

LEARN Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Plan

Updated FY2018

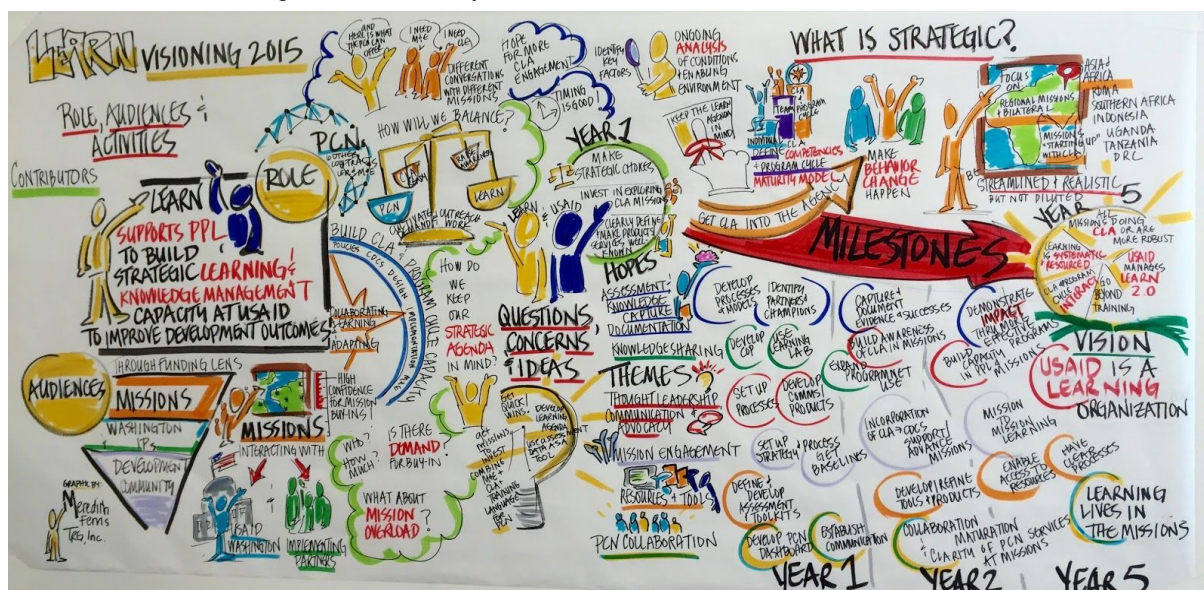
About LEARN

USAID LEARN is a five-year contract funded by USAID's Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) through its Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research (LER) to support strategic learning and knowledge management (KM) at USAID in order to improve the effectiveness of USAID programs in achieving significant development outcomes. The contract was awarded on September 29, 2014 to Dexis Consulting Group and its partner IRG, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Engility. The contract has a funding ceiling of \$57M over its 5-year span, with approximately \$23.5M of "core" funding anticipated from LER, with the balance available for mission, bureau, and operating unit buy-ins.

Practically speaking, this means LEARN supports the integration of USAID's approach to strategic learning and knowledge management—known as collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA)—throughout strategy, project, and activity level design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (i.e., USAID's Program Cycle). PPL and LEARN's efforts to support CLA integration throughout the Program Cycle primarily target USAID missions, but also support USAID bureaus and operating units, and implementing partners, that work with missions and bureaus at the activity level.

For more on [what LEARN does](#), CLA, and the [Program Cycle](#), see [USAID Learning Lab](#). It is important to note that while collaborating, learning, and adapting are broad topics, LEARN has worked with PPL to define what CLA is, creating a [CLA framework](#) and [maturity matrix](#) that outline, respectively, what CLA entails and stages of maturity for CLA integration and practice.

LEARN and PPL team visioning exercise, January 2015:



Purpose of the Updated Plan

LEARN takes collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) seriously and operates from a core value of “walking the talk.” Meaning, we don’t promote what we ourselves won’t do, and we believe strongly that we have to apply the approaches and principles of CLA in our work in order to be effective.

Having a systematic, intentional, and resourced approach to monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) is essential for effective learning. And learning is essential for adapting / adaptive management. Put simply, this MERL plan is intended to support our ability to learn and adapt so we can be as effective as possible in supporting CLA integration within USAID and among its partners.

In addition, we found that our original MERL plan, created during activity start-up, was not sufficiently useful. This was due in part to not having a clear picture of how LEARN’s vision would become a reality, which is to be expected so early in the life of the activity. In addition, while in practice we were actively reflecting on and learning from our experiences, our MERL plan focused heavily on performance indicators that were not highly relevant to our learning efforts. Lastly, in conducting the [CLA Maturity Matrix](#) on ourselves, we found that one area that needed more intentional effort was moving from reflection to decision-making and action (under the Application section of Adapting in Version 6).

