USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

MEASURING IMPACT
Making Use of the Portfolio: Organizational Learning at USAID

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MEASURING IMPACT

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CLP	Continuous Learning Points
DOS	U.S. Department of State
E3	Bureau of Economic Growth, Education and the Environment
FAB	Office of Forestry and Biodiversity
FSNs	Foreign Service Nationals
FSOs	Foreign Service Officers
MI	Measuring Impact Project (E3/FAB)
RDMA	Regional Development Mission for Asia
RM Portal	Natural Resources and Development Portal
TCNs	Third Country Nationals
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learning from experiences to improve future actions has been a priority of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for decades. Indeed, a number of approaches to learning and knowledge management have already been tried in the Agency through general and sector-specific initiatives, with varying results. Few, however, have been able to achieve sustained cross-Mission learning for conservation interventions.

This technical analysis explores previous and ongoing social learning efforts, best practices, challenges, and lessons in USAID as a foundation for improving the implementation and design of the Agency's forestry and biodiversity programs. This analysis is particularly relevant as the Bureau of Economic Growth, Education and the Environment's Office of Forestry and Biodiversity (E3/FAB) begins to develop a Cross-Mission Learning Program under the Measuring Impact initiative, a five-year activity to promote the adoption of best practices in the USAID program cycle among Missions using biodiversity funds. The findings reported in this document can help inform the overall design and structure of the Learning Program and provide insight into possible challenges and best practices.[1]

A comprehensive literature review on organizational learning and key informant research on previous and current internal and external USAID-supported social learning efforts produced several suggestions for the design and implementation of future such learning efforts in the Agency, including the Cross-Mission Learning Program. The following paragraphs summarize these suggestions.

1. **Recognize Different Challenges for Internal- and External-Facing Social Learning Efforts.** Internal social learning efforts focused on groups in the Agency tend to have difficulty sustaining activities because they often lack facilitation resources and dedicated staff time. These efforts also usually involve only a small number of people and suffer membership loss from staff turnover more than external-facing efforts, which usually engage many times more people.

   Several Agency Bureaus support external-facing social learning efforts run by outside implementing partners, which have dedicated staff and resources so they can maintain consistent leadership and online presence. The main challenge for these efforts is to maintain participant engagement, especially through online platforms. These efforts draw participants with wide-ranging interests from disparate geographic areas, which makes it difficult to identify relevant content for a large number of people that is specific enough to be novel and interesting. USAID's large, diverse, and geographically broad membership makes it hard to bring members together for in-person interaction and knowledge exchange, which is critical for engagement and motivation.

2. **Cultivate Motivation.** Maintaining staff motivation, often overlooked in activity design and launch, is challenging for internal and external social learning efforts. Future social learning efforts should identify the most interested and engaged participants and focus on their learning needs, while also investing in knowledge dissemination and products that are relevant to broader audiences. This strategy aimed at core engagement would also provide benefits for the larger group with varied interests, an audience that is harder to focus on strategically.

   Motivation can also be encouraged by attaining senior leadership buy-in for learning activities, deploying incentives for participation, and holding in-person events.

3. **Keep Focus with Learning Agendas.** A Learning Agenda is a set of questions related to an organization's work. Answers to those questions help the organization work more effectively. Learning Agendas help focus group efforts on the creation and sharing of

[1] Appendix C describes how these recommendations will be integrated into the Cross-Mission Learning Program.

valuable, relevant knowledge that addresses knowledge needs. Using Learning Agendas increases members' engagement and motivation.

4. **Diversify Knowledge Storage.** Social learning efforts tend to focus on written documents to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge storage, but knowledge can also be stored in videos, infographics, podcasts, and other media and embedded in practices and organizational routines in groups such as communities of practice. Diversifying knowledge storage reduces the risk of loss and improves the ability of knowledge seekers to locate the knowledge later.

5. **Focus on People, not Platform.** Personal connections among participants are more important than the technological tools used to connect them. Platforms should be deployed to the minimum required specifications and then expanded if and when more functionality is needed. The tools should not be the focus; rather, they should facilitate connections and learning.

6. **Build on Existing Efforts.** Capitalizing on existing efforts can be a shortcut to developing a core group of active participants because it simplifies identifying initial members and building social capital among the group. When possible, new social learning efforts should identify and build on existing groups that share information on a specific topic.

7. **Record Learning Outcomes and Knowledge Products.** Efforts should include monitoring how members use and apply knowledge gained from social learning activities, not just the knowledge products, such as documents and workshops. The effort will have a clearer value when learning outcomes are monitored, and the lessons identified in the outcomes can be reinforced and improved through future activities.

8. **Encourage Collaborative Implementation.** To address difficulties in motivation and staff availability to participate in social learning efforts, USAID should pair staff from different offices in a Mission, such as environment officers and health officers, that would benefit from knowledge exchange to help them design projects and associated learning agendas. When possible, USAID should develop projects with cross-sectoral objectives. Through collaboration in project design and implementation, staff from across operating units will spend more time interacting, building stronger relationships, and exchanging knowledge. The process of co-creating knowledge will provide distinct opportunities to embed knowledge from both units in the actions and knowledge stores of both offices.

9. **Encourage Participation by Foreign Service National Staff.** Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) and Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) have different roles and capacities in institutional knowledge storage. Many learning efforts have not reached FSNs, but FSNs often have stronger institutional knowledge of previous Mission work and more engagement with field activities. As a result, they have the potential to be key contributors to learning activities.

10. **Strengthen Project-level Links between Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.** The quantity and quality of lessons generated from project actions is in large part determined by the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems that provide feedback on the impacts of actions. M&E systems that focus on tracking key results in a theory of change and addressing questions that test assumptions underlying that theory of change can generate evidence to inform adaptive management of interventions, while speeding identification and verification of new lessons. By designing M&E[2] approaches to support the Agency's commitment to systematic learning and use of evidence, clearer lessons

[2] Guidance on best practice in designing monitoring and evaluation to support systematic learning and best practices in implementing the USAID program cycle is being developed by the Forestry and Biodiversity Office and Measuring Impact in consultation with Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning during 2015. See also Margoluis and Salafsky, 1998.

can be generated and compared across projects to improve USAID's investment in effective conservation and development approaches.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is a leader in global efforts to conserve biodiversity and protect the natural environment from destructive and unsustainable human impacts. The Agency's annual biodiversity conservation investment of over $200 million dollars supports a diversity of approaches to biodiversity conservation around the world that are continually being tested, refined, and improved. To date, however, many of these efforts take place in relative isolation from each other with little cross-pollination of ideas and lessons among USAID Missions. At the same time, the Agency has made a significant commitment to evidence-based learning as part of the USAID Forward reform initiative introduced in 2010. This has resulted in a number of changes, including establishment of the Bureau of Policy, Planning, and Learning; development of an Evaluation Policy (2011); creation of the USAID Program Cycle and associated guidance; and development of the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) approach. The investment by the Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and the Environment/Office of Forestry and Biodiversity (E3/FAB) in Measuring Impact is intended, in part, to ensure that these reforms are effectively adopted in the Agency's biodiversity programs. As a result, a critical need has arisen, plus an invaluable opportunity to bring the results of activity and country-level learning efforts to the global scale of USAID's portfolio and significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of conservation interventions around the world.

Learning from experience to improve future actions has been a USAID priority for decades. Indeed, the Agency has already rolled-out a number of approaches to learning and knowledge management through general and sector-specific initiatives. These initiatives have had varying results, yet few so far have achieved sustained cross-Mission learning related to conservation interventions.

The purpose of this technical analysis is to share knowledge about past and ongoing social learning[3] efforts, key best practices, challenges, and lessons in USAID. This analysis is particularly relevant now as E3/FAB begins to develop a Cross-Mission Learning Program through Measuring Impact.

Specifically, this analysis addresses the following questions:

- What are the key factors that enable and limit organizational learning in USAID?
- What have been the experiences, challenges, and successes of other USAID social learning efforts?
- What actionable recommendations can be drawn from the literature and experiences to inform future USAID social learning efforts, especially E3/FAB's Cross-Mission Learning Program?

This paper is organized in three sections that focus on these questions. The first section is an overview of the science of organizational learning, extracting key concepts relevant to the USAID institutional context. The second section summarizes original key informant research into USAID experiences in social learning and major lessons. The final section summarizes recommendations for future USAID and E3/FAB learning efforts.

[3] The term *social learning efforts*, defined under Terminology, is used throughout this document to distinguish efforts that focus primarily on peer-to-peer efforts to spread and refine knowledge among individuals and operating units and efforts that generate new knowledge through research. USAID uses the term *learning effort* to encompass social knowledge sharing and research efforts.

1 ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: KEY CONCEPTS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO USAID

This section covers key terminology and concepts from scientific literature on organizational learning that are relevant to USAID to describe factors that enable and limit USAID organizational learning. Information about the USAID context was gathered from the authors' general knowledge of the institution and supplemented with input and feedback from USAID reviewers.

TERMINOLOGY

A number of terms are used in everyday language, often synonymously, to refer to key terms in the knowledge management and organizational literature. Here we present formal definitions to ensure clear use throughout the document.

- **Data** refers to raw, unanalyzed quantitative and qualitative material (Machlup 1979).
- **Information** refers to analyzed data, often presented in a form that is specifically designed for decision makers for a given decision-making task (Ibid).
- **Knowledge** refers to the absorption, assimilation, understanding, and appreciation of information received (Ibid).
- **Learning** is a continuous process of analyzing various information sources and knowledge, including evaluation findings, monitoring data, innovations, and new learning that bring to light new best practices or call into question received wisdom, collected observations, and acquired tacit knowledge from people who have particularly deep or unique insight, leading to iterative adaptation of strategy, project design, or implementation to sustain the most effective, efficient path to achieve development objectives (USAID 2014).
- **Organizational learning** is a change in an organization's knowledge that occurs as a function of experience (Fiol and Lyles 1985). This includes knowledge creation and diffusion through an organization that occurs naturally in and among organizations, but also can be promoted or discouraged by organization members.
- **Sub-groups** are smaller groups or operating units in the larger organizational network. In USAID, sub-groups could be Missions or project teams in Missions or DC-based technical offices, such as E3/FAB, or smaller groups in these offices. Sub-groups commonly hold information and knowledge beyond a single individual's, but that is not widespread throughout the organization.
- **Social networks** comprise individuals, groups, organizations, and related systems that tie in one or more types of interdependencies, such as shared values, visions, and ideas; social contacts; kinship; conflict; financial exchanges; trade; joint membership in organizations; and group participation in events, among numerous other aspects of human relationships (Serrat 2009).
- **Social learning** comprises approaches to help facilitate knowledge sharing, joint learning, and co-creation experiences among particular stakeholders for a shared purpose to take learning and behavior change beyond the individual to networks and systems. New shared ways of knowing emerge through a facilitated iterative process of working together in interactive dialog, exchange, learning, action, reflection, and on-going partnership that lead to changes in practice (Van Epp and Garside 2014).
- **Organizational network** refers to a large organization's social network, such as that of USAID.
- **Organizational routines** are a group's patterns of behavior that are subject to change if conditions change. Routines are different from individual-level recurrent activity patterns, which are called habits (Becker 2004).
- **Complex systems** have many interconnected components that make it difficult or impossible to distinguish the effects of changes in parts or conditions of the whole system's function (Lissack 1999). Social, political, and environmental systems all exhibit high levels of complexity, especially at larger scales.

THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING

As an organization carries out its tasks, it gains experience and knowledge through learning. Over time, this learning tends to improve efficiency and reduce the time and cost of completing tasks.

In the context of biodiversity, learning-induced effectiveness gains occur with the production of conservation outputs. Marine parks, sustainable livelihoods, and improved forest management policies, for example, are produced through a combination of technology and knowledge by organizations with defined structure and routines that use repositories of organizational knowledge. The people and organizations involved in the production of these outputs accumulate knowledge and experience. As programs move from initial pilot stages to wide-scale implementation, costs are expected to fall and impacts to rise, in large part due to organizational learning on how to undertake tasks and accomplish objectives more efficiently. These efficiency gains are not limited to a project's implementing organization; they can also be transmitted to other organizations and projects.

If one organization, such as a USAID Mission, spends days, weeks, or years developing solutions to problems that were already solved in other organizations, efficiency is lost through the duplication of efforts. Bringing people and knowledge together adds efficiency and efficacy to conservation actions, but the process is not usually as simple as connecting disparate teams, especially in the context of an institution as large and decentralized as USAID where it is not possible to directly connect all people or sub-groups. Even when teams are connected, barriers can prevent successful knowledge transfer and uptake. The first step is to understand the factors that influence an organization's knowledge diffusion.

A conservation organization's productivity is not as easy to measure as that of an organization that produces a discrete good, such as a truck. Productivity is not a straightforward calculation of the effect of learning on conservation, and the effect of various factors on learning is difficult to generalize because of context dependency. There are, however, several general factors described in the literature that have been found to impact learning and can be applied to different sectors. The remainder of this section describes these factors (marked in bold red text), placing them in the context of USAID and its partners. Many of these factors describe individual experiences and general phenomena familiar to most organization members that are routinely involved in the creation, transfer, and application of knowledge. The objective of the exercise of naming and describing these factors will help the reader distinguish individual experience and general phenomena and develop a broad view of the overall learning environment in USAID.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Learning can be divided into three related processes: (1) knowledge creation, (2) knowledge transfer, and (3) knowledge retention, each a semi-independent process that is affected by several factors.

KNOWLEDGE CREATION

Knowledge is created from the combination of new information and existing knowledge or the novel combination of different, already-existing knowledge (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011). By definition, knowledge, as opposed to data or information, can be created only by people.

The **connectedness** of people strongly influences knowledge creation. All things being equal, a person or group that is connected through social ties to more people tends to create more knowledge than a person or group that is less connected (Phelps, Heidl, and Wadhwa 2012). The **diversity of connections** is also an important factor. A person who is connected to people with very different knowledge is likely to create more new knowledge than someone connected to people with similar knowledge. People who have many connections across organizations, for example, will tend to create more knowledge because knowledge *across* organizations is more diverse than *within* organizations (Perry-Smith 2006, Rulke and Galaskiewicz 2000).

In the USAID context, Washington-based Technical Offices and Regional Bureaus have the highest connectedness in the organization because of their numerous ties with Missions,

Bureaus, and other partners. Staff in these Technical Offices, however, are mostly connected to other global international development professionals. Conversely, Mission staff have more regular contact with local partner organizations, host country institutions, and businesses in their countries, and thus they have different networks.

Feedback, an observable outcome that results from an action, is a critical factor in learning. Individuals and organizations struggle to draw lessons from their experiences unless they receive information about the effect of their actions. Indeed, delays in feedback can significantly hamper learning (Diehl and Sterman 1995; Rahmandad, Repenning, and Sterman 2014). As time between action and feedback increases, it is increasingly difficult to connect specific actions with results. At a minimum, this can slow learning (Diehl and Sterman 1995, Rahmandad 2008); at its worst, this can lead to counter-productive learning and inaccurate lessons (Denrell, Fang, and Levinthal 2004).

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

After an individual or group creates knowledge, that knowledge needs to spread to the larger organization for the organization to *learn it*. This process is called **knowledge transfer,** which is influenced by several factors in three categories:

1. **Knowledge properties**—the type of knowledge to be transferred
2. **Structural factors**—the structure of the network
3. **Relational factors**—the relationships between individuals

KNOWLEDGE PROPERTIES

The properties of the knowledge itself can affect the ability of individuals to transfer that knowledge to others. Knowledge occurs along a continuum from tacit to explicit. Tacit knowledge is difficult to demonstrate, unproven, or causally ambiguous (Martin and Soloman 2003). Causal ambiguous experience occurs when the relationship between causes and effects during task performance is unclear or difficult to articulate (Argote 2011). Examples of highly tacit knowledge include languages, leadership skills, and the skill of driving a manual transmission vehicle. Conversely, explicit knowledge is articulated or codified into media, such as encyclopedias, journal articles, and video tutorials.

Conservation and development projects operate in complex social and environmental systems where much of the knowledge is generated through experience, and therefore tacit. Tacit knowledge is difficult and costly to share. It requires close, personal relationships and significant time investments from all individuals involved in the transfer (Ibid). Tacit knowledge is often tied to a specific context, and therefore, it can be difficult to generalize or to translate into different contexts. On the other hand, explicit knowledge, when codified into an electronic format, can be shared at low cost through email, websites, and other online tools.

Tacit knowledge can sometimes be codified through research. An example is impact evaluations that the Agency uses to generate and codify knowledge. These evaluations, designed and implemented alongside development interventions, include experimental design, robust data collection, and monitoring indicators in the project area and a comparable control site (USAID 2011). When these evaluations are successful, they make some of the tacit knowledge about local context, project design, and implementation more explicit, and thus more readily transferable to others outside of the immediate project team.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS

As in knowledge creation, **connectedness** is crucial in knowledge transfer. People who do not know each other or who have no means of interacting cannot transmit knowledge to each other. Knowledge transfer increases as individuals become more connected with other individuals or sub-groups (Reagans and Zuckerman 2001, Rulke and Galaskiewicz 2000, Burt 1992). Also important is the pattern of connections among individuals, referred to as **network structure**. Some research suggests that highly centralized networks, where organizational units are connected only to a central unit, may impede the transfer of knowledge by reducing the ability and willingness of individuals to share their information and knowledge (Tagliaventi and Mattarelli

2006). Learning is, therefore, restricted to what the coordinator creates and disseminates back to the group. This implies that centralized networks might do well to foster connections among non-central individuals and sub-groups to achieve knowledge transfer beyond that produced solely by the dissemination of centrally developed knowledge.

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the broader USAID team working on environmental programs based on discussions with Mission and DC technical staff. Currently, this highly centralized network has few formal connections among members of different operating units outside of Washington.[4] Centralization supports hierarchical knowledge flows and provides a filtering function that helps reduce information overload. With centralization, it is not possible or desirable for all individuals and sub-groups to regularly engage or connect with each other; however, centralization also creates bottlenecks in knowledge transfer and reduces the overall transfer potential in the network. Regional Bureaus serve as management hubs for Mission programs and provide oversight on strategic direction and programmatic implementation and administrative issues. Technical Offices, such as E3/FAB, serve as technical resources for Missions, with a concomitant and challenging responsibility to create effective research coordination and knowledge management functions that will be readily used in a highly dispersed organization. Some regional Missions, such as the Regional Development Mission for Asia, may also provide coordination or technical support functions to some extent.

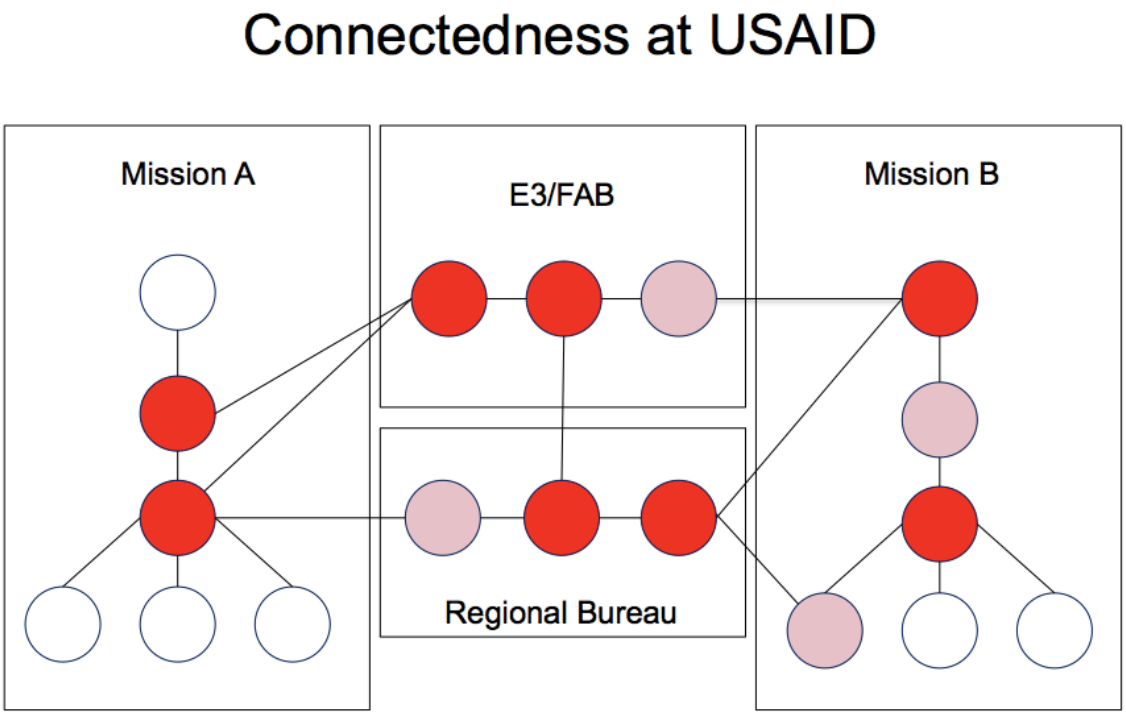

Figure 1: A simplified social network analysis chart illustrates the structure of USAID's environment team. Circles represent individuals in operating units, which are represented by larger rectangles. Lines indicate connections. Darker shades of red indicate individuals with higher connectedness.

Tradeoffs between centralization and connectedness indicate a need for an effective balance, which requires enough connectedness that diverse individuals and sub-groups can meet for learning or action and then disband when no longer needed.

