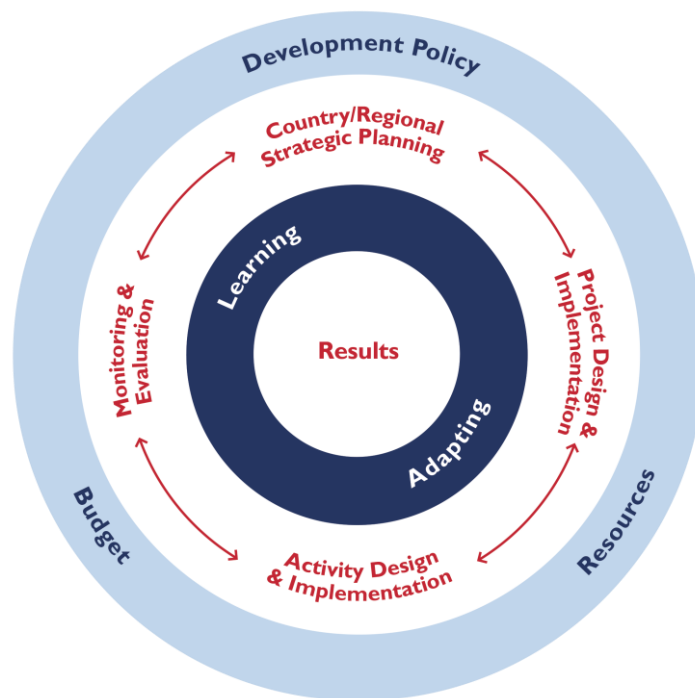
CONNECTIONS WITH THE SELF-RELIANCE AND PROGRAM CYCLE LEARNING AGENDAS

Both a process and a set of products, USAID's Self-Reliance Learning Agenda (SRLA) generates, collects, synthesizes, and disseminates evidence and learning to inform how USAID supports countries on the Journey to Self-Reliance. The SRLA coordinates and encourages the application of learning from across the Agency, including the ways in which the Program Cycle fosters self-reliance. In addition, to ensure that USAID is learning from Program Cycle implementation and filling in knowledge gaps around improvements in the current iteration of the Program Cycle Operational Policy, PPL developed the

<u>Program Cycle Learning Agenda</u> (PCLA) to address five learning questions pertaining to key assumptions or critical processes within the Program Cycle. This study complements learning activities under both the PCLA and the SRLA, therefore, and addresses two critical learning questions related to Program Cycle policy and implementation.

STUDY METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

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 relating 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.

TABLE 1: PCLS PARTICIPATING MISSION CHARACTERISTICS					
Mission	**Region**	**2017 Mission Budget[1]**	**2018 approx. staff size**	**Largest Technical Sector**	**PCLS Research Trip Timeframe**
El Salvador	Latin America and the Caribbean	$103 m	126	Governance	June 2018
Guinea & Sierra Leone[2]	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

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.[3] Following the field visits, the research team shared the draft Mission-specific findings for

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

[2] Guinea and Sierra Leone staff are in separate physical locations but are managed by the same Mission Director. While we visited both countries, for the purposes of this study, we approached them as one Mission case.

[3] Technical Assistance (TA) was provided by PPL or LEARN staff. USAID/Uganda received TA for its Mission leadership transition; USAID/El Salvador received TA for its RDCS Midcourse Stocktaking process; USAID/Guinea and Sierra Leone received TA for its CDCS Midcourse Stocktaking process; and USAID/Vietnam received TA for its CDCS process.

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. To maintain the speakers' confidentiality, individuals who are quoted in this report are referred to simply as "interviewees." Unless otherwise specified, the interviewees who are quoted come from the four Missions studied.

Location	Total Number of Interviews	Program Office	Front Office	Technical Office	Other Mission Staff[4]	IPs[5]
Table 2: PCLS Mission Interviewee Details						
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[6]	**20**					
Grand Total (including USAID / Washington staff)	**151**	**25**	**11**	**53**	**19**	**23**

The researchers conducted the research in four phases.

1. First, before the research trips, the team refined the methodology and data collection tools, collected and reviewed a variety of documents from Missions, and conducted background interviews in Washington. The research team requested a standard set of Program Cycle-related documents, such as internal CDCS documents, PADs, and Mission Orders, ahead of each research trip, reviewing a total of 5,948 pages of Program Cycle-related documents from across the four study Missions prior to and following the research trips. 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. In total, the research team

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4   This includes staff from the Executive Office, Contracting Office, Office of Acquisitions and Assistance, and Office of Financial Management.

5   USAID implementing partners staff, which includes MEL/CLA platform contract personnel.

6   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.

generated 897 pages of typed notes from their research activities. (See Table 2 for a breakdown of interviews.)

2. Over the course of the research trips, researchers conducted 131 interviews, making sure to interview at least one staff member from each office in each Mission. In all four Missions, the research team also interviewed representatives from implementing partners, including members of any MEL/CLA contract that supported the Mission. To select interviewees, this study used purposive sampling; based on input from each Mission, interviewees were identified according to their involvement with various components of the Program Cycle. In addition to interviews with Mission staff, the research team conducted 21 event observations, which included retreats, midcourse stocktakings, and everyday meetings.

3. 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.

4. Upon completion of all the research trips, the researchers re-analyzed all 897 pages of interview notes, observation notes, and documentary evidence collected during the research trips, along with the Mission summary documents and available Program Cycle-related documents. The research team coded this data using qualitative database analysis software in order to identify themes and patterns from across the four Missions, triangulating these findings where appropriate with other data.

5. Finally, the team selected findings that were supported by multiple pieces of evidence across the interviewee data, direct observation, and documents. The researchers then drew conclusions based on specific findings and made recommendations based on the findings and conclusions.

The study's conclusions draw on multiple findings, and recommendations in turn draw on multiple findings and conclusions. PPL and Mission staff reviewed this report for accuracy and feedback, which the research team incorporated as appropriate.

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.

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 and ongoing policy, practice, and support. These insights are presented in the following sections of this report, which are divided into Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations.

FINDINGS

The findings presented in this section are organized into the following categories:

I. Overall Implementation and Effects of the Program Cycle;

II. Individual Components of the Program Cycle, Alignment, and Adaptation; and

III. Support from PPL for Program Cycle Implementation.

Every finding listed in each of these categories is supported by multiple pieces of evidence. In some cases, the report incorporates direct quotations from Mission staff, with their approval, as well as anonymous Mission examples. These examples and quotations are not the only evidence for the findings; rather, they provide helpful illustrations of the findings, all of which are supported more generally by various types of evidence.

In some cases, the findings conform to "common knowledge" about the Program Cycle's implementation in Missions. The value of including those findings here consists of the ability to support such received notions with actual evidence from independent research. In addition, this study seeks to deepen readers' understanding of underlying reasons for these and other findings.

A table containing the study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations can be found in Annex 1.

I. OVERALL IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTS OF THE PROGRAM CYCLE

The nine findings included in this section relate to the overall implementation and effects of the Program Cycle in the four study Missions. They concern the roles of Mission leadership, Program Office and technical staff, and others, as well as their awareness of the principles and components of the Program Cycle and its relationship to the Journey to Self-Reliance. Other findings pertain to attitudes and experiences around Program Cycle challenges and Missions' reliance on external support to complete required Program Cycle processes and documents.

Finding 1: Interviewees had limited exposure to the Journey to Self-Reliance but noted four enabling factors supporting the integration of the Journey to Self-Reliance throughout the Program Cycle.

Given the timing of the data collection at Missions for this study (April–June 2018), interviewees at the first two Missions (Uganda and El Salvador) had limited exposure to the Journey to Self-Reliance because work to operationalize this new Agency priority was still nascent. Not surprisingly, during the research trips many Mission staff across all four Missions admitted to limited knowledge regarding the operational implications of self-reliance. Mission staff opinions on the Journey to Self-Reliance generally differed by hiring mechanism. FSNs tended to express strong support for the concept but also expressed concern about the ramifications for their own employment if USAID's relationship with the country shifted. In contrast, both Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) and Third Country Nationals (TCNs) tended to focus on how the concept is not particularly new but rather links up with previous initiatives and approaches. Some interviewees also viewed self-reliance as a top-down Washington initiative with little relevance to the field.

The four most commonly mentioned factors as potentially enabling the integration of the vision, concept, and operational approaches of the Journey to Self-Reliance into Program Cycle processes and related work were:

1) **Mission leadership efforts and staff engagement.** 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. Also important were the quality and quantity of relationships, both within the Mission and between the Mission and USAID/Washington, as these relationships facilitated the flow of information about ways to integrate the Journey to Self-Reliance into country strategies, projects, activities, and MEL/CLA processes.

2) **Greater autonomy and flexibility with the Mission's budget.** Where such freedom existed, it enabled Mission staff to devote resources to the sectors, programs, and approaches they felt had the best chances of increasing the host country's self-reliance.

3) **The potential contributions of implementing partners (IPs) in support of operational approaches that foster self-reliance.** IPs expressed the desire to learn more about the Journey to Self-Reliance and indicated that they were supportive of approaches that strengthened the capacity and commitment of local actors.

