Learning Agenda Workbook for Food Security and Nutrition Programming

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Learning Agenda Workbook for Food Security and Nutrition Programming

The Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Program is the USAID/Food for Peace-funded learning mechanism that generates, captures, disseminates, and applies the highest quality information, knowledge, and promising practices in development food assistance programming, to ensure that more communities and households benefit from the U.S. Government's investment in fighting global hunger. Through technical capacity building, a small grants program to fund research, documentation and innovation, and an in-person and online community of practice (the Food Security and Nutrition [FSN] Network), The TOPS Program empowers food security implementers and the donor community to make lasting impact for millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

Led by Save the Children, The TOPS Program draws on the expertise of its consortium partners: CORE Group (knowledge management), Food for the Hungry (social and behavioral change), Mercy Corps (agriculture and natural resource management), and TANGO International (monitoring and evaluation). Save the Children brings its experience and expertise in commodity management, gender, and nutrition and food technology, as well as the management of this 7-year (2010–2017) U.S. $30 million award.

Contents

Acknowledgments

The Learning Agenda Workbook for Food Security and Nutrition Programming is based upon the materials and exercises developed for the TOPS FSN Network Knowledge Management (KM) Task Force "Learning Agenda Workshop[1]," which was held in late 2016 in Washington, DC. The idea for the workshop came from the participants of another TOPS FSN Network KM Task Force workshop, "Developing a Knowledge Management Strategy[2]." During this workshop, participants expressed an interest in wanting to know more about the process of creating and the uses for a learning agenda. The "Learning Agenda Workshop" was developed to address this knowledge gap. Members of the TOPS FSN Network KM Task Force were instrumental in helping to create the workshop curriculum by sharing their knowledge and experiences. Participants who attended the workshop added to the collective knowledge and helped to further refine the information required to develop a learning agenda for food security and nutrition programming. These contributions serve as the basis for this workbook. We would especially like to thank the following KM Task Force members and workshop participants[3]:

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1. Information and materials for the TOPS FSN Network "Learning Agenda Workshop" can be found at https://www.fsnnetwork.org/learning-agenda-workshop
2. Information and materials for the TOPS FSN Network "Developing a Knowledge Management Strategy Workshop" can be found at https://www.fsnnetwork.org/developing-knowledge-management-strategy-workshop
3. Names and organizations listed as they were in December 2016.

I. Introduction

Welcome to the Learning Agenda Workbook.

This workbook will take you through the steps involved in developing a learning agenda for your food security and nutrition program. Through guidance, discussion questions, worksheets, and case examples, we hope you will be able to determine the best approach for your program.

Questions are provided throughout this workbook to lead you through the process of thinking about what learning your program needs.

We provide examples in the annexes of this workbook of end products and processes. They are intended to provide ideas, but the direction you take should be determined by your program's context and learning needs.

II. What is a Learning Agenda?

A learning agenda is **a set of learning questions or themes around which a food security and nutrition program commits to generating and sharing lessons in order to build knowledge to improve programming**. Learning agendas help programs:

- Prove or disprove assumptions within their theory of change;
- Shape research and evaluation plans;
- Improve program implementation;
- Increase the overall evidence base.

There is no 'one size fits all' learning agenda and no 'right' approach to creating one. What matters is what knowledge is needed and important for your program's context.

"But aren't we already doing learning?" This is a common question when the concept of learning agendas is presented. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and knowledge management (KM) have a built-in learning component. How is this different?

How is a learning agenda different from a(n)[4]:

Evaluation Plan – Learning agendas can shape evaluation plans to ensure that the appropriate learning questions are being answered through monitoring and evaluation efforts. A learning agenda is broader in scope than an evaluation plan and may include questions that can't be easily answered by an evaluation. Learning agendas ask questions and seek answers long before a set mid-term or final evaluation. An evaluation agenda does not help teams identify game changers or think through possible scenarios prior to or during implementation.

Knowledge Management (KM) Strategy – Knowledge management is the process of creating, sharing, using, and managing the knowledge and information of a program. Learning is one element of a KM strategy; however, the KM strategy goes beyond the learning agenda to include components of communication, knowledge sharing and capture, and information management. Knowledge management efforts overlap with organizational learning, but KM has a greater focus on the management of knowledge as a strategic asset and an emphasis on encouraging the sharing of knowledge. For more information on building a KM strategy, see "A Guide to Developing a Knowledge Management Strategy for a Food Security and Nutrition Program" at http://www.fsnnetwork.org.