As a result of our aspiration to “walk the talk” and these realizations, we determined in the summer of 2016 that we should update our MERL plan to more accurately reflect our work and the MERL practices we have in place for learning and adapting.

LEARN team members, clients, and partners share why learning matters:



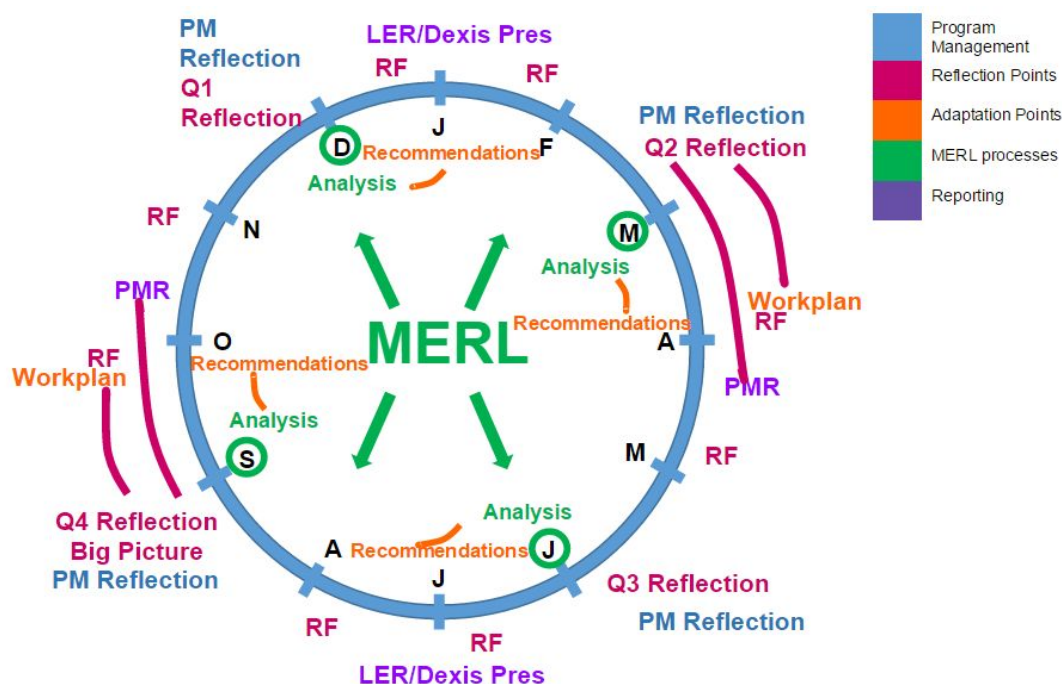
Our Learning and Adapting Cycle

Our MERL practices are focused on three key areas:

- **Continuous Learning and Improvement:** What are we doing? How can we improve?
- **Impact:** How is what we are doing leading to CLA integration within the USAID system? What is happening in our operating system that could affect our interventions?
- **Evidence Base for CLA:** Does CLA integration lead to better development outcomes? If so, how? Under what conditions?

To ensure we move from learning to adapting, we have built these learning focus areas into our activity management timeline.

The Learning and Adapting Cycle diagram below highlights this process.



Each month is designed inside the circle (J for January, F for February, etc.).

MERL Processes (green): On a **quarterly basis**, the MERL team performs both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data coming out of our MERL processes (outlined below, see section on Learning Questions and Activities) with the intent of drawing out key trends for each work stream. In this function, MERL supports the work streams in understanding their data and making evidence-based decisions.

Reflection Points (pink): Monthly, we have a Reflection Friday (RF) to provide the time and space for reflecting on our work, how it can be improved, what impact we are having, and what evidence we are generating that CLA makes a difference. We also have a monthly reflection session with USAID's CLA team during our monthly meeting, during which one learning question is posed for discussion by the group. **Quarterly**, one of the Reflection Fridays is a reflection on our quarterly learning coming out

of the MERL analysis for the entire LEARN team. We also have a separate discussion with the CLA team with the highlights of these reflections on a quarterly basis as well. **Annually**, one of our Reflection Fridays (Quarter 4 - Q4) is replaced by a Big Picture Reflection with USAID's CLA team.

Adaptation Points (orange): These reflections feed into our **monthly** reporting to our COR, in which we can identify key changes moving forward. In addition, two of the **quarterly** reflections, including the **annual** Big Picture Reflection, feed directly into our workplans. Our **semi-annual** workplans are the main opportunity for adapting our work. However, as we decide to adapt, we also use the change logs within our activity scoping documents to document changes in real-time.