4) **The potential for integrated (cross-sectoral) programming.** Many interviewees recognized the value of avoiding silos when seeking to foster self-reliance in complex, interconnected development contexts.

Mission staff held differing views on how to operationalize self-reliance, with some interviewees expressing interest and concern regarding how to increase commitment (as opposed to capacity), given the perceived lack of focus and the political sensitivities in addressing it. As one interviewee noted: *"I think there are good elements of capacity and commitment; we have been working on capacity but less overtly on commitment."*

Finding 2: Mission leaders influence the timing, manner, pace, and scope of Program Cycle implementation through their messaging, decisions, and priorities, especially regarding clearances.

Many interviewees across all four Missions mentioned the role of the Mission Director in supporting and directing the Mission's approach to Program Cycle implementation, including supporting components and processes. According to interviewees, the Mission Director's buy-in, leadership style, and commitment to the Program Cycle set the tone, drove expectations regarding involvement and engagement, and influenced the pace and direction of Program Cycle processes. The current policy provides a Mission and its Program Office with wide latitude in how to design and manage internal processes in support of the Program Cycle, including its mandatory components. In the ADS 201, the component of the Program Cycle that is described in the greatest detail, including timeframes, is the development of the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS).[7] The absence of explicit timelines and processes in the ADS for other components of the Program Cycle, such as project design, provides Missions with more flexibility, but even with the revised CDCS guidelines, Mission Directors and Program Office Directors have considerable leeway to create processes that work for their Missions.

Many interviewees, both at USAID/Washington and in the study Missions, noted the importance of the Program Office within the Mission for facilitating and leading Program Cycle processes, linking this to the way the Program Cycle is implemented. As many interviewees noted, Program Cycle processes are but one priority among many for the Mission. Some interviewees stated directly that the role of the Program Office is most linked to Mission leadership's support of the Program Office in general and the Program Cycle in particular. As one interviewee explained: *"Your main stakeholder in implementing the Program Cycle is the [Mission's Program Office], and it has no authority. It is not above the other offices in the hierarchy. It limits the way you can do the Program Cycle. If the Front Office just sees [the Program Cycle] as a check the box, as some quality control, it doesn't work. If the [Mission's Program Office] isn't fully empowered institutionally, the Program Cycle is just not going to happen as well as it possibly could…Your Program Cycle is not going to go well until the structure at the Mission is right."*

Many interviewees from all four Missions noted the impact of clearance processes on finalizing and executing Program Cycle decisions. These clearance processes are often heavily influenced and guided by Mission leadership. Some interviewees referenced Mission Orders (MOs) when describing how their

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[7] This may be because the CDCS process mandates close communication and approval between USAID/Washington and a Mission at the strategy level. In early 2019, the CDCS timeline was shortened to eight months for the second wave of Missions embarking on integrating the Journey to Self-Reliance into their strategy development process.

Mission organized its own Program Cycle processes. MOs lay out internal processes, considering factors such as leadership preferences, staffing contexts, and organizational configurations. A few interviewees noted, however, that additional time is frequently required in order to determine the exact clearance process, even when some of these processes are detailed in Mission Orders.

With regard to the CDCS clearance process, while the ADS lays out the requirements clearly, a considerable length of time can be required to obtain approvals. For instance, in the past, the strategy design process included three video conferences with USAID/Washington, and these required the attendance of Mission and USAID/Washington leadership, which made them difficult to schedule.[8] Beyond CDCS clearance processes with USAID/Washington, internal Mission processes for other Program Cycle components can add significant time to the clearance process. For example, in one Mission, each Technical Office director had to review and clear each PAD because all the PADs in that Mission were cross-sectoral. In three of the four Missions, Office Directors and/or Mission Directors requested additional detail or processes beyond the minimum requirements listed in the ADS 201 in response to a perceived lack of information or a desire to minimize potential liability, lengthening the time needed to complete Program Cycle processes.

Finding 3: Program Office staff were the most aware and appreciative of the Program Cycle, including the ability to tailor its implementation to the Mission context. Among other Mission staff, awareness of the Program Cycle overall was low.

Based on many interviews with Mission staff across all four Missions, Program Office staff appear, not surprisingly, to be the most conversant with the Program Cycle, with the ADS 201 guidance and Mission Orders primarily used as reference points. Some Program Office respondents differed, however, as to whether they characterized the Program Cycle as a set of processes, a set of documents, or a mixture of both. Some Program Office interviewees also stated that the documents were less useful than the process. Other Program Office interviewees commented that they are aware of changes to the policy but noted that they did not always have enough time to track the changes.

Many Mission staff, especially non-Program Office staff across all four Missions, while aware of certain components, were less aware of the ways that parts of the Program Cycle connect holistically. As one interviewee remarked: *"People understand the component parts [of the Program Cycle], but not the overarching cycle."* Some interviewees noted that there is no "single Program Cycle" for many of these processes, given the often simultaneous, ongoing, and iterative nature of components. A few interviewees noted that awareness of the policy remains challenging given its complexity and the competition for Mission staff's attention. An interviewee noted: *"People just have no idea about ADS 201 because there are so many competing messages about what the Agency is trying to do and what good programming is. We're one voice among many."*

Many Program Office interviewees across all four Missions were the most aware of their ability to tailor Program Cycle processes; however, few Mission staff outside the Program Office appeared aware of this ability. Some interviewees across all four Missions understood the rationale for Mission-tailored processes but noted that this customization can take time to figure out and can sometimes result in repeatedly "reinventing the wheel" or establishing processes perceived as onerous. Some interviewees

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commented that Program Cycle processes overall are more burdensome for small Missions than for larger Missions. As one interviewee noted: *"You have big Missions, you have small Missions. No matter what the size is, if you're developing a project, it's the same process."*

Finding 4: The four Program Cycle principles appear most clearly in documents; actual practice varies across and within Missions.

Differing interpretations of the Program Cycle's four principles were evident in documents as well as in interviewees' comments. Few interviewees could cite the four principles by name, but the principles were nevertheless evident across documents and practices. More details can be found throughout the rest of this report, but here are some general observations on each of the four Program Cycle principles:

- **Apply analytic rigor to support evidence-based decision making.** Many interviewees noted the value of Program Cycle processes such as portfolio reviews for supporting evidence-based decisions. Based on direct observation, document review, and many interviews, it is clear that portfolio reviews refer to, use, and discuss a range of evidence sources, including monitoring data and evaluation findings. Program Cycle documents reviewed by the research team, such as CDCSs and PADs, commonly included evidence in background and contextual discussions but only occasionally drew on evidence when referring to theories of change or choices of interventions. Documents also commonly included discussions of required analyses, such as gender and environment assessments.

- **Manage adaptively through continuous learning.** Many interviewees described managing activities adaptively in response to shifting contexts and new information. Interviewees noted that shifting Administrative priorities or Congressional mandates can also cause individual activities to change. Interviewees commonly reported that projects, strategies, and internal processes, all of which are more time consuming to change, were less frequently adapted.

- **Promote sustainability through local ownership.** Interviewees generally supported local ownership, though they translated the concept into program priorities in varying ways. For example, interviewees in one Mission viewed engagement with the host country government as promoting local ownership, while in another Mission, interviewees pointed to how the country's overall strategy was oriented toward the average citizen as an example of the Mission's commitment to local ownership.

- **Utilize a range of approaches to achieve results.** Based on document review and confirmed by some interviewees across all four Missions, it is evident that the Missions use a variety of approaches to achieve results, including a range of partnering modalities, innovative procurement processes, and adaptive mechanisms.

Finding 5: Mission staff typically use ADS 201 as a reference, consulting specific sections as needs arise rather than reading the entire document.; therefore, they rarely conceptualize the Program Cycle as a coherent, integrated whole.

Many interviewees across all four Missions stated that they often consult ADS 201 as an occasional reference, ordinarily focusing on locating the most relevant section for the task at hand rather than reading it straight through from the four principles to the end. Many interviewees noted that ADS 201 is

a long and complex document to navigate; although the 2016 update is shorter than the 2010 version, at the time of this research, the policy was 159 pages long, making it difficult for readers to absorb the holistic vision behind the Program Cycle. As one interviewee noted: *"I am not familiar with the whole idea of the ADS—it's like 300 zillion pages."* Some interviewees also noted that the frequency and nature of ADS changes can make following updates and revisions challenging.

Finding 6: Mission staff expressed uncertain views regarding the roles and place, if any, of implementing partners in strategy development and project implementation. Implementing partners themselves were most familiar with their own activities and the Mission's overall strategy but not the projects with which their activities were associated.

Implementing partners conduct the activities that USAID funds and therefore play a critical role in Program Cycle implementation. Nevertheless, many Mission interviewees across all four Missions had mixed views on the utility of raising implementing partners' awareness of strategy- or project-related processes or documents. Some interviewees mentioned active attempts at increasing implementing partners' knowledge through events such as monthly meetings between the COR/AORs or the Mission Director and Chiefs of Party, while other interviewees questioned the benefits of sharing documents such as public versions of project appraisal documents (PADs), suggesting that doing so was of limited utility or could instill confusion.[9] A few interviewees noted that the discussion of project management within PADs was often not detailed enough to be useful to implementing partners. Many implementing partner interviewees were most familiar with their own activities and the overall country strategy; there was limited awareness of the project level among most implementing partner interviewees.[10]

Finding 7: 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.