4. Adapted from materials from USAID LEARN, CRS, and TOPS

Theory of Change (ToC) – A theory of change makes clear how and why certain actions will produce desired changes in the environment. The learning agenda should pull from the theory of change to identify assumptions and key questions related to the causal logic that need to be answered in order to improve a program. Learning agendas address issues beyond theories of change by drawing from a program's KM strategy and M&E plan. For more information on theories of change, please see "Theory of Change: Facilitator's Guide" at http://www.fsnnetwork.org.

> **Practitioner Tip:** *"Yes, we are learning, and learning has been a part of individuals and organizations for a long time. However, **what is different now is the intentionality of learning.** The essential point of a learning agenda is to develop an explicit set of learning commitments and a plan to tackle them."*
> *- Guy Sharrock, CRS*

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Plan – Learning agendas are one potential activity within a larger CLA plan. For more information on CLA, explore the USAID Learning Lab at https://usaidlearninglab.org/.

Annexes 1 and 3 provide examples of learning agendas created for two different contexts. Annex 2 provides a case study of the Productive Safety Net Program Plus (PSNP Plus) Project, a three-year USAID-funded pilot project in Ethiopia. The PSNP Plus Learning Agenda (Annex 1) consists of a series of learning questions that served to validate the project's causal model or hypothesis to ensure that interventions selected had the best chance of creating the desired change.
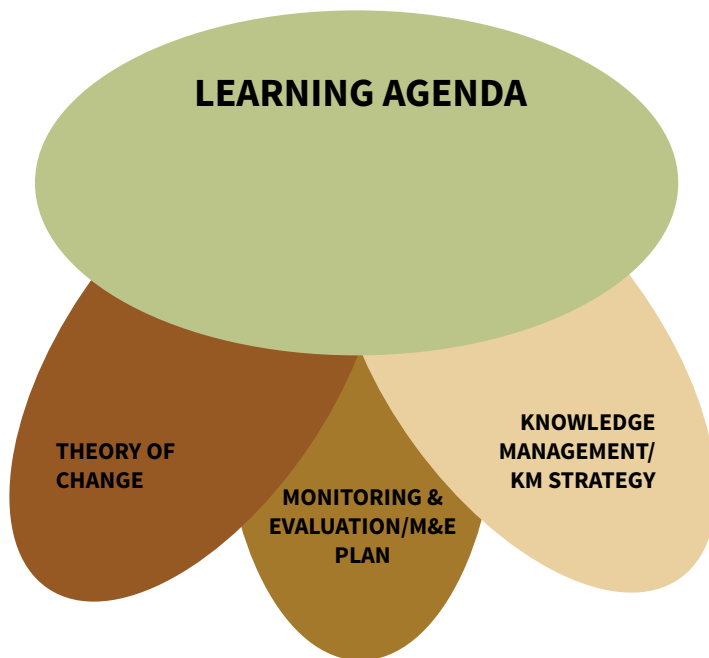
Annex 4 shows the process the USAID Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) used to create their learning agenda. The DRG Learning Agenda (Annex 3) consists of research questions that focus on generating evidence and testing assumptions and theories of change that contribute to the overall effectiveness of DRG programming. This brochure provides an example of the final themes and learning questions selected for 2016.

LEARNING AGENDA

THEORY OF CHANGE

MONITORING & EVALUATION/M&E PLAN

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT/ KM STRATEGY

There are several notable contextual differences in these learning agendas. The learning agendas were created for distinctly different purposes. The PSNP Plus agenda (Annex 1) serves to validate a project's causal model or hypothesis in order to ensure that the interventions selected have the best chance of creating the desired change. The DRG agenda (Annex 3) was created to generate evidence through the stimulation of original research to affect overall DRG programming. The audiences for the learning agendas are also very different. PSNP Plus is a USAID-funded project and the document is intended for project staff and partners involved in implementing the agenda. DRG is a Center within USAID and their document is meant to be read by an external audience trying to understand their priorities and learning directions.

Read the two examples in Annex 2 and 4 and think about how each is similar or different from your program's context.