Reporting (purple): LEARN provides **monthly** and **semi-annual** reports (Performance Monitoring Report or PMR) to our COR, though only the semi-annual reports are contractually required. These reports help us document our major achievements, key changes, key considerations moving forward, and priorities for the upcoming work period. We also report to Dexis leadership and LER leadership **semi-annually** (as noted by the purple LER/Dexis President in the diagram).

Revisiting the MERL Plan

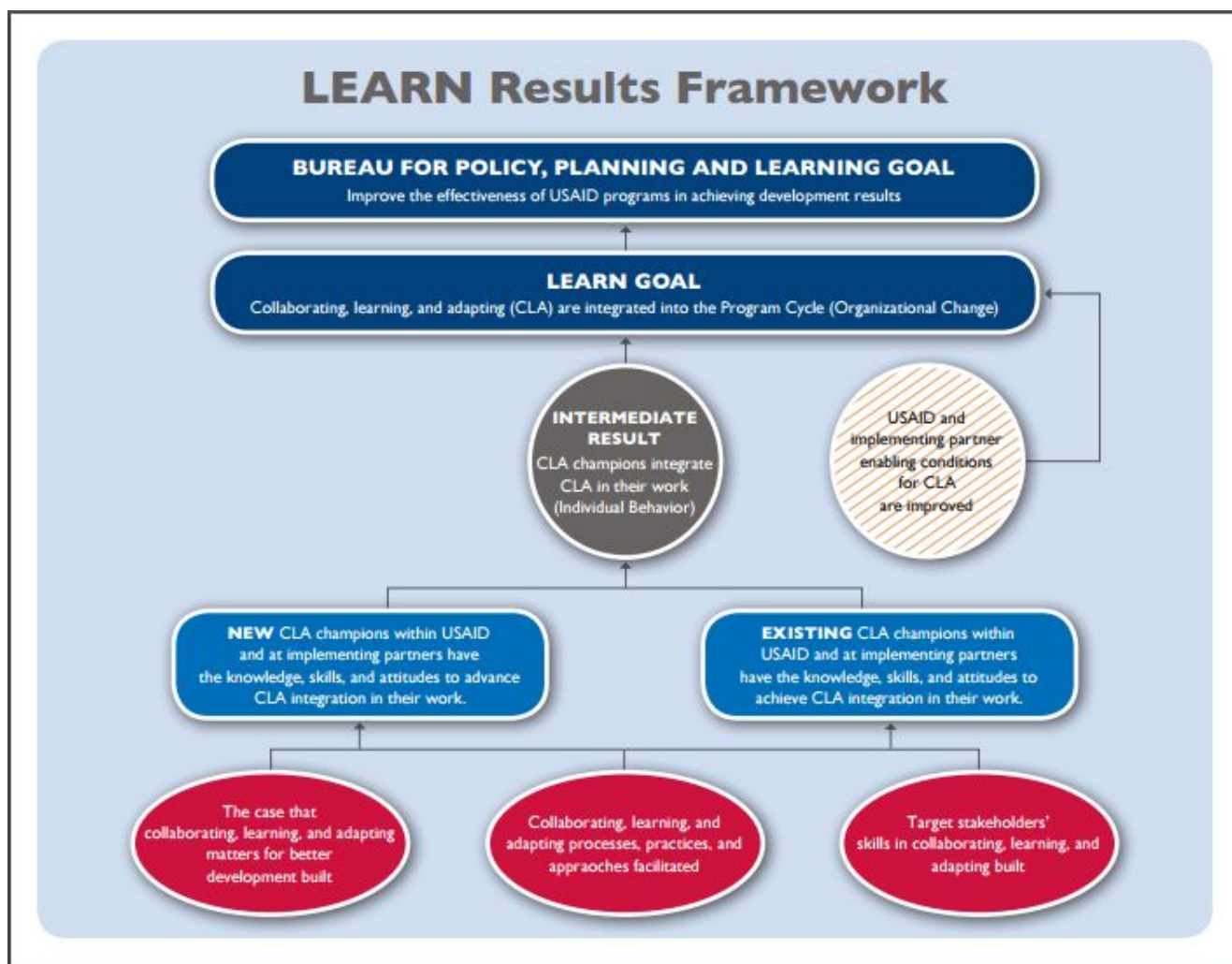
The MERL plan, as this update demonstrates, is a living document. As we identify the need for new or limited usefulness of existing learning questions, activities, or tools, we will update the MERL plan accordingly. At the very least, we will intentionally review our MERL plan following the midterm evaluation and annually thereafter in alignment with the Big Picture Reflection.