Many interviewees from all four Missions discussed their involvement, or lack thereof, in various Program Cycle processes and their accompanying team-related or Mission-wide decisions. Many interviewees often expressed their desire to be involved, though they also acknowledged that the type and frequency of these interactions—and therefore the staff's ability to inform decisions—are influenced by workloads and availability, as well as Mission culture and leadership support for such participation. Many interviewees described Mission staff involvement in strategy development processes as common and widespread. All Missions in the study involved staff in various aspects of strategy processes, but the exact scope and frequency differed. In some cases, involvement was occasional in nature with ad hoc convenings, while in others it was institutionalized, as was the case, for example, with the creation in one Mission of a special Mission-wide council designed to facilitate a participatory approach to strategy development. Some interviewees also emphasized the role of portfolio reviews in informing staff and raising awareness of the Mission's development work. Some interviewees commented on the benefits of

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[9]   No Mission interviewees mentioned sharing public versions of the PADs, rendering the visibility of the project level opaque to implementing partners. However, a review of activity solicitations did demonstrate that many solicitations mention the relevant project purpose.

[10] This may in part be driven by the typical designation of PADs as "Sensitive But Unclassified" (SBU) documents that restricts access to staff outside USAID. While the policy allows for the creation of a public version of PADs for wider sharing, the research team did not come across any examples of such public versions of PADs in the four Missions.

such involvement and connected it to levels of ownership and buy-in with regard to the resulting output or document.

Finding 8: Missions often bring in external support (in the form of USAID/Washington TDYs or contractors) to help complete Program Cycle processes and documents because of staffing shortages, frequent staff transitions, and many competing priorities that result in knowledge management, ownership, and continuity trade-offs.

Many interviewees across all four Missions mentioned that staffing shortages negatively affect Program Cycle implementation. They stated that Missions often do not have an adequate number of positions, and even the positions they do have often remain vacant. These staffing challenges can impact a Mission's ability to implement Program Cycle processes. Staffing shortages can be caused by difficulties in recruiting Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) for "hard-to-fill" posts, insufficient budgets, routine leaves, and overall constraints on the numbers of positions at their Missions.

Many interviewees noted that Program Cycle implementation can especially be affected by Program Office staff's available time and capabilities. Given the centrality of the Program Office in supporting Program Cycle implementation, limits to their capacity can influence the manner and pace of implementation within the Mission. According to direct observation, Program Offices commonly struggle to manage concurrent processes, including ensuring alignment across Program Cycle documents (e.g., CDCS and PADs), because of competing priorities and staffing shortages. As one interviewee explained: *"People just don't have time. Your core duties suffer at the end of the day."* Program Cycle implementation can also be hampered by Technical Office staff's limited time, skills, and understanding of the Program Cycle.

In addition to hiring and retaining an adequate number of appropriately skilled staff, interviewees mentioned that staffing challenges also included managing staff turnover (for all hiring mechanisms). Some interviewees noted that staff transitions, coupled with position vacancies and leave, result in increased duties and responsibilities for existing staff, limiting their available time. Some interviewees also stated that staff transitions, especially in Mission leadership, often lack in-person handover of Mission-specific processes, which can result in delays and shifts in priorities in Program Cycle processes such as CDCS development or project design.

According to many interviewees from all four Missions and confirmed by many USAID/Washington interviewees, these time and capacity constraints often cause Missions to turn to USAID/Washington resources (including PPL, Regional Bureau, and Technical Bureau staff), consultants, or support contracts for assistance in fulfilling Program Cycle requirements. Many Program Office staff from all four Missions noted how they had received support on Mission Program Cycle processes, with many interviewees citing in-person TDYs. For example, one Mission obtained Program Cycle-related support through its Regional and Pillar Bureaus as well as from PPL personnel during its CDCS development process. Many interviewees noted that this helped to reduce excessive workloads on staff members, provide specific knowledge and expertise, and complete Program Cycle-related tasks. Although external support is typically deemed necessary to ensure the completion of Program Cycle-related work because it supplements Missions' limited bandwidth, some interviewees noted tradeoffs in terms of the overall sense of ownership of the Mission's strategy, for example, or familiarity with, and buy-in to, the resulting processes and products. The Program Cycle support provided by resources external to the Mission varies in nature, but often includes the following sorts of tasks:

- Conducting and synthesizing analyses;

- Facilitating midcourse stocktakings or Mission-wide retreats;

- Providing a targeted "lens" for integrating a particular approach (e.g., Science, Technology, Innovation, and Partnership or private-sector engagement);

- Drafting and aligning Program Cycle documents such as PADs, PMPs, or CDCSs; and

- More generalized work, such as stakeholder engagement in preparation for a new CDCS.

Finding 9: Mission staff perceptions vary by Program Cycle process; although many Technical Office interviewees consider certain elements as valuable sources for evidence-based decision making, they also considered others to be superfluous, time consuming, and unnecessarily bureaucratic, sometimes resulting in procurement delays, heavy workloads, frustration, or staff turnover.

Technical Office staff across all four Missions expressed varying views regarding the Program Cycle. Some interviewees across all four Missions mentioned that the Program Cycle, especially those elements related to MEL/CLA, can support consistency and coherence in Mission-wide programming and decision-making, and guide daily work by providing a set of processes, documents, and procedures. Some interviewees also appreciated the benefits of certain processes, such as portfolio reviews and midcourse stocktakings. Interviewees noted that these processes supported shared decision-making and increased awareness of the Mission's programming among staff members.

However, Technical Office staff across all four Missions also viewed some Program Cycle elements solely as bureaucratic necessities. In one Mission, for example, interviewees described how activity procurements were canceled or delayed because of delays in the project design process. Shifting priorities and funding availability also resulted in procurement delays. Many interviewees also noted stress and frustration with the resulting high workloads, periodic delays, and lengthy—and sometimes unclear—Mission-specific clearance processes for Program Cycle components, which some interviewees said can rely on idiosyncratic interpretations. As one interviewee lamented: *"The place has a feel of a car that is about to overheat and stop in the middle of the road: we have been on the gas pedal; the machine is not supposed to work. Something is going to pop—people will be burned out."* In addition, many interviewees from all four Missions noted that a lack of control over Mission budgets and development priorities can lead to frustration. For example, in one Mission, interviewees expressed a desire to think strategically about the resources available to them and shared their concern that the budget did not reflect the main development challenges in the country as laid out in the CDCS.

Many Technical Office interviewees, who typically expressed a deep commitment to activity design and management, commonly asserted that non-activity-related Program Cycle processes sometimes crowd out activity-level work. Some Technical Office staff expressed the view that certain Program Cycle processes, such as Project Design Plans, are superfluous, a view that typically stems from a belief that their primary function is to design and implement activities. Such staff viewed the tasks associated with implementing the Program Cycle as unnecessarily time-consuming and disruptive to their "real" work. This led some interviewees to express frustration that the time and attention given to these processes impacted activity management. Interviewees typically cited these factors when attributing decisions about their careers, such as office transfers and curtailments, to bureaucratic frustration, Mission

leadership, work-related stress, and related burnout. As one interviewee claimed: *"I feel like I'm wasting my time. No one else with power believes in [the Program Cycle]."*

II. INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM CYCLE, ALIGNMENT, AND ADAPTATION

The nine findings in this section focus on the individual components of the Program Cycle as it is implemented in the four study Missions. Drawing on interviewees' comments as well as observations and document analysis, this section describes attitudes and practices around strategies, projects, activities, and MEL/CLA. The final few findings in this section relate to alignment across the components of the Program Cycle and considerations surrounding the adaptation of strategies, projects, or activities.

Finding 10: Strategy development takes longer than the ADS 201 estimates and is affected by the need to conduct key analyses, engage Mission staff and external stakeholders, derive a consensus around development objectives, and obtain USAID/Washington approval.

Many interviewees across all four Missions confirmed that CDCS development in the study Missions took longer than the ADS 201 estimate of 12 months for the three phases of the strategy development process.[11] Some interviewees from two Missions were able to provide more specific estimates, stating that the process took between 21 and 36 months. In one Mission, for example, the entire process took more than three years, according to staff members, because of an ongoing health crisis in the country and USAID/Washington staff's rejection of the first CDCS draft, requiring the Mission to create a version with two Development Objectives (DOs) instead of just the one that had been proposed initially by the Mission.

Many interviewees in all four Missions often conflated strategic planning and decision-making processes with drafting, reviewing, editing, clearing, and finalizing the CDCS document itself. Many interviewees noted some of the lengthy processes involved, such as identifying and conducting key analyses, surfacing and deriving consensus around country-level strategic choices as manifested in the results framework, and building out accompanying elements, such as the management approach and MEL/CLA planning. Across all four Missions, some interviewees commented that uncertainties around the Mission's budget constrained and lengthened Mission and Washington staff conversations during strategy design.[12] A few interviewees also observed that there can be challenges in incorporating certain presidential initiative activities, such as PEPFAR, into the strategy development process.