What is the context of your food security and nutrition program? Who is the audience for your program's learning agenda?
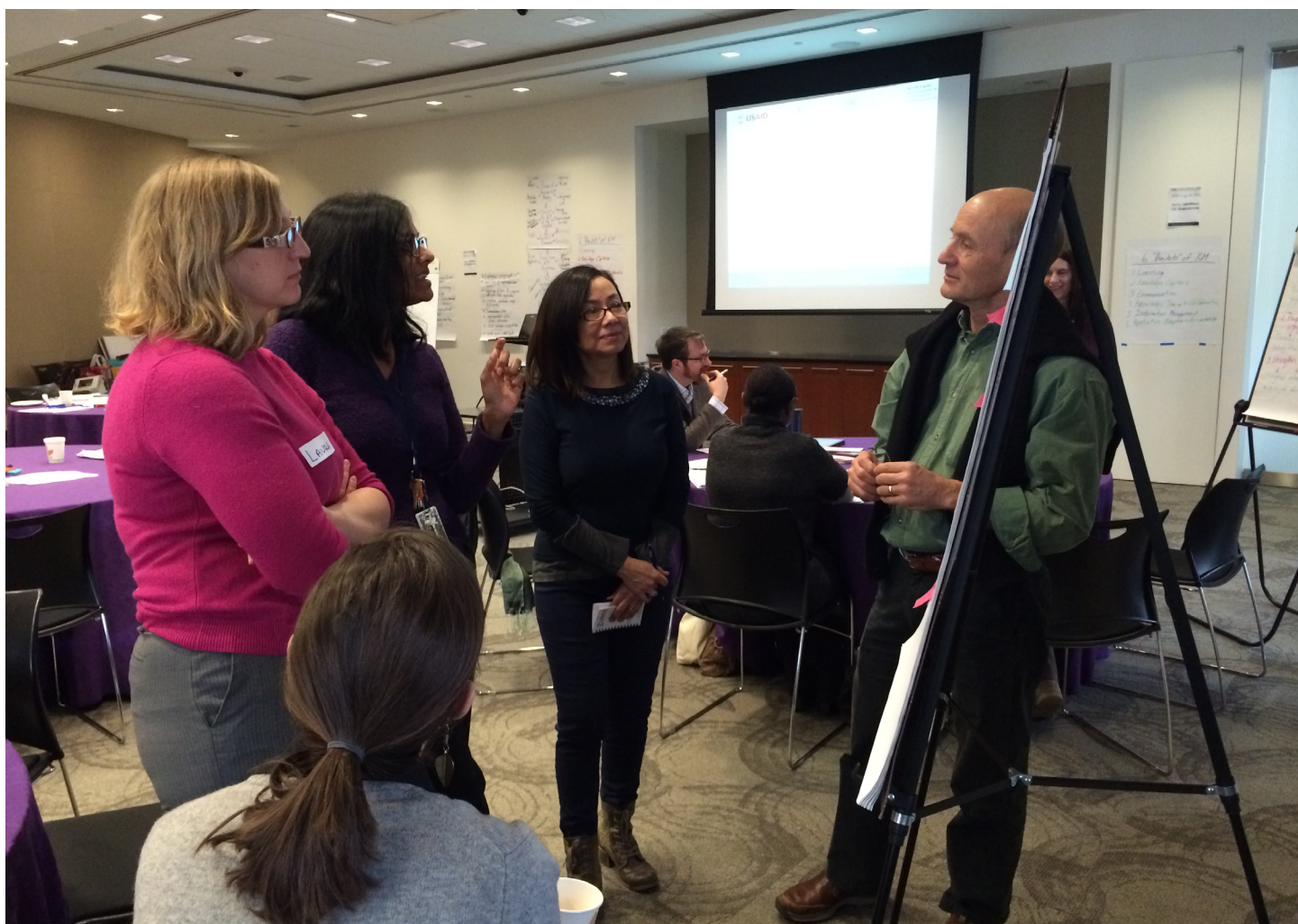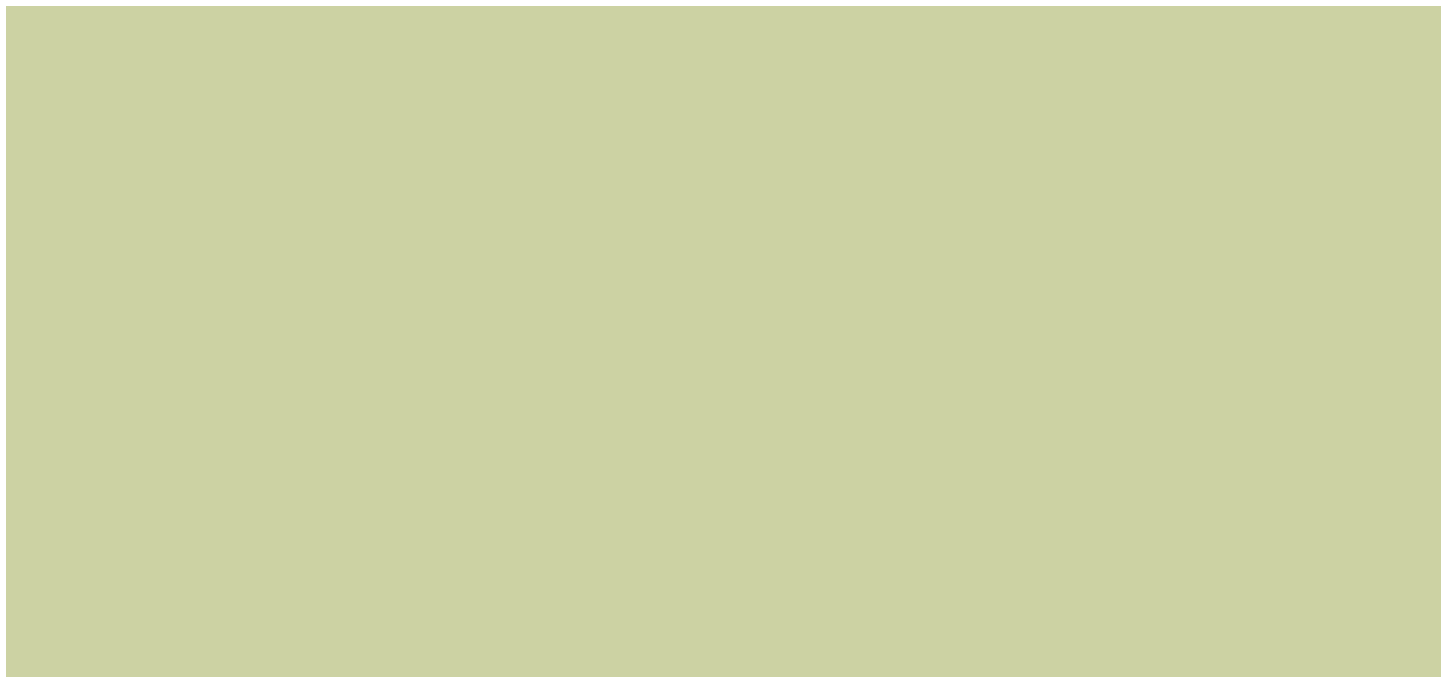
III. How is a Learning Agenda Created?