Logic Model

To start the MERL plan update process, we first adapted our logic model. We found that:

- Our previous logic model was not being used by the team to articulate our strategic approach or as a tool to understand our effectiveness or impact. It also did not capture our buy-in work, which could end up being more than half of the contract's total funding.
- The initial LEARN 5-year goal focused on institutionalizing CLA throughout the Agency, but 1.5 years into the contract, we came to realize just how much was outside our control in achieving this. In addition, cementing major institutional change in an organization of USAID's size and decentralized structure is not realistic in a five-year time horizon.
- At its core, LEARN is an organizational change / change management activity. The previous logic model was not reflecting the technical evidence base found in organization development or change management literature.

As a result, we have updated our logic model and corresponding theories of change:



The updated logic model hinges on the following theories of change and assumptions:

- CLA integration¹ throughout the Program Cycle (LEARN's goal) will improve the effectiveness of USAID programs in achieving development results (PPL's goal). *Note:* This theory will be explored through our Evidence Base for CLA (EB4CLA) work.
- USAID and implementing partner staff (the people) do the work of CLA integration. These individuals are either new or existing CLA champions² and must have the appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes to integrate CLA into their work. They also need to have tools, resources, guidance and peers to support these knowledge, skills and attitudes. As they change their individual behavior to further integrate CLA, they will influence the organizational system within which they operate.

¹ For more on what CLA integration means, see the CLA integration checklist in Annex 2.

² For more on how we have defined CLA champions within the logic model, see the champions synthesis in Annex 3.

- However, organizational change is not possible without certain enabling conditions in place (an organizational culture, processes, and resources that support CLA)³. Meaning, individuals can only integrate CLA to an extent before running into institutional barriers; thus, enabling conditions for CLA must be improved for CLA integration to take hold at the institutional level. However, some organizational enabling conditions are outside of LEARN's direct control and often times even influence as indicated by the circle on the right in the results framework. *Note: These theories and assumptions will be explored through our Impact and EB4CLA focus areas.*
- By building the case that CLA matters for better development, facilitating CLA processes, and building target stakeholders' CLA-related skills, new and existing champions will have the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes to integrate CLA into their work. *Note: This theory will be explored in our Continuous Improvement and Impact focus areas.*

The three red ovals at the bottom of the logic model provide guideposts to the LEARN team regarding what we do and don't do. In other words, if an intervention idea or buy-in opportunity emerges that does not fall within one of those three ovals, we would be unlikely to take it on. In the left red oval, we are building the case that CLA matters to development (via evidence base for CLA work, knowledge capture, advocacy, and engagement). In the middle oval, we are facilitating CLA processes, approaches, or practices--defined in relation to the components and subcomponents in the [CLA framework](#)--as service providers. This often captures our TDY and buy-in activities. In the right oval, we are teaching (via training, mentoring, coaching, providing tools, resources, guidance, and communities of practice, etc.) target stakeholders the skills necessary to carry out CLA processes, approaches, or practices on their own.

While appearing in the logic model as a relatively linear, straight-forward framework, we know that organizational change is anything but. Particularly in the USAID context with constantly shifting staff and leadership at the mission and bureau levels, institutional change is incredibly complex. There are so many qualifiers to getting CLA integrated at the individual level let alone organizational level, all of which are captured in the circle 'enabling conditions improved.' Some of these enabling conditions, such as those outlined in the CLA framework and outlined below, are outside of LEARN's control:

- Leadership is on board with CLA integration
- Other demands are taken away from staff and/or if CLA is not perceived as additional work for staff
- Individual and organizational incentives are changed and aligned
- USAID has acquisition and assistance mechanisms that enable/require CLA practices
- CLA isn't perceived as forced from Washington
- ADS 200 series guidance changes are taken seriously and applied at missions