Some interviewees asserted that the turnover of FSOs, such as Mission Directors, Deputy Mission Directors, and Supervisory Program Officers, plays a role in delaying Program Cycle processes, especially strategy development; interviewees commonly stated that waiting for the arrival of one of these key players can delay the strategy development process by months or shift the priorities and focus mid-process. Some interviewees in two Missions reflected on how the process chosen by the Mission to

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[11] This 12-month figure is based on the research team's own calculations after reviewing the relevant timeframes in the ADS 201 policy. The CDCS development process was revised in 2019, and at the time of the writing of this report is being codified into ADS 201 revisions in order to incorporate the Journey to Self-Reliance and shorten the duration of the CDCS development process to eight months. At the time of the research TDYs for this study, three of the four study Missions had country strategies that were developed under the 2010 guidance with one Mission developing its strategy under the 2016 guidance.

[12] The CDCS document includes a range of budget scenarios, with foreign assistance budgets ordinarily approved over a two-year period. As the 2016 USAID Transition Brief notes, "Budgets tend to shape Agency strategy rather than the other way around," with major Presidential or Agency-wide initiatives—rather than the CDCS process—driving Agency operations and strategic planning due to their size and visibility.

develop the new strategy influenced the amount of time needed to finalize the CDCS. In one of these Missions, for example, some interviewees noted that the participatory strategy development process, while valuable because it engaged Mission staff and external stakeholders, had added time to the overall process. In another Mission, some interviewees noted that disagreement between leadership in the Mission and USAID/Washington during the strategy development process increased the length of time needed to achieve consensus on key strategic areas, integrate feedback, and engage unavailable key stakeholders.

Finding 11: Familiarity with the meaning of "project" is low, especially among non-Program Office staff; many view project design as an unnecessarily lengthy, bureaucratic process.

Many non-Program Office Mission interviewees across all four Missions use the term "project" to refer to what the ADS refers to as an "activity." Some Program Office staff also conflated these two terms. In addition, some of these interviewees across all four Missions appeared unfamiliar with the project concept, with some respondents uncertain of its value. In some cases, interviewees viewed projects as duplicative of the CDCS. In all four Missions, some interviewees noted that because of the close relationship between the CDCS and PADs, the project design process often occurs concurrently with the strategy design process. A few interviewees asserted, however, that this does not tend to reduce the amount of time needed to complete project designs since the CDCS must be finalized before project design final review and approval can take place. Some interviewees stated that completing PADs required lengthy internal reviews and clearance processes; some interviewees also noted that time was expended clarifying the exact internal processes to be followed. As one interviewee claimed: *"Project designs are long and demanding, so Missions have an incentive to only do a handful of them with each entailing 15-20 tangentially related implementing mechanisms. They are bloated and treated like aspirational strategies that never get off the shelf rather than useful and nimble management tools that help a few activities work together to achieve higher-level goals."*

Many interviewees in all four Missions described PADs solely as bureaucratic "authorizing" documents required as a part of activity design and procurement. Many Technical Office staff viewed project design as taking valuable time away from activity design and management. One Mission required an elaborate system of approval for PAD amendments to ensure that activities were sufficiently detailed. As one interviewee noted: *"I found that PADs don't streamline, as intended; they seem like a separate requirement. Theoretically, I understand the desire and need to have well thought-out, strategic, coordinated activities. But often you don't know what you're going to write in the activity design, so it's really like a nice theoretical exercise. You really need to design activities!"* Some interviewees noted the lack of ongoing reference to, or use of, the PAD documents other than in a few, limited instances, with one interviewee exclaiming: *"When I get a question from [the Front Office], I bring out the PAD, blow it off [interviewee physically blows on an imaginary dusty, unused document], and use it to defend [my point]—for example, 'See page 37, where it was mentioned in a sentence.'"*

Finding 12: Project management as envisaged in the ADS 201 remains occasional; commonly cited reasons for this include a lack of time, available staff, incentives, and detailed management plans.

Project management as envisaged in the ADS 201 is practiced in different ways among the four Missions, falling into one of three categories: (1) having no formal project managers assigned, and no activity

portfolio management aside from writing PADs; (2) having no formal project managers assigned, but some activity portfolio management designed to facilitate collaboration or alignment, and to contribute collectively to a set of higher-level results; and (3) having formal project managers assigned to at least some projects to facilitate collaboration and alignment and to contribute collectively to a set of higher-level results. Some interviewees described projects that are successfully managed as portfolios of activities aimed at achieving higher-order results. With most projects, however, Missions appear to take a more ad hoc, flexible approach to managing multiple activities. The research team's direct observations show that projects are also occasionally discussed during some Mission practices, such as portfolio reviews, midcourse stocktakings, and partner meetings. Some interviewees noted that project management often required active ownership by Technical Offices as well as concrete guidance and direction from the Front Office or Program Office on how to operationalize projects. In the one study Mission that had formal project managers assigned to all projects, some interviewees expressed a desire for more explicit guidance, especially about how to engage in the sort of matrix management that projects can entail.

Many interviewees across all four Missions asserted that insufficient staff or time can make it challenging for staff members who already have full workloads to take on the additional responsibilities of managing projects. As noted above, many Technical Office interviewees expressed a preference for concentrating their attention on activity design and implementation. According to ADS 201.3.3.14, *"The Mission Director must designate a Project Manager or other responsible person to provide overall guidance and direction at the project level. The Project Manager may be an Office Director, Team Leader, or COR/AOR, among other options. This is a function in the Mission and not a formal supervisory position."* Some interviewees noted a lack of incentives to play the role of a Project Manager or contribute to various project management tasks. According to many interviews, the default practice is to have Technical Office directors serve as Project Managers. As one interviewee summed it up: *"I don't think that [the role of Project Manager] is something we have actively used here."* A few interviewees noted that the project design document addresses the technical rather than managerial implications of the portfolio. This observation accords with the document review the research team conducted of current PADs from the four study Missions, which revealed that the project management sections tended to be short and relatively lacking in details articulating management processes for projects.

Finding 13: Most of the potential benefits of managing a group of related activities as a single project have yet to be realized.

Some interviewees across all four Missions acknowledged that projects can offer benefits for thinking strategically about interconnected activities, but they stated that they focus mostly on the production of project-related documents. While many interviewees across all four Missions often described the time spent on project design, they generally devoted much less time, attention, and resources to project management. Some interviewees attributed this to staff not always valuing projects or to being unable to dedicate the necessary time to manage projects.[13] As one interviewee noted: *"I think what we've done is that we've gone from strategy to activity, and the project level was ineffective—it's the weakest part of the whole cycle. It's not referenced anymore."*

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[13] Unlike other Agency structures such as Acquisition and Assistance agreements and Government to Government agreements for activities, projects rely on Mission leadership to set and support those expectations and staff to operationalize them.

Finding 14: Technical Office staff strongly prefer to focus on activity design and implementation, but many feel that competing priorities (including project design and implementation as well as other tasks) prevent them from fulfilling all of their activity-related responsibilities.

Many Technical Office staff interviewees from all four Missions commonly focus on activity design and management, including MEL, rather than on strategy and project elements. Many interviewees from Technical Offices explained that activity management tasks often include discussing work plans, reviewing quarterly reporting, conducting Data Quality Assessments, reviewing activity-related reports and correspondence, conducting site visits, serving on technical evaluation committee (TEC) panels, and addressing related emergent tasks related to activities.

Many interviewees from all four Missions stated that there is generally insufficient time for activity design and management, and many competing priorities exist at any one time. Some interviewees noted that activity design often occurs in conjunction with the PAD design. Some interviewees from two Missions explained that during activity design, an additional activity approval memo for activity procurement was initiated to provide additional details not contained in the PADs. Despite the fact that the 2016 ADS revisions introduced a stronger focus on activities, many interviewees stated that the activity-related sections contained insufficient detail, especially in comparison to the detail provided on strategies and projects. As one interviewee remarked: *"ADS 201 does not focus on the activity level, so Missions are left to create their own process to make sure they are implementing the broader strategic vision."* In addition, many interviewees noted that it was often difficult to comply with required site visits because they had little time to conduct them. Furthermore, some implementing partner interviewees commented that the frequent changes in activity managers in Missions often resulted in a loss of contextual knowledge and shifts in the management priorities for activities.

Finding 15: Mission staff typically mentioned challenges in maintaining alignment across strategies, projects, and activities—particularly related to MEL/CLA—because of multiple, concurrent processes that necessitate ongoing updates and amendments.[14]

Many interviewees across all four Missions noted that alignment is an ongoing process across strategies, projects, and activities; often the direction of alignment flows in both directions. One interviewee explained: *"It's a misnomer to talk about the Program Cycle in a Mission. There are Program Cycles. Your activities have cycles. Your PADs have cycles. You've got all these things happening at the same time."* Some interviewees noted, for instance, that when projects and activities are developed together or in close succession, alignment can be ensured through ongoing reviews and revisions prior to approval. Some interviewees across all four Missions commented on the use of PAD amendments to support alignment between the project and activity levels; many interviewees tended to view the amendment process as lengthy and bureaucratic.