The structure of organizational networks is not static; individuals frequently enter and leave the organization and move between positions. Losing members from the organizational network reduces the knowledge base, and adding new individuals to the network increases the knowledge

[4] Informal, personal connections develop across the Agency among staff in different operating units and locations. These relationships are formed and maintained as staff are posted and rotate to different posts. These informal, personal networks are an important source of knowledge transfer that are commonly drawn on for technical knowledge exchange.

base, which means that growing organizations or sub-groups tend to be more creative. Personnel movement within the network can be a powerful mechanism for diffusing knowledge in an organization (Almeida and Kogut 1999, Choi and Levine 2004).

USAID's rotational staffing policy frequently shuffles Foreign Service Officers (FSO) among duty stations, resulting in frequent shifts in their cultural work context and relationships to other staff in the network, which provides a major source of knowledge transfer in the organization. The policy also contributes to knowledge loss in individual units. This loss could be minimized, but not entirely eliminated, with well-planned transition periods when new and departing staff work closely to transfer knowledge and tasks. Institutional realities often dictate short transition periods with minimal or zero physical overlap between staff. Staff training that emphasizes the importance of knowledge diffusion and familiarization with the risks of knowledge loss caused by staff rotations could encourage staff to prioritize knowledge management during transitions.

Relational Factors

Simply being connected is not enough for individuals and sub-groups to transmit knowledge to each other. The quality and characteristics of their relationships influence how knowledge is identified for exchange and the magnitude of the transfer.

Relationship quality, often referred to as **tie strength,** is important for several ways of knowledge transfer. Argote (2011) summarizes much of the research on tie strength:

> *Much of this research shows strong ties – characterized by long relationship duration, frequent and intense collaboration, and repeated partnering over time – increase innovation adoption, knowledge transfer, and organizational knowledge creation. The explanation for these results is that social cohesion (i.e., trust, reciprocity, and social identity) provided by strong ties increases the motivation of firms to share and receive knowledge. Greater social interaction, the development of relational capital, and longer relationship duration, have a positive effect on inter-firm learning and knowledge transfer, while an increase in the depth and scope of inter-organizational interactions helps diffuse practices.*

This is not to suggest, however, that weak ties cannot support good knowledge transfer. Explicit knowledge, compared to tacit knowledge, transfers well among individuals connected through weak ties (Hansen 1999). The creation of strong ties takes significant time and effort for both parties. As a result, the number of strong ties an individual can sustain is limited by time constraints and competing priorities.

In the USAID context, E3/FAB and Mission staff are connected to Mission and other Agency staff through various strong and weak connections. Improving the quality of these relationships (see section 2) is likely to bring knowledge benefits throughout the network; however, improving relationships depends on the ability of Agency staff to invest in learning activities to improve tie strength and knowledge transfer, given the costs in time and energy.

An organization's individuals and sub-groups rarely give equal weight to knowledge coming from all sources in the organizational network. **Group dynamics** among individuals and sub-groups in the network relate to tie strength. For example, higher-ranking individuals may be more skeptical of knowledge generated at lower ranks of the organization, or individuals in one geographic area may be less accepting of knowledge generated in another place. Conversely, some individuals or sub-groups might acquire privileged status due to previous sharing of useful information or technical background. The quality and quantity of knowledge distributed throughout an organization does not correlate consistently with status or even technical background of individuals. Often, lower-status individuals from distant geographic areas or those with less formal training have extremely valuable information and knowledge, which because of group dynamics is less likely to diffuse throughout the organization.

At USAID Missions, Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) make frequent field visits, meet with local partners, and have deeper background knowledge of the host country's politics and culture. This makes them highly valuable sources of knowledge, and yet they tend to fill lower-ranking positions in the Mission and come from educational institutions that are less well recognized. New

information and knowledge produced by these staff could be given less-privileged status than if it came from other sources.

Shared language and experience is fundamental to knowledge transfer among individuals and groups. Language and cultural barriers impede communication and increase the time required for information and knowledge to move among individuals (Weber and Camerer 2003). Language barriers can refer to differences in fluency of a common language, as in USAID where English may not be the first or second language of many staff members, but also to differences in educational or technical background. For example, sociologists, economists, and biologists may struggle to efficiently communicate highly technical information or knowledge among themselves due to differences in technical vocabulary and different perspectives on the same issue. A lack of shared experience can hinder knowledge exchange because individuals lack a common understanding as a basis for building new knowledge. When individuals share a similar language and experience base, they can communicate more efficiently and increase their expectation that knowledge transfer will bring benefits that exceed costs, and thus increase their motivation to share and absorb knowledge (Phelps, Heidl, and Wadhwa 2012).

FSOs in USAID are likely to share common language and experiences among themselves and with DC-based technical staff, especially staff with common technical backgrounds. The E3 Bureau recently commissioned an assessment of USAID's environment staff learning needs through the Environmental, Communication, Learning, and Outreach (ECO) project; the response from one Mission environment staff reported frequent trouble communicating with senior Mission leadership due to differences in technical background:

> *I think there is a pretty significant deficiency in environmental knowledge… among senior leadership. [Mission Environment] team leaders need to justify things to these senior leaders, but they have trouble knowing the technical knowledge (e.g., biodiversity and climate change), communicating the messages, and finding the support in the absence of this. Some senior leaders are bridging that gap to know more about the environment.* (ECO 2014)

FSNs engaging with FSOs or FSNs from different countries may encounter language and cultural barriers. FSNs may also have difficulty exchanging knowledge with USAID counterparts in other countries due to different experience bases arising from, among other things, differences in exposure to international travel and work experience outside their own country.

Motivation is also a critical factor that affects knowledge transfer. Motivation is positive when individuals expect learning to produce benefits by addressing pressing knowledge needs and when the benefits exceed the costs of learning; the greater the expected return on learning, the stronger the motivation. Formal incentives, such as recognition and rewards, increase the expected benefits for learning, and therefore, improve motivation (Fey and Furu 2008, Gupta and Govindarajan 2000). Management support for learning and learning activities positively affects the level and quality of knowledge sharing by influencing employee commitment or motivation to exchange knowledge (Lin 2007; Lee, Kim, and Kim 2006). An organizational culture of openness and trust, where staff feel psychologically safe and free to express their ideas and provide constructive feedback, can encourage learning through stronger motivation (Edmondson and Moingeon 1999).

The ECO Learning Needs Assessment identified high learning need across environment sector staff for a wide range of technical subject areas on natural resource management and biodiversity conservation. Although it did not ask specifically about motivation, a number of qualitative responses in the report suggest strong underlying staff motivation to learn, but also limited ability to invest in learning activities due to institutional constraints (see section 2, USAID Peer-to-Peer Learning Efforts) and other, more time-sensitive priorities. Incorporating learning activities in Agency business processes could address some of this challenge and diminish the perception that learning is an optional activity to be addressed after completion of other tasks.

Key informants interviewed about previous and ongoing Agency social learning efforts (see Section 2) described differing levels of senior leadership support for learning at Missions and Regional Bureaus, which indicates a key constraint to expanding learning efforts. In addition to

dampening motivation, a lack of leadership support may also restrict staff participation and the uptake and application of new lessons.

The **availability of staff time to pursue knowledge exchange** is a critical factor that affects an organization's ability to learn. Knowledge cannot be exchanged unless staff can invest time in the relationships, conversations, educational tools, and documents where learning occurs (Wiersma 2007, Nohria and Gulati 1996).

At USAID, limited time for knowledge exchange is a major constraint to learning; short-term priorities tend to dominate Agency staff schedules and priorities (ECO 2014).

KNOWLEDGE RETENTION

Moving or diffusing knowledge through an organization is not a highly valuable end in itself. To complete the knowledge transfer process, knowledge must be retained, embedded in action, and further built on in the knowledge creation process (Argote and Miron-Spektor 2011). This is the adapting stage in USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting approach.

If new knowledge is identified, but is not acted on or retained in an appropriate location, such as a community of practice or commonly used reference manual, then it is likely to be lost or ignored. One key informant in this study noted, "A lesson identified is not the same as a lesson learned" (Baquet 2014).

A number of factors affect how and to what degree knowledge is retained in an organization's knowledge base, which includes reference material and organizational systems, plus the skills, knowledge, and experience of its staff.

TRANSACTIVE MEMORY

Knowledge that is not embedded into actions can still be useful to the organization when it is stored for future reference or application. Knowledge need not be stored in all or even most individuals in an organizational network for it to be part of the organization's knowledge base, as long as the location in the network is widespread knowledge. This understanding of where knowledge is stored, including who knows what, is referred to as **transactive memory** (Wegner 1995).

Decentralized organizations such as USAID often struggle to develop effective transactive memory systems. With more than 9,000 employees, plus thousands more contractors, fellows, and interns (DOS 2014) spread across 108 regional and bilateral Missions, the challenge at USAID is especially difficult. The Agency has attempted to formalize transactive memory in tools such as the Expert Locator System, developed to help Mission and other staff locate subject matter experts in the Agency. The system has failed at widespread adoption and to stay updated as contact information changes. A new tool, *My USAID,* an internal social networking platform intended to facilitate connections among staff across the Agency and be a way for internal teams to share information and documents, is being implemented. Adoption of this tool has been uneven across the different operating units so far; however, many individuals and groups seem to be taking a wait-and-see strategy before integrating the tool.

At present, the organizational transactive memory system functions informally, primarily through social connections. Agency staff have a good sense of who knows what among their close contacts. When expertise is needed beyond what immediate contacts can provide, staff members often seek other connections in their network. This system functions well most of the time, which may explain some of the reluctance to engage with formal transactive memory systems, such as *My USAID,* that might not solve a pressing or frequent need.

A complementary strategy could be to develop communities of practice focused on high-interest specific topics, which would expand and improve transactive memory systems in particular areas of expertise. This approach, however, is likely to work only in areas in which members have a strong subject-matter interest.

ORGANIZATIONAL SPECIALIZATION

An organization's **degree of technical or geographic specialization** affects its ability to retain knowledge. Specialist organizations have been found to be better at retaining new knowledge than generalist organizations (Haunschild and Sullivan 2002, Ingram and Lewandrowski 1996) because specialist organizations have staff with stronger knowledge and experience bases that serve as useful hooks for new knowledge. Without technical knowledge in specific domains, generalist organizations may struggle to identify which new knowledge is important or relevant. Furthermore, generalist organizations may have more uncertainty about a specific piece of new information or knowledge and its future need, and therefore, they may be uncertain about investing effort in storing it.

USAID has operating units that vary along the generalist-to-specialist spectrum. Regional Bureaus comprise geographic specialists and so are likely to be good stores of information about their regional context. Technical Bureaus have technical specialists and are better able to store knowledge of interventions. Administrative units are not likely to store much technical or geographically specialized knowledge outside of their bureaucratic jurisdiction. As such, administrative processes, like project evaluations that turn up important context or technical knowledge but, in some circumstances, do not involve specialist units or personnel, are less likely to generate long-term learning.