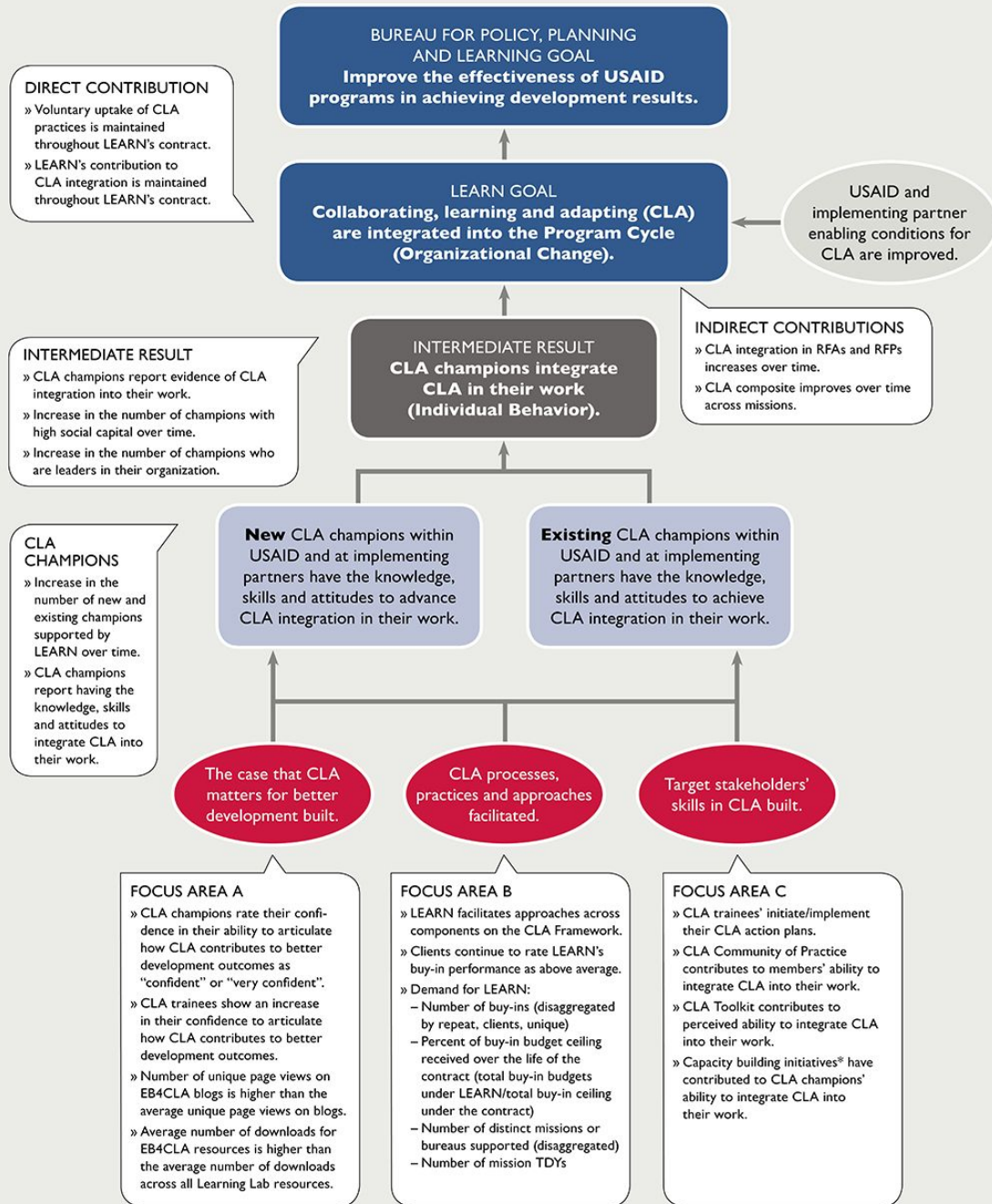
As a result of this complexity, LEARN's MERL approach needs to remain flexible and focused on accessing a variety of knowledge types and sources to ensure that our learning is context-specific, credible, relevant, and as a result, able to inform our decision-making.

³ For more on organizational enabling conditions, see the [CLA framework](#).

Measures of Success

In mid-2017, after our fifth Performance Monitoring Report (PMR), the MERL team realized that we weren't able to convey LEARN's impact over time. Each PMR included different data points, from different indicators, making it difficult to compare one PMR to the next. In an effort to demonstrate progress over time, LEARN recently developed **measures of success** for each component of our Results Framework. These measures of success first appeared in our sixth PMR and build on existing indicators already collected by LEARN. At least one indicator and a corresponding target now accompany LEARN's overall goal, the intermediate results, sub-intermediate results, and focus areas. These measures of success intend to demonstrate LEARN's achievement of higher-level objectives over the next few years through key data points most closely linked to our work. The image below includes the Results Framework and the corresponding measures of success:

LEARN Results Framework



Learning Questions and Activities

By working collaboratively with MERL, each technical work stream has identified key learning questions that serve as the foundation for the activity's monitoring, evaluation, and learning system. LEARN's indicators and methods have been structured to support the activity by:

- Helping LEARN **continuously learn and improve** via quarterly analysis and reflection on short-term outputs and outcomes
- Understanding LEARN's **impact** through analysis of short-term and long-term outcomes
- Building an **evidence-based case that collaborating, learning, and adapting matters** for better development outcomes

Continuous Learning & Improvement

LEARN's continuous learning and improvement approach relies on the following criteria to help work streams prioritize indicators and qualitative data collection methods:

- Is this information needed for reporting purposes?
- What decisions will be made with these data?
- How challenging is it to collect these data? Is knowing the information worth the effort to gather and track the indicator?