As ADS 201 notes, Program Cycle documents are ideally aligned with one another in multiple areas, and this is, in fact, mostly the case in the four study Missions. Document review of Program Cycle documents from the four study Missions showed it is typical for alignment of development results to be

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[14] Alignment includes references to connections among Program Cycle documents including, but not limited to, 201.3.3 (Alignment of Project with CDCS); 201.3.3.15 (Alignment of Project Portfolio with new CDCS RF); and 201.3.4.13 (Alignment of Activities with Strategies and Projects). Additional alignment is assumed regarding the MEL-related plans for strategy, projects, and activities.

internally consistent across strategy, projects, and activities. Theories of change and monitoring indicators, however, appear to be rarely fully aligned to the same degree of detail or specificity in the CDCS, PADs, and activity solicitations.

Amendments are often used to add new activities under a project. In one Mission, staff members had completed dozens of time-consuming PAD amendments, not realizing until PPL staff visited on TDY that simple PAD updates (which require less time and effort) would have been more appropriate, according to the ADS. Many interviewees also stated that the Performance Management Plan (PMP) and Project Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plans (PMELPs) are not always updated regularly, and some interviewees suggested that they may not be completely aligned with Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plans (AMELPs). Some interviewees across all four Missions also noted the challenge of documenting the connections between MEL/CLA and different Program Cycle components, since many of the details are only finalized following the requisite design processes. According to some interviewees, none of the PMPs across all four Missions were completed and approved within six months following the CDCS approval, as stipulated in the ADS. In some Missions, the PMP was developed largely by outside contractors because of a lack of staff time. In one Mission, its PMP was approved three years after the CDCS was finalized. In another Mission, the PMP was completed two years after the CDCS was approved. Interviewees mentioned that the reasons for the delays included a lack of staff, lengthy clearance processes, and insufficient information to complete the documents, such as details for monitoring indicators. At the time of data collection, none of the four Missions had uploaded their PMPs to ProgramNet as required by the guidance.[15]

Finding 16: Mission staff stated that in order to manage adaptively, they need meaningful indicators, high quality monitoring data, evaluations well timed to inform decisions, and management flexibility.

Many interviewees across all four Missions mentioned the importance of relevant and appropriate monitoring data for informing decisions and commented that monitoring data at the strategy and project levels could be more useful. For instance, one Mission recently reviewed its PMP and cut two-thirds of the indicators that were deemed not useful. As one interviewee claimed: *"People brought in their monitoring data, but it wasn't very helpful because it wasn't at the right levels. It wasn't deep enough."* Some interviewees also noted that monitoring data, almost exclusively produced by implementing partners, can be of varying quality, and a few interviewees noted the implications for understanding implementation progress and making appropriate adaptations. A few interviewees also noted the importance of timing evaluations so that results could be finalized in order to inform adaptations to new procurement decisions or to the relevant activity or project.

Many interviewees described the role of dedicated events such as portfolio reviews to assess and reflect on monitoring data, but some interviewees questioned their utility in cases of poor data quality. Many interviewees also mentioned the importance for AOR/CORs of conducting monitoring through periodic site visits and regular review of monitoring data, then using this information to inform adaptations. In one Mission, for example, the health team referenced challenges with one implementing partner that were caught through their MEL system. As noted above, some interviewees commented on the challenge of conducting regular site visits because of competing work responsibilities, a lack of

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[15] ADS 201.3.2.16 notes that "Upon approval, this initial PMP must be uploaded on ProgramNet."

incentives, and varying institutional or individual approaches to activity management. A few interviewees also described the importance of having team leadership support to provide them with the flexibility to organize their affairs, time to manage activities adaptively, and a sense of empowerment to make decisions on their own.

Finding 17: Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting practices occur throughout the Program Cycle, though only some Mission staff identify these practices as CLA per se.

Interviewees commonly referenced CLA in conjunction with activity design and management as well as strategy development. Technical Office interviewees most commonly mentioned learning in the context of activities they managed. Many implementing partner interviewees also described instances and examples of learning and adapting in their work, although the extent to which this was intentional and systematic was unclear. Many Mission interviewees from all four Missions noted the necessity and benefit of collaboration, with examples cited for strategy development and activities. Among the most common examples cited were working with other internal Mission staff, interagency colleagues, implementing partners, or host country government officials. Many interviewees referred to consultation with Mission staff and government officials during the strategy development process and with implementing partners and organizations during activity design. A few interviewees noted CLA in conjunction with projects, with interviewees from one Mission with an integrated strategy noting that their cross-cutting activities (such as retreats and field-based portfolio reviews or "synergy trips" to the field) also facilitated collaboration among staff and partners working on activities that contributed to a single project.

Many interviewees from three of the four Missions also described frequent CLA practices designed to support the enabling conditions for CLA (and Program Cycle principles), though only some of them referred to the practices as "CLA." For instance, one Mission that explicitly used the term "CLA" developed a leadership charter outlining its goal to be a Mission of Leaders; hosted regular staff retreats to address Mission-wide issues; integrated Insights Discovery™ (with the aim of fostering understanding of individual personality traits across the Mission); and took stock of Mission culture through a series of tailored metrics, all in support of institutionalizing a learning culture. In another Mission, in contrast, while CLA is not referenced explicitly, staff members regularly use MEL data to inform activity level adaptations. In yet another Mission, even though Mission staff did not label frequent CLA practices as such, one staff member had taken a CLA training, and IPs explicitly supported CLA in their activities, conducting their own CLA training and seeking out opportunities for adaptive management.

Finding 18: Interviewees commonly reported that activities are typically the easiest to adapt in response to new information and contextual changes, followed by projects, strategies, and internal processes, all of which are more time consuming to adapt.

Many Mission staff interviewees across all four Missions most readily recalled adaptations at the activity level and noted that they occurred with relative frequency in response to contextual shifts in order to achieve intended results and respond to emergent priorities or needs. Mission staff interviewees commonly mentioned reviewing MEL data and direct observations at site visits when making these decisions. Interviewees mentioned an array of shifts from minor adjustments to training curricula to substantive changes in programmatic focus areas or types of beneficiaries targeted by an intervention.

Some Mission interviewees across all four Missions also cited changes at the project and strategy level, though these typically occurred with less frequency. In one Mission, for example, interviewees shared examples of multiple adaptations at the project level and a few at the strategy level that resulted from portfolio reviews and a midcourse stocktaking, including revisions to the project-level theory of change. According to the document review, and confirmed by some interviewees, changes to the CDCS document in all four Missions appeared to be rare and limited to time extensions. For example, two Missions' CDCSs were extended due to a temporary pause in CDCS development by USAID/Washington. A few interviewees noted that some changes in the strategy over time were made but were not formally documented in the CDCS because of a hesitancy to engage in the protracted process for formal strategy-related amendments. In one Mission, potential changes to the CDCS that emerged during the midcourse stocktaking were purposely confined to those that did not require USAID/Washington's approval because of the perceived additional burden of reviews and clearances. One interviewee described this disincentive: *"Even when you've identified that something needs to be changed, it's hard to know exactly what [documents] to change. Often it becomes so burdensome that nobody wants to go there—it would require so much time and paperwork. Amending the CDCS, for example...we were like, 'Can't we just wait for the next one?'"*

A few interviewees also described some adaptations to internal Mission processes. Missions appear to make internal process-level changes based on intentional learning and a desire to accommodate their staff members' management approaches, learning styles, and preferences. For example, one Mission applied lessons learned from its first CDCS process for the second iteration and modified its approach to project design following the CDCS. Another Mission also revised its PAD amendment process. Some interviewees in one Mission described the use of adaptive management practices to improve their organizational performance, citing the Mission's detailed and comprehensive PMP, which includes a set of indicators and processes related to measuring and improving organizational performance.

III. SUPPORT FROM PPL FOR PROGRAM CYCLE IMPLEMENTATION

The two findings in this section focus on PPL's support to Missions for the implementation of Program Cycle processes.

Finding 19: Mission staff members' familiarity with PPL is typically low, even among some Program Office staff, and some staff are skeptical of PPL's understanding of Mission needs.

Many interviewees across all Missions could not readily identify PPL or its role and purpose. As one interviewee noted, *"In my mind, PPL and [the Regional Bureau] were the same thing."* While many Program Office staff are aware of PPL and its functions, some interviewees, both in Program Offices and Technical Offices, appeared less certain of the nature and scope of available PPL support. According to interviewees in the four Missions, and confirmed by Washington-based interviewees, PPL is usually not their first point of contact on issues related to the Program Cycle; Technical Office staff mentioned liaising frequently with the relevant Pillar Bureaus while Program Office staff commonly contacted Regional Bureaus. A few USAID/Washington and Mission staff seemed uncertain if direct communication with PPL colleagues was generally permissible. One Mission staff member even stated that contacting PPL directly without going through the Regional Bureau would be strongly frowned upon by Regional Bureau counterparts. As one interviewee noted, *"It's been difficult to know how and when to reach out to Washington. It feels like a bigger step than Washington imagines."*

Some interviewees remarked on the need for PPL staff to understand more fully the experience of working in Missions. Some staff have a perception that PPL imposes additional burdens on Missions without realizing that doing so almost always requires shifting responsibilities or deprioritizing other tasks, given Mission staff members' limited time and resources. As one interviewee noted: *"It would be better to have PPL staff deploy to the Missions to see how much time processes actually take. On paper, processes look great, but whenever you start a process, then there is the Mission's own processes for clearance, etc., with several layers that PPL doesn't even want."*

Finding 20: In cases where Mission staff experienced a PPL TDY, they were appreciative of PPL's direct support. Such support typically occurs episodically and relies on personal relationships.