After you determine the context and audience for your learning agenda, the next step is to establish the process to create the agenda.

The design of the overall process and the level of involvement are critical to success. Resistance is ensured when the learning agenda is dictated by someone else. The best-written learning agenda won't go anywhere if stakeholders aren't involved in its development and therefore don't own the final product. However, there is also the challenge of balancing involvement with moving forward.

In this section, we'll look at the process for developing a learning agenda:

- What do you have to build from?
- Who should be involved in the planning process?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- How will you design the overall process?

Based on your program's context, which parts of the PSNP Plus and DRG processes can you use and/or adapt to create your learning agenda? What other tools and mechanisms are needed for process development?

Let's start by asking several questions. There is a worksheet at the end of this section that provides a place to record your thoughts and plans.

1. **What is the primary purpose of the learning agenda? Why is it being developed?**
   This question is an essential starting point and will drive all future decisions. Do you need to evaluate the causal logic of your program's theory of change to ensure the activities are affecting the right type of change? Is there something you need to know to ensure/improve program results? Are there important gaps in your technical understanding that are important for influencing project implementation? Are there programmatic, political, or donor priorities that need to be considered?

2. **Starting point: What exists? From what will the learning agenda build?**
   Learning agendas should never exist in a vacuum. What do you already have and how will the learning agenda complement and build on this? Will you be starting from a theory of change and organizing questions within this framework? Will you be reviewing your program design and identifying critical gaps in technical understanding or questions that will guide future decision making? Will you be checking a KM strategy to examine the effects of knowledge sharing and capture on program learning? Do you already have some research or evaluation questions that are important in the design of your program and from which you want to build? Are there larger learning themes that have been established by your donor to which you want to contribute?

   > **Practitioner Tip:** *"Inclusivity in the development of learning agendas is crucial in order to drive buy in and ownership. Ensure that you have the right representation in the room during the development process and that your process is inclusive and participatory. In this way, the learning agenda is seen as everyone's business/responsibility and everyone (in theory!) will be committed to its implementation and success"*
   > *- Yemisi Songo-Williams, The TOPS Program, CORE Group*

3. **Who should be on the planning team?**
   The planning team is an essential part of the overall learning agenda creation process. **The planning team is responsible for engaging stakeholders, determining the agenda's format and action plan, aligning political and budget support, and guiding the implementation effort**. While the planning team manages and coordinates the creation process, they do not determine the content of the learning agenda.