In Missions, FSOs and FSNs are likely to behave differently with regard to knowledge retention due to differences in expected career trajectories. FSOs rotate frequently between posts that vary greatly in geographic and technical focus. Although FSOs are usually placed according to technical background, a single staff member over the course of a career may work in a dozen countries and various related, but technically distinct, subject areas. For example, an FSO with an environment background, such as Backstop 40, might move through a series of posts and be charged with supporting projects as diverse as biodiversity, forestry, marine fisheries, clean energy, and climate change adaptation.

As an FSO acquires seniority, he or she can expect to move into administration and management positions. FSNs tend to remain in their home country throughout their USAID careers and focus in fewer technical areas. For these reasons, FSNs are likely to be more effective knowledge stores for technical information and institutional knowledge in Missions.

FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE STORAGE

Knowledge can be stored in different places in an organization, including people, technology, routines, and documents and document repositories. Organizations use a combination of all of these storage media, depending on the qualities of the knowledge and the institutional context. Most knowledge can be stored in more than one form, with tradeoffs in advantages and disadvantages, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of various knowledge storage methods

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individuals	Default location for new knowledge Easy retreival Can store tacit information Can be directly applied, combined with other knowledge to create knowledge	Degrades over time if not used Can be hard to locate in large organizations Lost when individual leaves organization / sub group Not easily transferred to others
Routines	Improves efficiency of teams through specialization Capable of storing tacit explicit knowledge Operalization of knowledge into actions	Resistant to change Can become disconnected from original conditions in which they were successful When codified or dictated through hierarchy, can reduce flexibility and adaptability of individuals to apply knowledge
Technology	Knowledge doesn't degrade over time Knowledge is resilient to staff turnover	Can only store explicit knowledge Constrains knowledge to those who can use the technology Risk of knowledge loss if equipment fails
Repositories	*Same as with technology, but also:* Knowledge can be distributed to large groups cheaply	High maintenance / curation costs Difficult to locate knowledge Difficult for individuals to extract knowledge from documents

Source: Adapted from Easterby-Smith 2011

People are the default storage location for most new knowledge in an organization because they are good at storing tacit knowledge, especially when it is related to the navigation of complex social, political, and environmental systems. People are also effective at knowledge retrieval, especially in remembering who knows what.

The risk in storing knowledge in people is that they might leave the organization or sub-group, causing significant knowledge loss to the organization. Also, while people are good at storing tacit knowledge or expertise, they are not good at storing information, and their capacity is extremely limited for storing data. Individuals cannot communicate with large numbers of people without some degradation of information (Easterby-Smith 2011). People are not always willing to share their knowledge with others, such as when withholding knowledge provides them with increased status or power or when they are limited by the time they can dedicate to knowledge sharing. People are one of an organization's most expensive assets, and increasing organizational knowledge storage capacity by adding people is rarely economical.

To some extent, storing knowledge in groups of people rather than in individuals can mitigate these drawbacks. Groups are less susceptible to knowledge loss through turnover than individuals are. Also, groups forget less quickly than individuals do (Easterby-Smith 2011). It can, however, be difficult and costly to transfer knowledge among individuals, especially the kind of knowledge (tacit) that is most commonly stored in people.

An **organizational routine** is a "pattern of behavior that is followed repeatedly, but is subject to change if conditions change" (Winter 1964). As individuals in an organization carry out tasks as part of their day-to-day activities, they develop patterns of collaboration among themselves. These patterns are a form of tacit knowledge that is held by a group rather than an individual. An example is the advantage that a sports team gains from playing together as a group for an extended period. Over time, players gain an intuitive understanding of how teammates will react in certain situations, such as a breakaway in soccer, which is leveraged to optimize collaboration, with a pass across the field to where a teammate is expected to be ready to score. In an organization such as USAID, project teams develop an understanding of each member's needs, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses that can be used to efficiently coordinate tasks.

Some knowledge embedded in routines can be codified, for example, into standard operating procedures or training manuals, but much routine knowledge is causally ambiguous, too complex, or situation-dependent to be worth the effort of documenting. The addition, loss, or movement of team members in an organization or group temporarily disrupts routines or degrades team performance, although occasional changes in the team may prompt groups to reexamine and update routines to present conditions (Easterby-Smith 2011). High turnover in Missions likely reduces the efficiency of teams but increases the return on investment of efforts to codify routines

so that new team members can more quickly pick them up. Agencies with significant movement and turnover of staff, like USAID, can benefit from codifying rules and procedural guidance.

The disadvantage of storing both tacit and explicit knowledge in routines is that they can be resistant to change. Patterns of behavior become ingrained in habits and can become disconnected from the original conditions in which they were developed (Argote 2011). Occasionally, routines need to be examined, understood, and adapted, which can be a difficult process given the involvement of multiple people and considerable causal ambiguity that can exist about the effects of individual actions (Easterby-Smith 2011).

Another challenge is that routines are sometimes dictated by senior leaders and then spread through hierarchical structures to individuals throughout an organization, which can lead to inefficiency when dictated routines do not closely match the realities project teams face.

Technology, another form of knowledge storage, has the benefit of being immediately accessible and also retaining knowledge without degrading. Thinking tools, such as Marxan software (Watts et al. 2009) and Miradi software[5] are examples of knowledge stored as technology. These software packages provide templates and analytic tools that help organizations and individuals model natural systems (Marxan) or the relationships between conservation targets, threats, and potential strategies (Miradi). While data and information must be entered in the software, the software itself contains large amounts of stored knowledge in its code that allows users to perform tasks that would be considerably more time consuming or difficult without the software.

The danger in storing knowledge in technology is that technology usually has higher upfront costs and is more difficult or expensive to update or adapt to new situations. Technology is, therefore, most appropriate for knowledge and situations that are less likely to change in the future. While technology has the potential to store vast amounts of knowledge, accessing and using this knowledge often requires another kind of knowledge itself: how to operate and maintain the technology. If knowledge of how to use the technology is scarce or difficult to master, then access to the knowledge can become restricted or bottlenecked. Worse, if knowledge of how to use the technology is lost, then the knowledge contained in the technology will also be lost.

Documents[6] and document repositories are another method of storing explicit knowledge, such as published journals, books, guides, and video tutorials, and their storage facilities, such as libraries, databases, and websites. Recording and storing knowledge as documents and repositories ensures the knowledge remains accessible, at least theoretically, to all individuals with authorized access, regardless of staff turnover. Although limited to explicit knowledge, repository access can be diffused widely through an organization without the communication loss that can occur when individuals pass the information person to person.

As with technology, documents and repositories can be difficult to update and change because documents are added continuously to repositories, but outdated or irrelevant documents are rarely removed. As a result, repositories become cluttered and inconsistent filing can make it difficult to find and sort documents. Even when a search finds relevant documents, learning can be hampered from a lack of capacity to understand the document and evaluate the relevance of the knowledge for a specific purpose and the user needs time and motivation to study the material. One in-depth review found that “The repositories in knowledge management systems seem more valuable when the task is routine and employees do not have other sources of knowledge than when the task is uncertain and employees have other sources of knowledge” (Argote 2011).

USAID maintains several knowledge repositories, such as the *Development Experience Clearinghouse,*[7] *Learning Lab,*[8] *Agrilinks,*[9] and the *Natural Resource Management Portal*

[5] www.miradi.org
[6] References to documents in this section includes all kinds of explicit, storable media, such as audio files, videos, and presentations.
[7] https://dec.usaid.gov/
[8] http://usaidlearninglab.org/
[9] http://:agrilinks.org

(RMPortal),[10] and users often struggle to find relevant information. The ECO Learning Needs Assessment found that staff more frequently rely on colleagues and Google to find information and knowledge. One USAID staff member commented that, "All too often, knowledge repositories become knowledge cemeteries, where considerable effort is expended to develop materials that are promptly ignored or forgotten" (Baquet 2014).

Despite the challenges, explicit knowledge is a valuable resource that needs to be created, captured, and stored in a place that is accessible to all organization members.

PROMOTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Because numerous complex, interrelated factors affect organizational learning capacity, various strategies are needed to improve learning conditions. Since the concept of organizational learning emerged in the 1980s, businesses, governments, and nonprofit organizations have adopted strategies to improve knowledge transfer, which some organizations have used successfully. For example, Chrysler Motors cut design cycles for new vehicles from five years to two-and-a-half years through a restructuring of the organization. Parts teams that comprised engineers that designed similar parts for all cars were reconfigured into platform teams with mixed specialty personnel who worked together to design and engineer a specific kind of car, such as SUVs or economy cars. Platform teams built on members' specialized experience through a shared vision that focused on a single product. These teams were complemented by dozens of informal tech clubs, informal groups of engineers with similar skills and expertise, such as brakes, transmissions, and aerodynamics, which promoted continued knowledge creation and diffusion of specialized knowledge instead of concentrating knowledge in individual parts teams (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). Another concrete example is described in Collison and Parcell (2001). A drilling engineer for British Petroleum (BP) noted on the company's intranet a new drilling technique that resulted in dramatic improvements in performance. The technique was picked up the next day by another BP drilling team across the world, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars in productivity gains.

Learning promotion comes with costs and risks that need to be weighed carefully against potential benefits. Costs include actual expenditures on learning activities, such as conferences, staff training, and website development, plus staff time that could be spent on other activities; in other words, learning versus producing. In promoting learning, the risk is that efforts will not produce sufficient tangible benefits to justify their costs. At times, overly ambitious efforts can lead to learning fatigue among staff because people are frustrated by a lack of benefits from learning, and so they turn away from learning-related activities.

An organization's capacity to learn is not unlimited. Codifying knowledge is costly and follows the law of decreasing marginal usefulness. The number of strong-tie relationships that a person can build and maintain without undue distraction is limited, which restricts the amount of tacit knowledge that can be transferred by individuals directly. The time that individuals can devote to knowledge creation, transfer, and retention is constrained by the priority of learning in the organization in relation to other activities. Organizational factors, such as hierarchical structures and established routines, also constrain individuals' and sub-groups' ability to change behavior and actions at the organizational level to incorporate new knowledge (Levitt and March 1988).

The next section describes previous and ongoing Agency efforts to improve knowledge transfer, best practices, challenges, and limitations on the promotion of organizational learning in USAID.

[10] http://:rmportal.net, http://lms.rmportal.net/

2 USAID'S SOCIAL LEARNING EFFORTS

The Agency's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) has taken steps to address factors that affect organizational learning at USAID. The most significant effort has been the development of a Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework that has been incorporated in recommended guidance for Agency project development. CLA encourages Missions to develop a plan to improve coordination and collaboration with development partners, test promising new approaches, build on what works, and eliminate what does not during implementation of all stages of the program cycle. In addition, PPL has developed internal-facing (ProgramNet) and external-facing web (Learning Lab[11]) platforms to share information and resources on CLA and the program cycle and host small groups, known as "communities of practice," where people with similar professional interests can connect with each other, build relationships, and exchange knowledge.