Many interviewees across all four Missions noted and appreciated direct support from PPL when it occurred, indicating that PPL staff time and expertise can be helpful in navigating decisions and completing tasks and processes related to the Program Cycle. Some interviewees stated that PPL support offered valuable perspectives and direct assistance, resulting in improved perceptions of PPL in general. As one interviewee acknowledged, *"It's nice to have help when we do evaluations or assessments, so if PPL can provide someone on TDY, that would be great. It brings an outside perspective."* According to many interviewee responses, support is commonly episodic in frequency, often depending on the needs to be addressed, available funds, and TDY staff. Based on direct observation, support is commonly requested from, and provided by, those with existing relationships with Mission staff.

CONCLUSIONS

The following five conclusions are based on the 20 findings described above. They derive from research on the four PCLS Missions and therefore may or may not be applicable to other Missions more generally.

Conclusion 1: The most important factors influencing a Mission's ability to implement the Program Cycle in a coherent, integrated manner are supportive Front Office and Program Office leadership, and high levels of Mission staff engagement.

ADS 201 allows for the customization of Program Cycle processes to suit an individual Mission's culture and development priorities. It is primarily Front Office and Program Office leaders who decide what this customization will look like for their particular Mission. The specific balance between the Front Office and Program Office leaders varies across Missions and even within a single Mission over time, given the frequency of staff turnovers. Since many Program Cycle processes take place concurrently, these leaders set the tone, determine the timing, identify interconnections, and specify the relative importance of Program Cycle processes. They determine the pace, levels of staff participation, and specific activities related to strategy development, project and activity design and implementation, and MEL/CLA practices. For example, Front Office and Program Office leaders largely determine the frequency, focus, format, and levels of engagement in portfolio reviews. What kinds of data should be considered in reviewing programs? How far back should the review cover? Should the portfolio reviews be organized according to DOs, projects, sectors, or some other factor, such as geographical region? Should the Mission's portfolio reviews be field-based? If so, who should participate, and how should the trips to the field be organized? The same sorts of fundamental questions about format, content, and participation

apply to most, if not all, other Program Cycle processes. Answers to these questions strongly influence how integrated and coherent the various Program Cycle components will be in a given Mission. The mandatory guidance in ADS 201 provides the scaffolding for Program Cycle implementation; Front Office and Program Office leaders construct the building.

Front Office and Program Office leaders affect not just how Program Cycle processes are implemented but often when they are implemented—or even whether they are implemented at all. For example, reconciling monitoring indicators across Program Cycle documents such as the PMP, PMELPs, and AMELPs may be a lower priority than responding to a USAID/Washington tasker, so reconciling the monitoring indicators may be delayed, or may not happen at all. Such choices can result in a lack of alignment across strategies, projects, and activities and render the Program Cycle less integrated and coherent overall.

Along with the influence of Front Office and Program Office leaders, another factor that affects Program Cycle implementation in a given Mission is the presence or absence of high levels of engagement in Program Cycle processes on the part of Mission staff members outside the Program Office. Such engagement often occurs because of explicit leadership decisions but can also be the result of a participatory Mission culture or individual staff members' choices. Widespread participation in a Mission's strategy development or portfolio reviews can lead to greater knowledge of, and support for, that Mission's development priorities. There are trade-offs, of course, because staff members are all busy, but carefully designed opportunities for participation in key Program Cycle processes can facilitate coherence across Program Cycle elements and generate greater buy-in to the Program Cycle overall.

Conclusion 2: Program Cycle processes take a significant amount of time and effort to implement, which can affect alignment and adaptation. The timing of these processes can also impact other required Mission tasks, leading to increased stress for staff.

Before a Mission undertakes a major Program Cycle process such as strategy development, project design, or midcourse stocktaking, Program Office staff, in consultation with Mission leadership, often have to spend time tailoring the process for their particular Mission. Once the process is designed, it can take up quite a bit of staff time to implement. While Program Cycle processes generally take place concurrently, there is still a sequential element to them. For example, activities must be authorized under a particular PAD, and if the PAD has not yet been approved, the activity either has to be authorized under an old PAD—requiring paperwork to transfer the activity to the new PAD once it is approved—or the activity design process has to be put on hold, thereby delaying procurement.

Competing priorities and a lack of staff time have two additional impacts. First, they limit Mission staff's ability to keep Program Cycle documents in alignment, or even to coordinate and communicate any relevant changes informally within the Mission. Second, they make it more difficult for Mission staff to review relevant data routinely in order to make course corrections, seek approval for any shifts, and implement these adaptations.

ADS 201 does not explicitly link Program Cycle processes to other required and related Mission tasks, such as Operational Plan (OP) or Performance Plan and Report (PPR) reporting, or PEPFAR Country Operational Plan preparation. In some cases, a Program Cycle process can be coordinated with such tasks, as when a portfolio review is timed to contribute data to the PPR, but most of the time the Program Cycle processes are overlaid upon all the other processes required of Missions—many of

which are considered by staff to be their "real work"—without much consideration for how they might conflict with, or compete for, staff members' attention.

The time-consuming nature of Program Cycle processes and their general lack of coordination with other Mission tasks may require difficult decisions regarding priorities. As one interviewee concluded: *"You can only get traction if you hammer home one point for a while."* The role of a Program Office in supporting Program Cycle implementation can be akin to "spinning plates"; a Program Office can only spin one Program Cycle component "plate" well at a time because of the challenges of obtaining other Mission staff's time and attention. One interviewee acknowledged: *"If you want to implement the Program Cycle in a really good way, you can only direct your attention at one element of the Program Cycle in a deep way."*

The significant amount of time and effort Program Cycle processes require can lead to negative perceptions. Staff sometimes viewed Program Cycle processes as mere bureaucratic exercises that detract from other more important tasks and priorities. This was a particularly common view among staff involved in managing Presidential initiatives, which have their own detailed processes. While other staff often recognized the benefits of these processes, the resulting impacts on staff time increased their levels of stress, frustration, and ambivalence and influenced their views on the value of the Program Cycle overall.

Conclusion 3: Staffing is often insufficient to support consistent and coherent implementation of the Program Cycle. As a result, Missions often turn to USAID/Washington or to contractors for assistance with Program Cycle processes and documents.

Program Cycle implementation is often hampered by an insufficient number of positions (especially in the Program Office), a lack of appropriate skills (both related to the Program Cycle and more general "soft" 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. In addition, the levels and types of skills within and across different hiring mechanisms vary widely, with some staff members lacking the capacity needed to implement the Program Cycle as envisioned in ADS 201.

In response to these staffing and capacity challenges, many Missions turn to MEL/CLA or other types of support contracts. Others turn to PPL and Regional or Pillar bureaus to supplement their own efforts. While many Mission staff members were unfamiliar with PPL's role, most said they would welcome more PPL support for Program Cycle implementation, either in the form of additional guidance, templates, and examples, or in the form of in-person TDYs. Those Mission staff members who had experienced one or more TDYs from PPL staff members expressed appreciation for the assistance and said they would welcome further visits. Such support can also be valuable to Mission staff and Washington-based staff for building and maintaining relationships.

Interviewees also acknowledged, however, that bringing in outsiders, whether from USAID/Washington or from contractors, comes with potential trade-offs in the form of less familiarity with, and ownership of, Program Cycle documents and processes, along with less of a shared vision for the Mission's overall development objectives. With outsiders contributing to key Program Cycle events and drafting core

Program Cycle documents, and with frequent staff turnover within the Mission, it becomes more difficult to ensure consistency, coherence, and alignment over time and across Program Cycle elements. As one interviewee noted: *"There's nothing wrong with the Program Cycle—it's great. It's just impossible to implement in a consistent way, the way it's meant to be."*

Conclusion 4: Unlike strategies and activities, the concept, benefits, and management of projects are not well understood, nor are projects consistently valued or commonly operationalized.

In general, Mission staff devote more time and attention to strategy development and activity design and implementation than to project design and management. Mission leadership priorities and Agency incentives, requirements, and systems often place a focus on non-project elements of the Program Cycle. For instance, USAID/Washington carefully lays out and oversees the strategy development process, while budget and procurement timelines drive processes at the activity level. Activities are also often the basis of staff employment in Missions and are tied to the technical backgrounds of Mission staff. The constituencies for projects are less obvious.