Based on this criteria, each technical work stream, with the support of MERL, identified a set of core indicators to track the short-term performance of their work. The table below highlights several illustrative indicators and data capture methods from each technical work stream. For the full list of indicators per work stream, see Annex 1.

Capacity Development Work Stream	
Learning Question	Illustrative Indicators and/or Methods
How many CLA plans have been developed as a result of LEARN's mission and/or bureau engagement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• # of CLA plans developed as a result of LEARN's work
How likely is it that CLA training participants apply what they have learned about CLA to their work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• % increase in training participants' likelihood to promote CLA in their work• % increase in confidence levels following training participants to apply what they have learned about CLA
Public Engagement & Platforms Work Streams	
Learning Question	Illustrative indicators
To what extent are users engaged on ProgramNet, Learning Lab, and the PC Dashboard?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• % increase in users/subscribers• % increase in members involved in a Working Group or Community of Practice

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Continuous learning and improvement relies heavily on LEARN's institutionalized practice of **After Action Reviews** required after every major activity and staff contributions to **Knowledge Drop** (an internal tacit knowledge capture blog that staff are encouraged to contribute to). In addition, LEARN uses a **post buy-in protocol** (Annex 5) that provides feedback on our performance during the course of the buy-in. In the case of long-term buy-ins, we can also utilize the **in-progress buy-in protocol** (Annex 6). These qualitative sources allow MERL to highlight any lessons learned that can be used to continuously improve how we implement. In addition, they serve as a resource for staff to conduct **Before Action Reviews**.

Impact

Based on our results framework, our key learning topics under Impact include:

- **Individual behavior change** as a result of LEARN's interventions
- **Organizational change** as a result of champions' efforts to integrate CLA
- **Context monitoring** of what is happening in our operating system that could impact our effectiveness

Individual Behavior Change

Under **individual behavior change**, our high priority learning questions, activities, and tools include:

Learning Question	Learning Activity	Learning Tool
What does a CLA champion look like?	Technical Specialists utilize the observation checklist while engaging with a USAID OU or IP.	Champion's Observation Checklist (To be created) Champions Synthesis (can be updated based on new learning) (Annex 3)
To what extent is the number of CLA champions increasing as a result of LEARN's work?	Technical Specialists identify new and existing champions using the checklist and input champions into database.	Champion's Observation Checklist (To be created) CRM (to be created)
How does a non-champion become a potential or actual CLA champion? How does a potential champion become a confirmed champion? What are the 'small CLA moments' that can create champions?	Tacit and experiential knowledge capture	Knowledge Drop CLA Team/LEARN monthly meetings Reflection Friday Reflection journals

What motivates and / or incentivizes staff to integrate CLA in their work (become a CLA champion)?		
What are the core competencies (including, knowledge, skills, and attitudes) required for a CLA champion to be able to integrate CLA into their work?		
Does having a CLA champion make a difference? Are champions able to integrate CLA, and if so, how does that affect the institution(s) in which they operate?	Post-training and engagement knowledge capture	<p>3 month post-engagement protocol (engagement refers to both TDYs and buy-ins) drawing from most significant change methodology (Annex 4)</p> <p>Post-training evaluation surveys drawing from most significant change methodology (Annex 7)</p>

Organizational Change

Under **organizational level change** (focused on USAID missions primarily, but also bureaus/offices/operating units, and implementing partners), our high priority learning questions include:

Learning Question	Learning Activity	Learning Tool
To what degree are mission, bureaus, and/or implementing partners increasing the integration of CLA in the Program Cycle and in the Enabling Conditions as a result of LEARN's work?	<p>Technical specialists select a few key questions from the post-engagement protocol to ask the TDY/buy-in point of contact (and other stakeholders if possible) what has changed as a result of LEARN's support / how CLA has been integrated.</p> <p>Based on the results, technical specialists fill out the CLA integration checklist which serves as a living document and can be updated periodically as LEARN continues to engage with the operating unit or IP.</p> <p>For longer-term engagements (1 year or more), technical specialists will perform a baseline and endline matrix self-assessment with the</p>	<p>3 month post-engagement protocol (applies to both TDYs and buy-ins) drawing from most significant change methodology (Annex 4)</p> <p>CLA Integration Checklist (Annex 2)</p> <p>CLA Maturity Matrix Self-Assessment</p>