Various social learning efforts have been tried in the technical sectors, many of which are still ongoing. A wealth of knowledge and experience has already been generated throughout Agency operating units. To pull these experiences together to build on best practices and avoid common challenges, Measuring Impact staff conducted a small-scope research initiative using key informant interviews with individuals who are deeply involved in these efforts. The focus of the interview questions was exclusively on the social learning efforts and challenges encountered in rolling out and sustaining them, rather than on knowledge-generation efforts, such as research, assessments, and portfolio reviews, because they are more relevant to organizational learning and the spread of new information and knowledge through the organization.

INTERVIEW METHODS

Key informants were initially selected using a USAID-provided reference document (USAID 2013) that summarized learning resources for Missions to prepare Country Development Cooperation Strategies. From this document, researchers selected and incorporated relevant social learning efforts to represent an intersection of sectors and a mix of efforts that covered internal USAID audiences and external audiences (see Table 2). During the first round of interviews with staff involved in these learning efforts, researchers solicited additional examples of successful efforts and a second round of invitations was sent out.

Interviews were conducted August 11–November 17, 2014, and each lasted about an hour. Interviews were semi-structured along a topic guide, shown in Appendix A, focused on the effort's purpose, history, membership, knowledge management, challenges, and impacts.

Table 2: Summary of social learning efforts in key informant surveys

Learning Effort Name	Type of Learning Effort	Sector
Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group	External	Environment
Agrilinks	External	Agriculture
Climate-Smart Agriculture Interagency Working Group	Internal (U.S. Government)	Agriculture, Environment
Combating Wildlife Trafficking Working Group	Internal	Environment
Feed the Future Feedback	External	Knowledge Management
Food Animal System Team	Internal	Agriculture
Food Security and Nutrition Network	External	Agriculture
FRAMEweb	External	Environment

[11] http://usaidlearninglab.org/

Groove Network	External	Value Chain Development
K4Health and Global Health Knowledge Collaborative Practice	External	Health
Knowledge Management Reference Group	External	Knowledge Management
Learning Lab	External	Knowledge Management
Multiple internal and external USAID learning efforts	Both	Agriculture
Resource Management Portal	External	Environment
The Sustainable Conservation Approaches in Priority Ecosystems (SCAPES) Learning Component	External	Environment

INTERVIEW RESULTS

USAID's learning efforts have been aimed at two distinct audiences: (1) internal, often organized as working groups or task forces, and (2) external, aimed at partners and the larger development community. Internal- and external-facing efforts are distinct and feature different goals, budgets, strengths, and weaknesses (see Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison of internal and external social learning efforts

	Internal	External
Goal	To accomplish a specific task or responsibility, such as coordination	To share learning and knowledge explicitly
Budgets	Minimal, usually zero	Extensive, with multiple full-time staff, ability to develop and maintain sophisticated online resources, and sometimes sub-grants provided to members for learning activities
Strengths	Small group size and history of frequent interaction, which makes it easier for groups to form strong bonds	Resources ensure leadership and facilitation capacity throughout the life of project
	Similar experience base eases communications and knowledge transfer	Large, diverse membership provides a constant source for news, information, and new knowledge
	Common internal communications platforms make it easy to get started and quickly come together	Better able to develop and maintain online platforms and document repositories
Weaknesses	More susceptible to staff turnover due to small size, which can remove core staff and result in knowledge loss	Large group size and unfamiliarity of individuals in groups makes it hard to form strong bonds
	Limited staff time for facilitation and leadership creates risk of stalled progress	Differences in experience, culture, and language increase transaction costs, which makes it harder for members to learn from each other and decreases motivation
	Difficult to pull in outside experts and partners due to possible procurement sensitivity	Geographic distance and technological problems, such as different web platforms, can make it difficult to bring people together online or off
		Diverse membership makes it hard to identify and develop material that is highly relevant, novel for numerous participants

This analysis separates these two types of efforts into sub-sections. The interview results are organized by common themes of membership, activities, learning agendas, challenges, and impact and sustainability.

INTERNAL-FACING EFFORTS

Internal groups tend to form quickly in response to a specific event or challenge, such as a new presidential priority like combating wildlife trafficking or to an international crisis that requires Agency action. Usually, the explicit purpose of these groups is not learning, but to accomplish a specific project or to contribute to a longer-term aim, such as improved collaboration across offices, sectors, or agencies. While not an explicit goal, however, information and knowledge exchange features prominently in the activities of these groups and has even become a driving factor in keeping many of these groups together. While many task forces and working groups begin with a specific objective, separate from learning, they often evolve for knowledge sharing after initial tasks are completed.

MEMBERSHIP

Internal groups usually involve a small number of staff (3–30) that share a similar technical specialty or focus, often in the same technical office, although sometimes the groups are cross-sectoral, such as the Gender Working Group and the Combating Wildlife Trafficking Working Group. Usually these groups comprise staff who know each other well and already have well-developed trust and social capital, which contributes to strong motivation for learning and reduced transaction costs.

ACTIVITIES

Depending on the priority, internal groups may be assigned significant short-term resources, such as temporary full-time staffing, for facilitation. At other times, internal groups may have no full-time staff; instead, they are led by staff who are personally motivated to participate in activities and carry them out. Aside from the highest priority task forces, funding and dedicated staff time can be difficult to acquire, which means these groups piggyback on existing USAID internal communications infrastructure and activities that tend to be limited to phone calls, email groups, and in-person meetings. The frequency of activities varies across groups and across time although there is a general pattern of frequent activity soon after the formation of the group, which then tapers off over time. This happens both with high-priority task forces as temporarily assigned staff return to their original assignments and with lower-priority groups that have staff turnover and waning motivation over time.

Notable exceptions are the Inter-Agency Working Groups included in this survey. Both the Climate-Smart Agriculture and Combating Wildlife Trafficking Inter-Agency Working Groups have been able to continue regular meetings and phone calls for several years. The continuing high priority of these issues in the U.S. Government and the fact that both groups have staff that are formally tasked part-time to facilitate the groups are contributing factors to this success.

LEARNING AGENDAS

A learning agenda is defined as “a set of questions related to an organization’s work that, when answered, will help the organization work more effectively” (USAID 2014). USAID’s PPL recommends that a learning agenda be developed for networking efforts to focus learning efforts on priority needs (USAID Learning Lab 2014). This aids knowledge retention by focusing knowledge creation and sharing around those activities that would most benefit from the new knowledge. When collaboratively developed, a learning agenda can also help to keep groups motivated and engaged because the groups closely align the knowledge creation and transfer with the interests and needs of members.

Because learning is not usually the primary emphasis of internal-focused groups, they rarely have explicit learning goals or an articulated learning agenda; however, they usually do have specific tasks that they need to accomplish, which has the effect of keeping discussions and knowledge-exchange moving toward the group’s top priorities.

CHALLENGES

Internal social learning efforts encounter several challenges. The most frequently cited was the limited ability of these groups to maintain focus and participant interest over time. For many groups, after initial tasks are completed or as other priorities emerge, the groups struggle to maintain participation in activities and accomplish longer-term objectives. Staff turnover is also a

major threat to the functionality of these groups. As staff rotate through positions in the Agency, they often leave the working group and are not always replaced. When they are replaced, new entrants can struggle to catch up with the group, leading to reduced benefit from participation and, therefore, reduced engagement. Bringing new members up to speed can also act as a drag on the group, slowing knowledge transfer as energy is shifted from learning back to building a common knowledge base.

A general lack of resources for internal groups also affects members' longer-term engagement and participation. With few exceptions, internal groups lack travel and meeting budgets, which prevents them from bringing people from distant operating units for in-person meetings. Internal efforts also usually lack group-specific knowledge repositories or other online tools that would facilitate longer-term knowledge storage. Although these knowledge repositories or other online tools could be developed on top of already existing sites, such as the Learning Lab, Agrilinks, or the Resource Management Portal, some leaders felt they did not have the time to do so on their own.

Another challenge is that internal groups are sometimes unable to include outside experts or partners in internal groups. One interviewee expressed it this way:

> *Because of potential issues with the sharing of procurement-sensitive information, we weren't able to really bring external (to the Agency) experts into the group. We could ask them to give presentations, but we couldn't ask them to help us work on specific issues or collaborate on a vision for the agency related to their area of expertise. This limited the usefulness of the group because we (the USAID staff) all basically knew the same things. What we needed were the ideas that the experts had that we didn't have* (Yazman 2014).

The Climate-Smart Agriculture Interagency Working Group has had a similar challenge. It is an interagency organization with limited membership drawn exclusively from the U.S. Government. In the future, the group would like to find ways to engage with outside experts and organizations as a way to further its impact; however that would require more resources dedicated to facilitation and communications.

IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Because of their informal nature, internal-facing groups do not measure the impact of the collaboration or learning except indirectly through tracking progress on specific tasks or deliverables. Despite this, anecdotal evidence is plentiful that these groups do provide highly valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange across sectors, operating units, and Missions. The fact that some of these groups have maintained cohesion for more than a decade, despite some major challenges, speaks to the genuine value they provide their members, despite their many challenges, as expressed by another interviewee:

> *The working group has stayed together for five years and continues to meet regularly, add members, and evolve. People stay engaged because they get a lot of value from the group, either in technical assistance, links to helpful resources, or connections to experts. Moreover, the topic as a whole is gaining attention at higher levels so people feel like engaging with the group provides a way of participating in the shaping of the development agenda of the sector* (Ngugi 2014).

EXTERNAL-FACING EFFORTS

USAID has been a major supporter of social learning efforts in the development sector for several decades. For example, one knowledge management effort, K4Health that is included in this study, can trace its history to 1973 when it was first conceived and launched by USAID.

All of the external-facing efforts covered in this study were supported by USAID funds and implemented by contractors or grantees. Budgets for these efforts range from several hundred thousand dollars a year to a few million dollars a year. In contrast to the internal groups, the external-facing efforts usually make knowledge exchange and learning an explicit, if not top, objective.

MEMBERSHIP

External-facing efforts usually target a general audience that includes implementing partners, host country government agencies, and the broader development community. These efforts tend not to do much active marketing or recruiting for their websites and activities. Rather, they rely on word of mouth and collaborative activities with implementing partners to reach their target audiences. With membership in the hundreds and sometimes thousands of users, this proves to be an effective strategy.

In these projects, the implementing partners facilitate group discussions, organize events, curate content, and lead website design and maintenance. USAID staff provide technical support and overall direction to the projects. Implementing partners are asked, and in some cases are required through their grant or contract agreements, to participate in events and online discussions and provide occasional content. Aside from implementing partners, participation in these efforts by individuals and organizations is usually voluntary. A notable exception to this is the Groove Network, where members' contributions were supported in part by USAID funds in exchange for contractual obligations to participate and achieve predetermined learning goals.[12]

ACTIVITIES

Most efforts use a similar suite of activities. All have a website that serves as a document repository, online meeting place, and posting place for news and events. Most also regularly host webinars, online seminars, or video presentations to focus their audiences' attention and reach out to a wider group. Online discussions, either through the chat function during webinars or on online discussion boards, provide an opportunity for peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. Email groups (listservs) reach out to the full membership base and draw members into discussions or alert them of news or upcoming events.