The level of understanding of, and appreciation for, projects remains relatively low among Technical Office staff. Interviewees associated projects with bureaucratic steps related to activity procurement. Continued terminological confusion among interviewees over the term "project" versus "activity," rather than being a relatively unimportant slip-up, indicates that awareness and understanding of the concept remains low in the four Missions.[16] Even where project management takes place, Mission staff members struggle with the organizational complexities around matrix management and with incentives that do not reinforce effective project management.

In sum, project management is not commonly practiced as envisaged in the ADS 201 policy. As one Mission interviewee noted: *"Sometimes you have to accept your losses; I'm not going to convince people of the value of projects. You can still do great things at the activity level. One thing I've learned about the Program Cycle is to choose your battles."*

Conclusion 5: Program Cycle processes and convenings benefit Missions and their development programming by providing staff with relational and structured ways to make coherent and aligned decisions, build relationships, create shared understandings, and support employee engagement.

Program Cycle processes provide purpose and direction to the highly relational and interactive nature of work within Missions, offering a strategic framework that can support the interpersonal element of decision-making. Convenings related to the Program Cycle can have the effect of raising awareness, producing shared understandings, and generating buy-in from various offices and stakeholders in the Mission and, in the case of strategy, between the Mission and USAID/Washington. These processes in turn support the creation of aligned and coherent Program Cycle documents and can support the practice of adaptive management through formally documenting key changes. In addition, these convenings can provide channels for communicating decisions and describing transparently how they were reached. Program Cycle documents, processes, and convenings also provide a shared language

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[16]   The training module on Project Management was released after the PCLS research trips were conducted.

around the general goal of U.S. Government development assistance in a country by clarifying how components such as projects and activities support broader development objectives. The CDCS development process is often the clearest example of how a Program Cycle process can produce this shared understanding across a Mission.

By providing an organizing framework, a set of requirements, and periodic opportunities for reflection, the Program Cycle focuses Mission staff time and attention in an ongoing, systematic, and deliberative way to inform, make, and document evidence-based programming decisions while also helping employees understand how their efforts support broader policy and development objectives. These processes also support alignment and reinforce coherence across different elements of the Program Cycle.

Participation by staff provides an opportunity for collective sense-making and individual engagement.[17] This sense-making can support a shared vision and set of values for working together on the Program Cycle, potentially spilling over to other Mission processes. Staff engagement can provide individuals with a sense of motivation and personal attachment to their work, potentially leading to more effective programming.[18] For example, leveraging MEL data for decision making involves convening relevant staff and facilitating appropriate discussions, a process that both benefits from and strengthens staff members' productive working relationships. Similarly, portfolio reviews and midcourse stocktakings often provide dedicated time and focus for Mission staff to review potential connections across different levels and identify broader implementation issues across the Mission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following five recommendations from the research team draw on the above findings and conclusions. More specific suggestions from the interviewees regarding PPL's Program Cycle support can be found in Annex 3.

Recommendation 1: The Agency should review the generalizability and validity of the study's findings and conclusions beyond the four Missions studied here.

The generalizability and validity of this study's findings and conclusions remain unknown. Before making any decisions or undertaking actions as a result of the study, it will be critical to understand the broader applicability of these findings and conclusions to inform future decision-making. Disseminating this report and providing for feedback from other Missions, along with conducting relevant quantitative research and additional qualitative research, may help in confirming the generalizability of these findings. If the findings and conclusions are more broadly validated, then the following recommendations may be appropriate. In addition, further research could focus on any remaining questions, such as whether misunderstandings of policy or leadership preferences influence certain decisions and processes related to the Program Cycle.

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[17] Sensemaking or sense-making is the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences and is defined as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (see K. Weick, Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. Organization Science, 16(4), 409–421 for more information.

[18] USAID, 2017. What difference does CLA make to development? Key Findings from a Recent Literature Review, accessed https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/eb4cla_litreview_briefer_rev0519.pdf

Recommendation 2: The Agency should review ADS 201 requirements and assess the necessary time, level of effort, benefits, and trade-offs and resources needed to conduct Program Cycle processes.

Program Cycle processes, along with many other similar types of requirements, take relatively intense staff time and attention. However, the exact amount of time required or needed to complete tasks and processes remains ill-understood and under-explored. Project management, for example, remains an area where the current practice does not fully reflect the ADS 201 policy. Understanding the resource needs for completing such tasks will enable USAID to better match resources with policy requirements and recommendations. In addition, this information will help inform choices regarding when and how to engage staff time, which may help address some of the identified drawbacks of Program Cycle implementation while leveraging its benefits. Developing a set of estimates for the level of effort and integrating some form of measurement moving ahead may help to deepen understanding on the level of effort involved, including the nature and scope of staff engagement across a Mission in the Program Cycle over time. In addition, further inquiry could clarify trade-offs in implementing the Program Cycle. For instance, does a trade-off exist between efficiency regarding the length of time to complete certain processes and the level of engagement and participation by staff? What are the trade-offs between more detailed and comprehensive processes and documents compared to simpler, more flexible approaches to the same Program Cycle elements? Additional assessments to understand these issues would bolster the knowledge base on Program Cycle implementation and inform related decision-making. Lastly, taking into account this information, the agency should continue to review, iterate, and adapt ADS 201 requirements while also taking into account interviewees' preferences for limited policy changes and their expressed need for providing change management support along with any ADS revisions.

Recommendation 3: PPL and other Bureaus, with Agency leadership backing, should review connections, inconsistencies, and dependencies between the Program Cycle and other policies, initiatives, and processes to support efficient Program Cycle implementation.

A range of Agency policies and initiatives influence, support, and overlap with Program Cycle implementation. These include USAID policies and processes regarding budgets, personnel, OP and PPR reporting requirements, and procurement, as well as the Journey to Self-Reliance and programs such as PEPFAR and the U.S. President's Malaria Initiative (PMI). In addition, State Department policies also impact Mission operations in areas such as available office space, information and communications technology, overall USG strategic planning, and physical security policies. Building on Recommendation 2, USAID should seek to identify how these policies, initiatives, and practices interact with and influence Mission staff's ability to effectively implement the Program Cycle. Potential changes to Program Cycle or other policies may include reducing or de-conflicting critical dependencies, synchronizing timing where helpful, and leveraging synergies whenever possible.

Recommendation 4: The Agency should determine the most effective and efficient ways to ensure adequate staffing with enough capacity and understanding of the Program Cycle.

The coherent implementation of the Program Cycle requires a sufficient number of staff members with the appropriate capacity, yet this study's findings surfaced concerns about staffing shortages and insufficient skills. Outputs from Recommendations 2 and 3 could help identify how to determine the most effective and efficient ways of providing adequate levels of staff with the most appropriate skills to

implement the Program Cycle. Considerations should include how to add positions where there are insufficient numbers of staff in particular hiring mechanisms, how to make the best use of external assistance from contractors and/or USAID/Washington staff, and how to ensure consistency and ownership of Program Cycle elements across all Mission staff.

Recommendation 5: The Agency should develop a Program Cycle implementation strategy that prioritizes leadership, learning, and communication regarding the Program Cycle, especially projects, for all staff and implementing partners.

Program Cycle implementation can support a range of desired goals for the Agency, including the concept, vision, and operational approaches to achieving country self-reliance. The findings of this study indicate that awareness of, and buy-in to, Program Cycle processes could be strengthened. Given the importance of Mission leadership and general staff engagement for ensuring alignment across Program Cycle elements, consistent and coherent implementation and institutionalization of the Program Cycle will likely require the development of a strategy that prioritizes leadership, continuous learning, and effective communication across the Agency regarding the Program Cycle. Developing an intentional, systematic, and resourced strategy regarding Program Cycle implementation will support Missions as they make changes that leverage the Program Cycle's benefits while minimizing its challenges. Such a strategy should consider the important role of implementing partners and plan for ongoing upgrades to staff members' skills and knowledge about the Program Cycle. As contextual shifts will likely require additional changes to ADS 201, structured and intentional communications, learning, and knowledge management will help Missions and the Agency ensure that their Program Cycle processes adapt accordingly.

ANNEX 1: TABLE OF PCLS FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This annex notes the data sources for the findings in the Program Cycle Learning Study final report as detailed above and outlines which findings support which conclusions and recommendations. More specific suggestions from the interviewees regarding PPL's Program Cycle support can be found in Annex 3.

| Findings | Interviewees | | Direct Obser-vation | Document Review | Con-clusions Supported |
	Four Missions	USAID / Washington			
Overall Implementation and Effects of the Program Cycle					
Finding 1: Interviewees had limited exposure to the Journey to Self-Reliance but noted four enabling factors supporting the integration of the Journey to Self-Reliance throughout the Program Cycle.	🏠🏠🏠🏠		👁	📄	1, 5
Finding 2: Mission leaders influence the timing, manner, pace, and scope of Program Cycle implementation through their messaging, decisions, and priorities, especially regarding clearances.	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)	👁		1, 2
Finding 3: Program Office staff were the most aware and appreciative of the Program Cycle, including the ability to tailor its implementation to the Mission context. Among other Mission staff, awareness of the Program Cycle overall was low.	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)	👁		1, 4, 5
Finding 4: The four Program Cycle principles appear most clearly in documents; actual practice varies across and within Missions.	🏠🏠🏠🏠		👁	📄	1, 5
Finding 5: Mission staff typically use ADS 201 as a reference, consulting specific sections as needs arise rather than reading the entire document. They therefore rarely conceptualize	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)	👁	📄	1, 2

the Program Cycle as a coherent, integrated whole.