	USAID operating unit.	
What are the enabling conditions for CLA integration in the Program Cycle? What are the barriers to CLA integration?	Tacit knowledge capture with PPL and missions (completed during start-up)	Interview guides
What is a CLA-ready institution? What criteria constitute CLA-ready?	Tacit and experiential knowledge capture of LEARN and CLA team based on engagement with USAID staff and IPs	Knowledge Drop
How does CLA integration / change in one part of the institution affect change in other parts of the institution?		CLA Team/LEARN monthly meetings
What causes enabling conditions for CLA within USAID to change?		Reflection Friday
How does the change to CLA being required in the ADS affect CLA integration at missions and implementing partners?		Reflection journals
What does effective collaborating, learning, and adapting look like (considered from the lens of the CLA framework - effective CLA in the Program Cycle and Culture, Processes, and Resources)? What resources are necessary to integrate CLA into the Program Cycle? ⁴	Tacit knowledge capture with PPL and missions (completed during start-up)	Interview guides
	Tacit and experiential knowledge capture of LEARN and CLA team based on engagement with USAID staff and IPs	Knowledge Drop, CLA Team/LEARN monthly meetings, Reflection Fridays, Reflection journals
	CLA Case Competition Analysis	See EB4CLA below, specifically the case competition analysis

Context Monitoring

Importantly, MERL also tracks and assesses changes in the external environment that might directly or indirectly affect collaborating, learning, and adapting at USAID and/or LEARN's work. MERL's context monitoring learning questions include:

⁴ Note that this is hypothesized, like all enabling conditions, within the CLA framework. However, the Evidence Base for CLA literature review found a lack of evidence about what resources are required to integrate CLA, so we are maintaining this question to try and contribute to the technical evidence base.

- Is there increasing demand for CLA / Learning fellows over time? (to check with CLA team if they can provide this data)
- To what extent is CLA being integrated into mission solicitations? How, if at all, does this change over time? (to be confirmed after discussions with mid-term evaluator on methodology)
- What changes in the USAID front office, PPL front office, and PPL more generally are happening that affect LEARN's work and the enabling environment for CLA?
- How is landscape for CLA changing in the broader international development community?

LEARN will rely on a variety of methods to answer these questions including tacit knowledge capture from PPL and LEARN colleagues, qualitative analysis of trends in mission solicitations commissioned during the mid-term and final evaluations, and blogs and articles about collaborating, learning, and adapting. For more on this, see the context monitoring tab in the full list of indicators (Annex 1).

Evidence Base for CLA

Building the evidence base for CLA represents the third pillar of LEARN's MERL approach. This work serves to answer the following learning questions:

- ***Does an intentional, systematic and resourced approach to collaborating, learning and adapting contribute to development outcomes?***
- ***If so, how? And under what conditions?***

The MERL team leads the strategy and implementation of the following learning activities linked to building the evidence base for CLA:

- **Literature Review:** LEARN identified the need to conduct a literature review to understand what is known, what remains unknown, and how others have tried to understand CLA's effectiveness on development. The literature review will be updated on a quarterly basis.
- **Annual Analysis of the CLA Case Competition:** The annual CLA Case Competition calls for USAID missions and implementing partners to submit case stories demonstrating CLA approaches and outcomes. MERL continuously mines the top cases for evidence of the relationship between implementing CLA and improved development outcomes.
- **Learning Network:** Comprised of five Implementing Partners, the Learning Network serves to answer how and if CLA contributes to better development outcomes.
- **Partners for Learning (aka Learning Dojo):** This group of USAID representatives from different bureaus aims to develop the evidence base for doing development differently in order to create organizational change within USAID and share learning from their multisectoral efforts along the way.
- **EB4CLA studies:** The MERL team is in the process of designing a study or series of studies to increase the robustness of the evidence that CLA matters for better development outcomes. This study will most likely begin implementation in 2017. LEARN anticipates using long-term buy-ins as a key opportunity for studying the effect or contribution of CLA towards achieving development outcomes.

Moreover, the activities contributing toward the expansion of the evidence base for CLA serve another purpose. These activities also help to answer the following question: ***to what extent does having a more credible evidence base support increased collaborating, learning, and adapting uptake in USAID missions, bureaus, and implementing partners?*** To answer this question, MERL intends to

facilitate discussions with the Learning Dojo and Network, USAID colleagues, and others who might be affected by the expansion of the evidence base for CLA. These discussions would focus on helping LEARN gauge if and how the evidence base encourages CLA integration. For more on this, see the EB4CLA tab in the MERL master tracking sheet (Annex 1).