   Decisions about who is on the planning team will determine the level of support, who is seen as 'owning' the learning agenda, and the overall 'slant' or direction the process will take.

   If the planning team is made up entirely of staff from Monitoring and Evaluation, for instance, the process, no matter how inclusive it seeks to be, will be seen as owned by M&E and will have a built-in bias towards M&E-focused information needs and questions. The same will be true for any other technical or cross-cutting area.

   Think carefully about who needs to be involved and what is appropriate for your program's context. Your goal is to have a group that is large and diverse enough to bring in the needed skills, contacts, and perspectives, yet stay manageable in size for decision making and action.

What will be the ownership of the final learning agenda? How does the composition of your planning team affect ownership or perceived ownership?

4. **Who should be on the content team?**
The content team is responsible for developing the learning questions or themes that will make up your program's learning agenda. Developing the content for your program's learning agenda requires a group of people with a variety of skills and knowledge. No one person is going to possess every skill required to develop the questions or themes for your learning agenda. You are looking for individuals who collectively have the knowledge and attributes needed to develop your program's learning agenda.

Make a list of the skills needed to develop the learning questions and themes of your learning agenda. Remember to consider your program's context. Some of the skills you may want to consider are:

- People who understand the program's theory of change and/or knowledge management strategy
- People who understand the program's issues and needs
- Staff who are good at managing processes
- People who can facilitate conversations among diverse group members (ex. HQ and field-based staff; different levels of seniority; different technical areas)
- Facilitator who can manage conflict
- Solid technical skills
- Ability to "sell" the importance of a learning agenda within the organization
- Managers who support staff time spent on developing a learning agenda
- Someone with the authority to make decisions

Once the list is completed, ask yourself the following questions to begin the process of identifying persons for the content team.

- Who is already on the program that possesses some of these skills?
- Who can we bring in to help?
- Which technical or programmatic fields need to be represented?

Where do you start to decide who should be on the planning team or the content team?

*We discussed above the importance of building upon what your program already has instead of starting from scratch when developing a learning agenda. Your program's **theory of change and knowledge management strategy** contain information as to the technical and programmatic strengthens and roles and responsibilities of program members. Utilize these resources to begin the process of narrowing down who should be on the planning or content team.*

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5. **Who are the stakeholders and how/when will they be involved?**
Different people and organizations will see the world in different ways, often making assumptions without realizing it. It is important to think about the right people to involve from a broad base of program staff to the right stakeholders across partners; there are important implications for the quality of the learning questions as well as level of buy-in to using the information. Inclusivity should be balanced with ensuring that the stakeholders see their time as well spent. For some, it will be important and useful to include them in an entire workshop. For others, a key informant interview to bring in their perspective may be better. **Use your planning team to think strategically about the role and involvement of various stakeholders**.

In the case of PSNP Plus, project management chose to purposely engage front-line staff in the workshop to ensure that everyone understood the big picture and was empowered to make changes to help achieve the project's goal. In addition to the national and regional level learning agenda, PSNP Plus also engaged grassroots stakeholders in

the learning effort, facilitating a meeting of farmers to come together and share their experiences, learning and methods of adaptation.

For DRG, it was important to involve a cross section of staff within the DRG Center, academics, and USAID Mission staff. They developed "theme teams" around various learning themes, pulling representations from across various technical teams in the Center to ensure a diversity of viewpoints. Theme teams met twice in two-hour sessions to brainstorm questions, group questions by common elements, rank groups and the questions within each group in terms of importance, and work with a "Learning Team guide" to minimize overlap and strengthen question-wording to meet pre-established criteria. In parallel, a handful of academic collaborators undertook the same task in order to complement the DRG questions and add a different perspective. The larger group of stakeholders from within the Washington, DC office and USAID Missions were then requested to weigh in through an online survey mechanism.

6. **When do we start?**
   This is a common question with no one answer. At what point in your program design and implementation process will the development of a learning agenda be most effective? **You want to start early enough so that you can have substantial time to answer the questions and you can design your M&E and KM systems appropriately to be able to feed into the learning questions**. However, you need to balance this timing against the reality that you often don't know the right questions to ask until you start the implementation. What timing is right for you?

