THE PROGRAM CYCLE
LEARNING STUDY

Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations
from Four Missions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

Data collection involved four main activities:

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

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

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

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

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

The report details five conclusions:

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

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

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

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

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

The report makes the following five recommendations:

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

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

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

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

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

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