External Evaluations to Assess Impact

Additionally, LEARN plans to conduct a **mid-term evaluation** starting in 2017. The purpose of the mid-term evaluation will be to determine if LEARN is on track to accomplish its objectives by the end of the contract and determine what adjustments need to be made to improve overall effectiveness. In addition,

PPL may be interested in commissioning a whole-of-project or activity-level **final evaluation** (2019) to assess the impact of PPL's multiple mechanisms or specifically LEARN's work over the life of the contract. If PPL is unable to commission this evaluation, LEARN would still like to conduct a final evaluation.

For both the midterm and final evaluations, a key learning question will be: ***to what extent has LEARN's work contributed to increased integration of collaborating, learning, and adapting at USAID missions, bureaus and implementing partners?***

Knowledge Management

Data, Information, and Knowledge Collection & Storage

MERL and members of technical work streams systematically capture and store both qualitative and quantitative data to answer LEARN's learning questions and track core indicators. LEARN captures data through online and paper surveys, web-based platforms such as Google Analytics and Drupal, Key Informant Interviews, and Focus Groups.

Broadly speaking, MERL stores all historical and current data for the technical work streams online via Google Drive and the internal knowledge sharing wiki (where Knowledge Drop lives). The availability of the data online means that all work streams can access, review, and discuss their data at any point in time. MERL designed this system to encourage greater ownership over technical data as well as to enable specialists to adaptively manage as needed.

Knowledge Synthesis

Data analysis represents one of the core functions of the MERL team. For quantitative data, LEARN relies on a variety of approaches, including comparisons of pre- and post-assessments as well as an exploration of relationships between one or more indicators. The way in which we do the qualitative analysis will depend on the type of data, what we need to know from the data, and sample sizes. MERL's qualitative analysis includes identifying key trends from AARs, Knowledge Drop, interview

protocols, and the CLA integration checklist that answer LEARN's learning questions about individual and organizational behavior change.

Knowledge Application

MERL believes any data collected should also be utilized for the adaptive management of LEARN's technical work. In service to this approach, MERL hosts a data reflection session with each technical work stream. During these sessions, MERL shares relevant analyses and asks strategic questions to surface learning. At the close of the session, MERL asks work streams what changes they may want to make as a result of this data analysis and reflection and teams can document these changes in their scoping documents (using the change log) or in the monthly reports (under key changes section).

Learning Actors

Who is Learning?

The MERL plan will support learning among key actors:

- **LEARN team:** As outlined above, the LEARN team will use learning to continuously improve, understand its impact, and build the case that CLA matters to development.
- **CLA team:** Learning will be shared with the CLA team quarterly to inform their strategic aims, management of the contract, and inform activities co-created between the LEARN and CLA teams.
- **PPL leadership:** The CLA team and LEARN will determine how best to communicate learning with PPL leadership to promote sustained support for CLA.
- **USAID leadership and CLA champions at both USAID and implementing partners:** What we learn, particularly under EB4CLA, will be shared via proper communication channels with USAID decision-makers and CLA champions to bolster support for CLA integration throughout the Program Cycle.

Roles and Responsibilities

Overall, MERL is a responsibility of every LEARN team member. The MERL team provides overall strategic direction and creates the systems, tools, and processes used by the team to capture knowledge. This includes maintaining Knowledge Drop, creating tracking sheets for indicators, facilitating relevant portions of Reflection Fridays or quarterly reflection sessions with each work stream, and creating the MERL tools used by the team.

Each team member is responsible for providing input on what data is most relevant to their decision-making needs, providing feedback on tools created, using tools created, inputting data for their indicators via the PC Dashboard or tracking sheets, contributing to our tacit knowledge capture

via reflections and Knowledge Drop, participating in quarterly reflection sessions, and most importantly, managing adaptively so that programmatic are made as a result of learning.

Note that the ProgramNet team is responsible for its own data collection, analysis, and reporting, but is welcome to participate in LEARN's other MERL processes, such as Knowledge Drop, Reflection Friday, and Big Picture Reflections. In addition, the MERL team is available to provide advisory services or feedback to ProgramNet (or any other buy-in's) on its MERL processes. ProgramNet will provide at least semi-annual information to the LEARN team for reporting to the LEARN COR in the semi-annual report.

Roles and responsibilities for implementation of the above MERL plan are outlined in the master tracking sheet (Annex 1). Specific MERL functions are outlined in the MERL team roles and responsibilities document (Annex 8).