In-person meetings are also common. These provide the best opportunity for members to exchange knowledge, build social ties, and accomplish group-focused tasks. Every interviewee mentioned the importance of in-person meetings to the successful functioning of the learning effort. A selection of these comments appear in Box 1.

> *"In-meetings are where the real learning and knowledge exchange happens."* (Harlan 2014)
>
> *"There is always huge motivation for people attending the Knowledge Exchange Meetings (in-person); on-line, we just haven't been able to get close to that level of engagement."* (Coonan 2014)
>
> *"We could keep things moving slowly along online, but the physical meeting is where we really got everything done and create all the value."* (Szabo 2014)

Box 1: Interviewee quotes on the importance of in-person meetings

LEARNING AGENDAS

The Groove Network was the only effort to use a learning agenda that included specific questions to guide knowledge exchange activities. Members' experience, expressed by another interviewee, was positive:

> *The learning agenda kept the group focused on the questions that were of high importance to everyone. This kept us focused on products and outputs of value to the whole group, rather than exploring the interests or particularities of each member's experience. As a result, by the end of the project we had more knowledge and experience to share not just amongst the group but also with the larger development and private sector community* (Szabo 2014).

Several other external-facing efforts did have priority areas for research and learning; however, these were not put into specific questions. An example is the Food Security and Nutrition

[12] The Groove Network was a particularly well-documented social learning effort. More information on the history and experience of this effort is available at https://www.microlinks.org/learning-marketplace/notes/note-groove-learning-network-value-integrated-value-chain-programming-and

Network, which has seven priority technical areas, each with its own section on the website and a corresponding task force that works to create guides, handbooks, and other resources related to the topic. The Network has found this way to organize learning was less effective and is seeking changes, as described by one interviewee:

> *We've had limited engagement on the technical areas, probably because they are too general. We're now thinking to move towards a focus on "interest areas" which would be chosen by members and would be more specific and relevant than the technical areas* (Coonan 2014).

Even without formal learning agendas, all the groups regularly make decisions about what information and knowledge to highlight for research and sharing, which forms a sort of ad hoc learning agenda. Without making key questions explicit, it is harder to direct inquiry toward issues with the most relevance and importance to the larger group.

CHALLENGES

The external-facing groups encountered similar challenges in promoting learning and knowledge exchange. These can be divided into challenges to engage the target audience and those on the tools used to support learning.

MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Engagement challenges were the most significant. These centered on generating and maintaining participation in online learning. An example from one interviewee summarized the problem this way: "We can post news items and discussion questions and send out emails all the time, but if the material isn't relevant, or if the people don't feel comfortable with each other, then nothing happens and there's very little learning" (Pierce-Quinonez 2014). Another interviewee said:

> *Content, by itself, is not enough to fully catalyze learning. Processes that socialize and contextualize knowledge (e.g., learning groups, training, shared workspaces) are also needed to give the content meaning and prepare people to apply it* (Hessmiller 2014).

In contrast, people are much more willing to participate and engage with each other at in-person events. One interviewee said, "The Food Security and Nutrition Network [in-person] events are well attended and really important because people arrive motivated and willing to learn and share" (Coonan 2014).

Adding evidence to this sentiment, one group lost the ability to hold face-to-face meetings because of budgetary constraints and consequently experienced a significant change in member engagement. "After the meetings stopped, we lost a lot of the motivation of the members and the website became more of a document library and webinar platform than a peer-to-peer learning tool" (Schmidt 2014).

In-person meetings are not a complete solution for learning, however. One effort focused primarily on annual meetings to the exclusion of an online community of practice, which led the group to feel that important learning opportunities were missed without the ability to continue coordination and knowledge sharing beyond the annual meeting (Ferris 2014).

A combination of in-person and online events seems to be the best practice, as stated by another interviewee: "A lot of our work takes place at the meetings where we'd develop work plans and outline tasks. We can then work together online to accomplish tasks and produce deliverables" (Harlan 2014).

A number of groups have found ways to improve online engagement and get knowledge exchange going online, summarized in this interviewee quote:

> *We've found that a good way to gather participation in online discussions is to organize them as time-bounded events centered on a webinar presented by an expert. The expert will then participate in the online discussion. This helps them*

> *to get acquainted with the audience and their needs and also draws members into discussions related to the webinar* (Jhasti 2014).

When groups have succeeded with online engagement, they've found that this happened when information or discussions were of a practical nature, summarized here: "People are looking for practical knowledge they can use for their projects or put into their next funding proposal" (Coonan 2014). Another interviewee found that people were more interested in working on real problems rather than more abstract learning-focused discussions:

> *My big takeaway from managing the group was that learning efforts need to be focused on operational knowledge, stuff people can use immediately, to be successful. The most active groups on our site were those that focused on operations (compliance, logistics, bureaucracy). Also, people like to engage in real problems, not hypotheticals* (Schmidt 2014).

Several respondents said the key to maintaining engagement and participation was to develop a solid understanding of the knowledge needs and interests of the target audience and make sure that social learning efforts remain focused on these, summarized by this interviewee:

> *My advice to someone starting a learning program would be to take a careful survey of needs of members and member organizations before starting. It would be good to be very systematic about this to avoid wasted time and missteps. We are now much better at discovering members' needs so we that we can respond effectively* (Harlan 2014).

Online Platform

After online engagement, the most frequently cited challenge was technical difficulties with the online platform. A previous FRAMEweb coordinator expressed an example:

> *Initially, we had a poorly managed wiki site that didn't engender much collaboration, but was used successfully for content management. Then, we switched to larger, contractor-managed site, but this turned out to be more of a burden than anything else because of technical difficulties and how long it took for us to make updates to the site. Discussions never really took place on the site. Instead, we just focused on calls, emails, and Adobe Connect, which seemed to work fine* (Schmidt 2014).

To address these challenges, one interviewee suggested, "It would be more effective to focus on building small communities of practice using whatever online and offline tools are available and that you know work well than to spend a lot of energy on a big new web platform with every bell and whistle that you can imagine" (Coonan 2014). Mirroring this sentiment, a USAID knowledge management specialist commented:

> *It's important to let your tools grow organically out of the needs of your group. Some of the bigger websites out there are great, but they are great because they grew out of smaller sites. There are also bigger websites out there, which are not great. I think because they started big and got disconnected from the groups they were designed to support* (Baquet 2014).

Monitoring and Feedback

Another important challenge is that individuals and organizations that participate in learning efforts often lack rigorous data or information to share. Monitoring and evaluation often focuses on performance measures, project inputs and outputs, rather than results, project outcomes. When results are shared, they are rarely gathered rigorously with results attribution to project activities. This means that participants are limited to sharing anecdotes and impressions, which are certainly valuable, but lack rigor and are more prone to being influenced by mitigating factors, making their general applicability less clear.

Simply collecting data is not enough to ensure effective feedback for learning and adaptive management. Monitoring should focus on performance indicators, outcomes, and testing

assumptions along a project's theory of change. To be relevant and useful for project teams, data should be linked to critical expected outcomes or key questions and generate lessons for sharing across sites. If data are not relevant and useful, then data collection can drain resources without providing much benefit, summarized by this comment:

> *All of the partners were doing monitoring at their respective sites and even gathering data into standardized templates. However, the data being collected wasn't closely connected with the priority learning topics or key questions, so it made only a limited contribution to learning* (Ferris 2014).

IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

To measure the impact of these efforts, most of the outward-facing groups collect regular feedback through various methods, including focus groups, interviews, and email forms. These tools help groups better understand the needs and interests of the users. For example, FRAMEweb carried out key informant interviews with members who started practical problem-oriented discussions in the forums. The interviews sought to understand how well peer support was being integrated into people's work. One respondent summed it up with the following comment: "We got varied responses: sometimes the user-provided responses weren't that relevant, but other times people reported significant, positive impacts" (Schmidt 2014). This technique is similar to the Outcome Harvesting technique[13] that the Agrilinks team plans to use, where surveys and focus groups will seek to discover the outcomes that have resulted from learning that took place as part of Agrilinks activities or communities of practice.

The Groove Network took a unique approach to monitoring and evaluation. It used learning journals to collect information on learning results quarterly at the individual and organizational levels. Then, after the project, key informant interviews at the industry level attempted to discover the post-project effects that had occurred at a larger scale.

In general, performance metrics for social learning efforts were used only internally to measure performance and guide the direction of activities. None of these efforts have so far attempted a formal analysis of their impacts. As a result, interviewees could provide only indirect, qualitative descriptions of the impact of their efforts. Following is a selection of these descriptions:

- *"Since we started the working group, the subject has really taken off as a hot topic within the Agency and the Agriculture sector. It's hard to know how much of this is attributed to our work specifically, but I'm sure that bringing experts from across the USG together regularly to discuss and work just on this issue has certainly had an impact"* (Ngugi 2014).
- *"The working groups have kept people focused and proactively thinking about the issue. They keep everyone motivated as we learn more about the scale of the problem, hear feedback on project implementation, and get news on successes. We are more effective as a group than as individuals"* (Carlson 2014).
- *"Groove's broader impact (extending beyond its funding period) was most evident in how it identified and leveraged existing networks where members could build on the trust, relationships, and technical learning that was established in the learning network to share that out with other industry partners. Groove members and the learning agenda that began in the network have helped to shape ongoing conversations in sectoral working groups like the Market Facilitation Initiative several years after the Groove officially ended"* (Szabo 2014).
- *"We know that people are getting value out of the webinars and other tools because we can see the web metrics. We know that people are coming to the site and accessing the information and it's an order of magnitude more people than just those who participant in the webinars on the day when we have the event"* (Jhasti 2014).

[13] More information on outcome harvesting is available at Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning's Learning Lab website, http://usaidlearninglab.org/e-consultations/e-consultations-resource/outcome-harvesting.

- *"As the reputation of our organization has grown, we've begun to see more participation at events from higher-level NGO staff and government authorities. In Gabon, for example, we recently saw senior ministry officials participate in our in-person events. This provides a direct conduit for new knowledge to reach the real change makers and also shows that senior officials are interested in learning when you find the right topic and have a good reputation for providing value"* (Mutu 2014).

On the sustainability of these efforts, all of the outward-facing social learning efforts rely on implementing partners through time-limited funding mechanisms to maintain online platforms, facilitate groups, organize in-person and online events, and generally push forward the day-to-day tasks for these efforts. Due to their large operating budgets and the Agency's limited ability to hire additional staff, it would not be possible for these efforts to be subsumed in the Agency's own direct activities. As a result, the sustainability of these efforts rests entirely on the continued USAID support for them through time-limited contracts, typically five years.