Finding 6: Mission staff expressed uncertain views regarding the roles and place, if any, of implementing partners in strategy development and project implementation. Implementing partners themselves were most familiar with their own activities and the Mission's overall strategy but not the projects with which their activities were associated.	🏠🏠🏠 🏠 `		👁		4, 5
Finding 7: 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 review—can play an even more important role in providing opportunities for Mission staff to be involved, informed, and "bought into" Mission-wide programming decisions.	🏠🏠🏠 🏠			📄	5
Finding 8: Missions often bring in external support (in the form of USAID/Washington TDYs or contractors) to help complete Program Cycle processes and documents because of staffing shortages, frequent staff transitions, and many competing priorities, resulting in knowledge management, ownership, and continuity trade-offs.	🏠🏠🏠 🏠	USAID logo	👁		3, 4
Finding 9: Mission staff perceptions vary by Program Cycle process; although many Technical Office interviewees consider certain elements as valuable sources for evidence-based decision making, they also considered others to be	🏠🏠🏠 🏠				2, 5

superfluous, time consuming, and unnecessarily bureaucratic, sometimes resulting in procurement delays, heavy workloads, frustration, or staff turnover.					
Individual Components of the Program Cycle, Alignment, and Adaptation					
Finding 10: Strategy development takes longer than the ADS 201 estimates and is affected by the need to conduct key analyses, engage Mission staff and external stakeholders, derive a consensus around development objectives, and obtain USAID/Washington approval.	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)		📄	2
Finding 11: Familiarity with the meaning of "project" is low, especially among non-Program Office staff; many view project design as an unnecessarily lengthy, bureaucratic process.	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)	👁		3
Finding 12: Project management as envisaged in the ADS 201 remains occasional; commonly cited reasons for this include a lack of time, available staff, incentives, and detailed management plans.	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)	👁	📄	2, 3, 4
Finding 13: Most of the potential benefits of managing a group of related activities as a single project have yet to be realized.	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)	👁		4
Finding 14: Technical Office staff strongly prefer to focus on activity design and implementation, but many feel that competing priorities (including project design and implementation as well as other tasks) prevent them from fulfilling all of their activity-related responsibilities.	🏠🏠🏠🏠	(USAID seal)			2, 3, 4

Finding 15: Mission staff typically mentioned challenges in maintaining alignment across strategies, projects, and activities—particularly related to MEL/CLA—because of multiple, concurrent processes that necessitate ongoing updates and amendments.	🏠🏠🏠🏠			📄	2
Finding 16: Mission staff stated that in order to manage adaptively, they need meaningful indicators, high quality monitoring data, evaluations well timed to inform decisions, and management flexibility.	🏠🏠🏠🏠				1
Finding 17: Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) practices occur throughout the Program Cycle, though only some Mission staff identify these practices as CLA per se.	🏠🏠🏠🏠		👁	📄	1
Finding 18: Interviewees commonly reported that activities are typically the easiest to adapt in response to new information and contextual changes, followed by projects, strategies, and internal processes, all of which are more time consuming to adapt.	🏠🏠🏠🏠		👁	📄	4
Support from PPL for Program Cycle Implementation					
Finding 19: Mission staff members' familiarity with PPL is typically low, even among some Program Office staff, and some staff are skeptical of PPL's understanding of Mission needs.	🏠🏠🏠🏠		👁		3
Finding 20: In cases where Mission staff experienced a PPL TDY, they were appreciative of PPL''s direct support. Such support typically occurs episodically and relies on personal relationships.	🏠🏠🏠		👁		3

Conclusions	Supporting Findings
Conclusion 1: The most important factors influencing a Mission's ability to implement the Program Cycle in a coherent, integrated manner are supportive Front Office and Program Office leadership, and high levels of Mission staff engagement.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 17
Conclusion 2: Program Cycle processes take a significant amount of time and effort to implement, which can affect alignment and adaptation. The timing of these processes can also impact other required Mission tasks, leading to increased stress for staff.	2, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15
Conclusion 3: Staffing is often insufficient to support consistent and coherent implementation of the Program Cycle. As a result, Missions often turn to USAID/Washington or to contractors for assistance with Program Cycle processes and documents.	4, 8, 12, 14, 19, 20
Conclusion 4: Unlike strategies and activities, the concept, benefits, and management of projects are not well understood, nor are projects consistently valued or commonly operationalized.	3, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18
Conclusion 5: Program Cycle processes and convenings benefit Missions and their development programming by providing staff with relational and structured ways to make coherent and aligned decisions, build relationships, create shared understandings, and support employee engagement.	1, 3, 6, 7, 9

Recommendations More specific suggestions from the interviewees regarding PPL's Program Cycle support can be found in Annex 3.	Supporting Conclusions
Recommendation 1: The Agency should review the generalizability and validity of the study's findings and conclusions beyond the four Missions studied here.	1–5
Recommendation 2: The Agency should review ADS 201 requirements and assess the necessary time, level of effort, benefits, and trade-offs and resources needed to conduct Program Cycle processes.	2, 5
Recommendation 3: PPL and other Bureaus, with Agency leadership backing, should review connections, inconsistencies, and dependencies between the Program Cycle and other policies, initiatives, and processes to support efficient Program Cycle implementation.	1, 2, 3
Recommendation 4: The Agency should determine the most effective and efficient ways to ensure adequate staffing with enough capacity and understanding of the Program Cycle.	1, 2, 3
Recommendation 5: The Agency should develop a Program Cycle implementation strategy that prioritizes leadership, learning, and communication regarding the Program Cycle, especially projects, for all staff and implementing partners.	1, 4, 5

ANNEX 2: DETAILED PROGRAM CYCLE LEARNING STUDY METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the PCLS 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[19]	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 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.

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

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[20]	IPs[21]
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[22]	20					
Grand Total (including USAID / Washington staff)	**151**	**25**	**11**	**53**	**19**	**23**

Table 2: PCLS Mission Interviewee Details

SAMPLING OF INDIVIDUALS

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

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

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

[22] 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.

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[23]	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:

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.

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[23] 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.

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.[24]

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.[25] 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.

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[24] 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.

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

ANNEX 3: MISSION INTERVIEWEES' SUGGESTIONS TO PPL

This annex summarizes the suggestions that interviewees from the four study Missions made regarding support from PPL.

1. **PPL should continue to provide support to Missions in understanding and implementing the Program Cycle.** Many interviewees across all Missions appreciated in-person TDY support to improve their understanding, design, and execution of the Program Cycle because of the limited time and attention they have, given competing priorities. One approach mentioned by interviewees from Program Offices involved developing additional training resources and a more formalized strategy for disseminating information regarding "on the job" training opportunities, particularly for new hires and Program Office staff. A few interviewees also suggested providing a more supportive "home" for the 02 Backstop, including, for example, making better use of the Program Officer listserv.

2. **PPL should examine the connections between Agency processes and initiatives and the Program Cycle to improve the ease of application of the Program Cycle.** Many interviewees noted the connections—or sometimes conflicts—between the Program Cycle policy and other policies, in areas such as procurement and personnel. For example, a few interviewees brought up the proposed Development Information System (DIS) as an example of a tool that could support MEL work and save time currently spent collating, curating, and reporting on various data streams.

3. **PPL should continue to improve on its resources on the Program Cycle policy to improve its understanding and execution.** Many interviewees from Program Offices commented on the need for more detailed visuals, including timelines, checklists, and process maps, to supplement the standard circular Program Cycle visual.

4. **PPL should continue to review, iterate, and streamline Program Cycle processes.** Many interviewees also recommended reducing the amount of time spent on clearances where mandated in the current policy. Some interviewees mentioned a general desire for streamlining, while other interviewees suggested eliminating entire components of the Program Cycle, with strategies or projects mentioned as potential areas for elimination. Some interviewees noted the utility of projects but questioned the utility of PADs and PDPs. A few interviewees called for the ability to streamline CDCS assessments by using existing information rather than commissioning new assessments. Some interviewees also suggested that, for now, PPL provide more streamlined avenues for the strategy design process, stating that Missions might be encouraged to produce short executive summaries of the strategy and PADs for internal and external use. Some Program Office interviewees shared a desire for fewer changes to be made and more direct communication regarding any changes. A few interviewees noted inconsistencies in the ADS regarding the number of items mentioned and the types of acceptable format for items in terms of physical versus electronic copies.

5. **PPL should continue to build its understanding and knowledge regarding Mission Program Cycle implementation.** A few interviewees also suggested improving PPL's direct experience and knowledge of the Program Cycle in action through a program that placed PPL staff members in Missions for several months, much as PPL's FSN Fellowship program places FSNs in PPL's offices.