Only a few groups that were interviewed indicated that they were looking into alternative funding sources from other donors and none were looking into membership fees or other fundraising mechanisms that would move them away from donor dependency. When future funding is insecure, such as in the case of FRAMEweb, the risk is that these efforts will lose their membership base, summarized in this quote:

> *"Towards the end of the contract, we saw engagement drop off as people weren't sure what would happen afterwards. They were reluctant to invest time in an online community that might not exist in a few months"* (Schmidt 2014).

On the other hand, when USAID provides good effort support and an expectation of continuity is established, people are more motivated to invest time and energy in social learning efforts, as summed up in this quote: "After 40 years of continued operations, the users have come to depend on the news, resources, and tools available through K4Health in a way that makes the site indispensable to the global health development sector" (Harlan 2014).

Not all social learning efforts need to set an expectation for long-term engagement. As groups address priority knowledge needs with their Learning Agenda, new questions might be added; however, if new questions are of low priority for members, then the Learning Group should move to diffuse knowledge already gained and then close down until or unless new high-priority questions arise.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE SOCIAL LEARNING EFFORTS

Building on the results from the literature review and key informant interviews described in the first two sections of this paper, this sections outlines clear, actionable recommendations for the development of future USAID learning efforts, especially in the E3/FAB's Cross-Mission Learning Program.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOGNIZE DIFFERENT CHALLENGES FOR INTERNAL- AND EXTERNAL-FACING LEARNING EFFORTS

Social learning efforts that are focused on Agency groups tend to have difficulty sustaining activities over time because the efforts often lack facilitation resources and dedicated staff time. These efforts tend to involve few people and suffer from staff turnover more acutely than external-facing efforts, which usually engage many more people.

External-facing efforts, supported by several Agency operating units, are run by outside implementing partners. With dedicated staff and resources, they can maintain consistent leadership and online presence. The main challenge for these efforts is maintaining participant engagement, especially through online platforms. This challenge stems from how efforts draw participants with wide-ranging interests, even within sectors, from large geographic areas, which makes it hard to identify content that is relevant to a large number of people, while also being specific enough to be novel and interesting.

Recognizing where internal and external efforts experience challenges should allow organizers to address these issues proactively. For example, internal efforts might invest in a dedicated facilitator, possibly a contractor. External efforts, on the other hand, might try to organize participants into smaller groups along similar interests or key questions to better filter the identification and delivery of materials to relevant sub-groups.

FOCUS ON THE PEOPLE, NOT THE PLATFORM

Knowledge transfer structural factors are often given priority when social learning efforts are initiated and online platforms developed. Online tools across a broad spectrum of technological sophistication are being used for learning. With rare exception, however, the tools themselves were not described as critical factors to either success or failure. Instead, the tools were more often noted for their drawbacks, such as inflexibility rather than for their positive characteristics. It is clear that high-tech tools are not a strong pull factor to acquire or maintain user engagement.

Activities that allowed development of personal relationships were cited as most useful for transferring knowledge, particularly in comparison to online engagement methods. For example, more social activities in a network, including in-person meetings, peer-to-peer discussions on online forums, and webinars, were highlighted repeatedly as critical factors in promoting member engagement. While online tools present an important opportunity to engage disparately located groups in collaboration and learning, the case for these should not be overstated. Knowledge exchange requires trust, motivation, and common language and knowledge bases. Experience has shown that these factors are harder to develop in online environments. Consequently, the Cross-Mission Learning Program should resist investing in expensive web platforms or other tools until a demonstrated need for them emerges. Many needs can be adequately fulfilled by already-available tools, such as Google sites, webinars on Adobe Connect, and email groups.

RETAIN KNOWLEDGE NOT ONLY IN DOCUMENTS

Previous social learning efforts commonly began with a strong focus on capturing learning for storage in documents and document repositories. As these repositories grew in size, however, organizers began to question their value, especially when repositories became cluttered and difficult to search and sort. As a result, many of the learning efforts now emphasize multimedia outputs, such as webinars, short videos, and infographics that are more accessible and engaging to target audiences.

Knowledge can also be stored in groups, technology, and organizational routines. Future efforts should aim for knowledge retention improvement by diversifying knowledge storage among

multiple knowledge storage tools. Communities of practice or learning groups can be established and facilitated, technological tools can be developed when appropriate, and the research and learning results can be disseminated practically in clear language to targeted audiences, including the organization's leadership, to make uptake easy.

It is not appropriate or feasible for all Agency staff to learn or retain all knowledge that is generated. Instead, knowledge should be channeled to people who need it and can best apply and retain the new knowledge. Improving connections among staff across the Agency will make it easier to direct knowledge to those who need it and others in the group who can retrieve it later as new needs arise. With targeted knowledge sharing, focusing on who knows what, and when, can improve the retention and retrieval capacity of the entire group.

CULTIVATE MOTIVATION

Maintaining motivation was a significant challenge to all social learning efforts reported in the study. Future efforts might foster motivation through a two-pronged strategy of (1) focused attention on a core group of supporters and (2) incentives developed to further encourage participation and engagement.

Focus on Core Groups

Future social learning efforts should identify the most interested and engaged participants and focus on their learning needs, while also investing in knowledge dissemination and products that are relevant to broader audiences. This strategy aimed at core engagement would also provide benefits for the larger group with varied interests, an audience that is harder to focus on strategically.

Efforts to develop and maintain a core group need to focus closely on members' needs and adapt quickly to changing membership. The best practice is frequent in-person meetings that draw out core supporters and provide direct value through peer-to-peer learning and professional network development. In addition or in place of in person meetings, key informant interviews and member surveys can help group organizers to keep pace with members' needs. However, interview results can be conflicting or hard to translate into concrete actions, and core members can be hard to distinguish from peripheral members.

Motivate Through Incentives

Social learning efforts should look at ways to improve institutional incentives to participation. Many USAID staff face a difficult challenge in getting permission from supervisors to participant in learning events. Acquiring support and buy-in of senior-level staff should increase opportunities and motivation for other staff to invest time and resources in learning. Support can be encouraged by targeted communications to senior staff and through collaboration and coordination with other Agency efforts, such as those being promoted by the Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning. Senior staff support should be highlighted and communicated to potential learning group members to encourage further participation.

A possible strategy to address this would be to collaborate with the Office of Human Resources to allow staff to acquire Continuous Learning Points (CLPs) through participation in Learning Program activities. The Federal Acquisition Certification-Contracting Officer's Representatives Program requires that USAID staff with contracting responsibility acquire a minimum of 40 CLPs every two years, roughly equivalent to 40 hours of training or learning. The Learning Program could facilitate CLP acquisition for participation in certain activities, which would be a strong incentive for participation and reduce supervisor reluctance to approve staff participation in Learning Program activities.

BUILD ON EXISTING EFFORTS

Several social learning efforts, such as FRAMEweb, Climate-Smart Agriculture Inter-Agency Working Group, and Food Security and Nutrition network, were built on existing informal efforts. Capitalizing on existing efforts provides a shortcut to developing a core group of active participants.

For example, the Combating Wildlife Trafficking Task Force is an existing group with a listserv that brings together experts from inside and outside the Agency for monthly calls. The Agency's high priority for this subject area means a large group of individuals is already interested in generating and sharing lessons. The Task Force could benefit substantially from the development of a parallel learning group in the Learning Program because the program could provide additional facilitation, curate online resources, and supplement research capacity.

Record Learning Outcomes, Not only Knowledge Products

Key informants had difficulty citing specific, concrete examples of how their efforts had created value for target audiences. Informants could point to a long list of events and documents their teams developed; however, none reported tracking progress on the use and uptake of knowledge by their members or the impact learning has on project outcomes and beneficiaries. It is these ultimate learning impacts that best illustrate the value that is created by social learning efforts. To maintain support for learning activities, it is important for efforts to track impacts on people, decisions, and actions, well beyond merely keeping track of documents produced or workshops held.

Outcome mapping or outcome harvesting is a technique to capture some social learning effects and provide valuable feedback to improve programming. By cataloging specific examples of impacts, leaders of these efforts could make a stronger case for continued funding to stakeholders, such as funders, supervisors, and supporters. More information on outcome harvesting for learning and knowledge management activities is available in Rassman, Smith, Mauremootoo and Wilson-Grau (2013).

Keep Focus with Learning Agendas

With the exception of the Groove Network, all of the groups interviewed lacked a formal learning agenda to direct their learning activities; however, all of the groups regularly make decisions about what information and knowledge to highlight for research and sharing. These decisions themselves form a sort of ad hoc learning agenda, although without specific questions, it is harder to direct research on the most relevant and important issues to the larger group.

The Cross-Mission Learning Program should aim to collaboratively develop learning agendas for specific topic areas to meet members' priority knowledge needs, make it easier for groups to filter and identify information with the highest relevance to the larger group, and focus group activities. As relevant information is developed for learning agendas and tangible results are produced, member engagement should increase.

Strengthen the Link between Project-level Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems provide feedback on the impacts of actions and the quantity and quality of project lessons generated by project activities. While M&E systems are required for most projects, they are rarely tied to key learning questions, which means missed opportunities for new knowledge creation. One participant in the SCAPES learning program summarized this in an assessment:

> *It would have been better if there was a more strategic approach to adaptive management as a learning topic. We should have focused more on M&E as a learning mechanism and integrating the Theories of Change from the beginning* (Ferris 2014b).

M&E systems that focus on key tracking results in a theory of change and address questions that test assumptions underlying that theory can provide evidence to inform adaptive management of interventions, while speeding identification and verification of new lessons. By designing M&E[14] approaches to support the Agency's commitment to systematic learning and use of evidence,

[14] The Forestry and Biodiversity Office and Measuring Impact, in consultation with the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning Guidance, during 2015 is developing research on best practices in designing monitoring and evaluation to support systematic learning and best practices in implementing the USAID Program Cycle. See also Margoluis and Salafsky 1998.

clearer lessons can be generated and compared across projects to improve USAID's investment in effective conservation and development approaches across its portfolio.

Encourage Collaborative Implementation

A possible strategy to address difficulties both in motivation and staff availability to participate in social learning efforts is to pair staff from different operating units in a Mission (for example Environment Officers and Health Officers) who would benefit from knowledge exchange. The pairs could work together, such as to design projects and associated learning agendas and, where possible, manage projects with cross-sectoral objectives and information needs. With collaboration on project design and implementation, staff from different operating units will spend more time interacting, building stronger relationships, and exchanging knowledge. Also, the process of co-creating new knowledge will provide distinct opportunities to embed knowledge from different operating units in their actions and knowledge stores.

The Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group has taken this principle to heart by requiring all of its projects to be jointly implemented by at least two member organizations. According to one of the organizers, this is a major impetus for knowledge exchange:[15]

> *When multiple organizations work together, they can't help but share knowledge. They come together often, form collaborative relationships, and trade knowledge about the specific project at hand, as well as other related projects* (Mutu 2014).

USAID regional and sub-regional projects also provide an important avenue for learning. They bring together staff from multiple Missions and other donor and partner institutions to collaborate on defined tasks.

> *Cross-Mission learning is happening every day in the regional and sub-regional projects, which bring together staff and experts from across sectors, Missions, and other institutions. The purpose of these projects is not learning, but it's a very important side effect that emerges from the meetings and activities* (Resch 2014).

Although this cross-Mission communication and collaboration is occurring in several regional USAID Missions, the opportunity for systematic learning has not been fully realized in the absence of agreed learning agendas and learning group facilitation. The Cross-Mission Learning Program could help regional programs realize the potential for cross-site learning through facilitation of learning groups.

Encourage Participation by Foreign Service Nationals Staff

FSNs and Third Country Nationals do not change positions as frequently as FSOs, and they tend to stay in the same country for most, if not all, of their careers. These staff often work directly with implementing partner organizations and host country beneficiaries over many years. As a result, they generate and acquire context-specific knowledge frequently and their specialization and work focus helps them store new knowledge. Although these staff have extensive knowledge, their opportunities to share it are limited, compared with FSOs. They have fewer training and professional development opportunities and language skills can be a barrier to communication with people outside the host country because English is often their second, third, or fourth language in non-Anglophone countries.

In recognition of their critical role in knowledge creation and storage, social learning efforts should designate more resources for FSN's and Third Country National's capacity building. Those efforts should also encourage FSNs to participate in professional development and other learning opportunities, such as the Cross-Mission Learning Program or the FSN Fellowship Program, which provides temporary assignments for FSNs in Washington, DC, to learn from headquarters staff and share knowledge with them.

[15] Knowledge exchange is not the only reason that the Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group requires joint implementation. The group also believes that joint implementation promotes better coordination and more strategic resources deployment, which leads to broader impact on shared target landscapes.

APPLICATIONS TO THE CROSS-MISSION LEARNING PROGRAM

Table 4 summarizes how the Cross-Mission Learning Program will apply these recommendations. More information on the Learning Program is available at "The Framework for the Measuring Impact Cross-Mission Learning Program."[16]

Table 4: Integration of recommendations in the E3/FAB Cross-Mission Learning Program

Recommendation	Application to Cross-Mission Learning Program
Recognize different challenges for internal- and external-facing learning efforts	The Learning Program will primarily be an internal-facing group that calls on outside experts as needed. The program provides facilitation assistance and ongoing technical support to collaborative learning groups that have similar small, focused learning interests.
Cultivate motivation	Motivation will be developed by closely tailoring events and activities to collaborative learning groups' high-priority needs. Activities will expand or contract according to members' availability and to match core group participant capacity. When feasible, opportunities for in-person events will be pursued to develop social capital and foster peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. The Learning Program will also investigate the use of incentives, including possibly CLPs for USAID staff to improve motivation and buy-in. The Learning Program also will seek out feedback and modify efforts to respond to group learning needs and priorities.
Keep focus with learning agendas	Learning agendas will be developed collaboratively with learning group members. Agendas will consist of specific high-priority questions for all members. Where possible, learning agendas will be aligned with M&E systems to strengthen links between learning and the Agency's performance management processes. As groups address priority knowledge needs through learning agendas, new questions can be added. If new questions are lower priority for members, then the learning group should diffuse knowledge already gained and then close down until new high-priority questions arise.
Understand that knowledge is not retained only in documents	The Learning Program will use various methods and media to transmit knowledge. While it is inevitable that documents will be created, efforts should attempt to distill significant ideas into concise, focused products that target learning needs. Infographics, webinars, and in-person meetings will be used when appropriate to make information more easily digestible. Efforts will be made to use collaborative learning groups, software, and individualized training to diversify knowledge storage beyond documents. Knowledge about who knows what will be cultivated and shared so that knowledge can be channeled to the people who can best use and retain it.
Focus on the people, not the platform	The Learning Program will focus on building connections among people and developing a supportive environment for learning online and offline. Online tools will begin with low-cost, easily deployed tools that are already familiar to most members, such as Google sites, Adobe Connect, and email. More advanced tools, such as a data management system, will be deployed only if a clear priority need is identified.

[16] A draft version of this document is available from Measuring Impact. Contact Shawn Peabody at speabody@enviroincentives.com.

Build on existing efforts	Efforts will be made to reach out to existing and previously existing groups using platforms such as RMPortal, FRAMEweb, and Agrilinks. The Measuring Impact team will reach out to other groups that have explored cross-Mission learning, such as the SCAPES project, or those that appear to be poised for cross-site learning for possible inclusion in the Learning Program.
Record learning outcomes, not only knowledge products	A Mission engagement log will be developed to record learning activities outputs and outcomes.
Encourage collaborative implementation	When possible, the Learning Program will encourage participants to collaborate on learning activities implementation.
Encourage FSN staff participation	Special effort will be made to include FSNs in collaborative learning groups and ensure that their voices are heard and materials are appropriate for different language levels. This idea would also extend to implementing partners, when appropriate and feasible, because these organizations also have local experience. Language and Internet connectivity may impose some limitations.
Strengthen the link between project-level monitoring, evaluating, and learning	The USAID Biodiversity Policy and updated Biodiversity Code require that biodiversity-funded projects include a theory of change and indicators to measure progress along that theory of change. E3/FAB, through the Measuring Impact initiative, is helping Missions implement these new requirements in project design and monitoring and evaluation. The Cross-Mission Learning Program will complement these efforts by (1) helping learning groups write learning agendas that align to project M&E systems and (2) providing technical assistance in managing M&E data to inform learning.

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APPENDIX A: TOPIC GUIDE FOR KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

I work for E3/FAB's Measuring Impact project which aims to increase USAID's capacity to design, monitor, evaluate, and improve the impact of biodiversity conservation and natural resource management programs. One of the core programmatic strategies of Measuring Impact is to "Improve Biodiversity Conservation Approaches" with the overarching goal that E3/FAB and the Missions engaged with Measuring Impact have a greater understanding of conditions under which priority conservation interventions are effective. To accomplish this, Measuring Impact is working with FAB to design and implement a "learning program" to systematically capture and share learning across the USAID biodiversity portfolio.

Learning from past experiences in order to improve future actions has been a top priority of USAID for decades. A number of approaches to learning and knowledge management have been and are being tried within the Agency, with varying results. The purpose of our discussion today will be for us to gathering information about your experience to inform the design and rollout of our learning program. The final report should also be helpful for other learning programs that are designed in the future at the Agency.

1. Basic Information
Date:
Name of interviewee:
Name of network:
Purpose of network:

Brief overview of history:
What needs was the network designed to address?
What are the expected outcomes of the network?
Was there an informal network before the formal network came into being?

- Was there a contractor who helped get things going, generate or moderate content, etc.?
- What was the role of USAID staff vs. 'partner staff' vs. learning contractor staff (if any) in terms of keeping the network going?

2. Membership

How are members chosen/selected/recruited?

Did members usually know each other before joining?

- Do members work together in other capacities?

To what extent do members share a common knowledge / experience base?

- Do you have issues with miscommunication (different technical backgrounds / vocabulary, languages, etc.)?
- Have you taken any action to improve the quality of discourse?

How has membership changed over time? (why?)

- How do you deal with member turnover?
- Have you taken any actions to recruit more diverse members?

Has motivation of members to participate changed over time?

- What are main motivators / de-motivators?
- How does the network keep people involved?
- What benefits are members receiving from participation? (formal or informal)

What action have you taken to improve the direct communication among of members?

- Which has been most important?
- Have you seen impacts of these actions on participation in the network?
- Tips / challenges

Do members have a good sense of "who knows what?"

- How did this come about? Are there any group actions that support this kind of knowledge?
- Tips / challenges?

What was the balance of contributions among different populations within USAID – was this mostly Washington driven or mission driven, were the participants mostly Foreign Service Officers (Americans), FSNs, contractors, etc.?

3. Learning Agenda

Do you have a specific learning agenda? (Focused set of questions that the network actively works to answer)

How was your learning agenda originally developed?

How has this changed over time (why)?

4. Knowledge and Knowledge management

Knowledge

Describe the kinds of knowledge that is most often being shared?

- News
- Stories / Anecdotes
- Research results
- Data

How is knowledge identified for sharing?

- How is knowledge managed (captured, stored, accessed, shared)?
    - Tips / challenges?

Knowledge Management

Where is knowledge/ information being stored?

What sort of knowledge do members search for most frequently on the repository?

If you had to design the repository again, what would you do differently?

5. Impact

How are members applying knowledge gained through the network? (and how do you know?)

How do you monitor /evaluate the impact of the network?

Can you give me some examples of the impact you saw as a result of the network?

APPENDIX B: LIST OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Learning Effort Name	Key Informant	Position	Interview Date
Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group	Kamweti Mutu	Program Officer, Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group	9/30/14
Agrilinks	Marisol Pierce-Quinonez	Knowledge Management Specialis, Feed the Future Knowledge-Driven Agricultural Development (KDAD)	8/11/14
Climate-Smart Agriculture Interagency Working Group	Moffatt Ngugi	Program Analyst, Bureau for Food Security, USAID	10/20/14
Combating Wildlife Trafficking Working Group	Sara Carlson	Biodiversity and Natural Resources Specialist, E3/FAB USAID	10/2/14
Feed the Future Feedback	Aruna Jhasti	FTF Feedback Coordinator, KDAD	8/15/14
Food Animal System Team	Jim Yazman	Livestock sciences specialist, Bureau for Food Security, USAID	8/13/14
Food Security and Nutrition Network	Patrick Coonan	Knowledge Management Officer, CORE Group	8/15/14
FRAMEweb	Sarah Schmidt	Former Assistant Program Manager, CK2C Project (current: LEARN DCOP)	10/2/14
Groove Network	Brandon Szabo	Senior Associate, Knowledge Management, Engility/IRG	9/5/14
K4Health and Global Health Knowledge Collaborative Practice	Sarah Harlan	Learning Director, Knowledge for Health Project, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health	9/10/14
Knowledge Management Reference Group	Monica Matts	Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning Specialist, USAID	9/19/14
Learning Lab	Cydney Gumann, Ashleigh Mullinam	Knowledge Management Specialists, KDAD	9/5/14
Multiple internal and external USAID learning efforts	Zachary Baquet	Knowledge Management Specialist, Bureau for Food Security, USAID	9/9/14
Multiple internal and external USAID learning efforts	Tim Resch	Africa Bureau, USAID	9/29/14
Resource Management (RM) Portal	Rosanne Hessmiller	CEO, Ferguson Lynch	9/18/14
SCAPES Learning Program	Meredith Ferris	Training Consultant, Training Resources Group Inc.	11/17/14