7. **How do we plan for and start the process?**
   What needs to be collected and/or developed to facilitate discussion and decision making? People work more effectively when they come prepared to a meeting or workshop with a better understanding of the context, issues, and existing and unanswered questions. Especially in the case of formulating learning questions, the level of critical thought possible will be much greater if the participants are reacting to and building from prepared materials instead of brainstorming questions from scratch. Do you need to start with an environmental scan, literature review, key informant interviews, or targeted survey?

   Think about the ownership, input, expertise, and how to ensure buy-in while still maintaining a viable, efficient process. You may want to engage an external or internal facilitator to help the planning team think through the actual process. **Especially if you choose to conduct a meeting or workshop, exactly how that event is planned and facilitated is essential for success**. The PSNP Plus case study provides an example of a workshop which was very carefully planned to guide participants through a thought process and ensure participatory decision making and action.

   Consider the life cycle of the program and what timing is appropriate for various steps. When are the mid-term and final evaluations? Are there existing meetings or conferences that offer natural linkages, opportunities or targets? How/when will the learning agenda be revisited over time?

   A learning agenda is not a static document and should be re-evaluated regularly in conjunction with your program's theory of change. **Review your learning agenda to see which learning questions have been answered and what new questions have surfaced**.

   Record your thoughts and ideas in regard to these questions in the worksheet on the following pages.

Learning Agenda Process Worksheet

Project context:

What is the primary purpose of the learning agenda? Why is it being developed?

Starting point: What exists? From what will the learning agenda build?

Who should be on the planning team?

Title	Role

Who should be on the content team?

Person	Skills

Who are the stakeholders and how/when will they be involved?

Proposed process - Steps and time line: (Feel free to either write sequential steps or draw a flow chart).

IV. Developing Learning Questions

An essential component of the learning agenda process is the development of learning questions. The content team is ultimately responsible for formulating and finalizing the learning questions, but stakeholders outside of the content team will influence the topics to be covered in the questions. Regardless of the process you use to develop the learning agenda, there are certain requirements that will help ensure that your final learning questions are useful.

There are generally three types of questions:

Type 1: Theories of Change – The purpose of these questions is to test and explore a program's theory of change; specifically, its causal model and assumptions.

Type 2: Technical Evidence Base – The purpose of these questions is to fill critical gaps in technical understanding.

Type 3: Game Changers and Scenario Planning – The purpose of these questions is to identify game changers and develop scenarios.

Good questions are those that:
- Are answerable and realistic in scope
- Lead to answers that will help you make better, more informed decisions
- Are relevant to real work and real-world problems
- Are developed together with those who will be answering
- Ask how, what, where, when, and who

The added value of good questions is that they:
- Stimulate fresh or innovative thinking
- Test hidden assumptions or beliefs
- Generate collaboration, creative action, and new possibilities
- Encourage new and different questions to be asked as the initial question is explored
- Provide potential benefits upon answering that make it worth the effort

Prompts for critiquing learning questions:
- Does the question state clearly what you want to learn? (Is it clear and focused?)
- Is the question likely to stimulate fresh or innovative thinking? (Is it open-ended and arguable?)
- Is the question feasible to answer?

Take a few minutes to look at the following list of questions. Identify what is wrong with each question and rewrite it to formulate a better learning question.

1. **What have been the effects of climate change in Central America?**

2. **Were the farmers participating in the Farmer Field Schools satisfied?**

3. **How can farmers adapt to climate change in Central America?**

1. **What have been the effects of climate change in Central America?**
   This question is an example of the **'Black Hole' error**. It does not state clearly what you want to learn and would involve taking on way too much to be useful for a learning agenda.

   Better example: What have been the effects of climate change on coffee productivity of farms below 1000 miles above sea level in Central America?

   This question is now specific, answerable, and realistic in scope.

2. **Were the farmers participating in the Farmer Field Schools satisfied?**
   This question is an example of the **'term paper' error**. It is not likely to stimulate fresh or innovative thinking and would involve taking on too little to be useful.

   Better example: How effective were the project Farmer Field Schools in developing sustainable production and natural resource management skills?

   This question is now relevant and can help you make more informed decisions about future investments in this approach.

3. **How can farmers adapt to climate change in Central America?**
   This question is an example of the **'Nobel Laureate' error**, or taking on your life's work. It is not feasible to answer.

   Better example: What practices are farmers in Central America currently using to adapt to climate change?

   This question is answerable and realistic in scope.
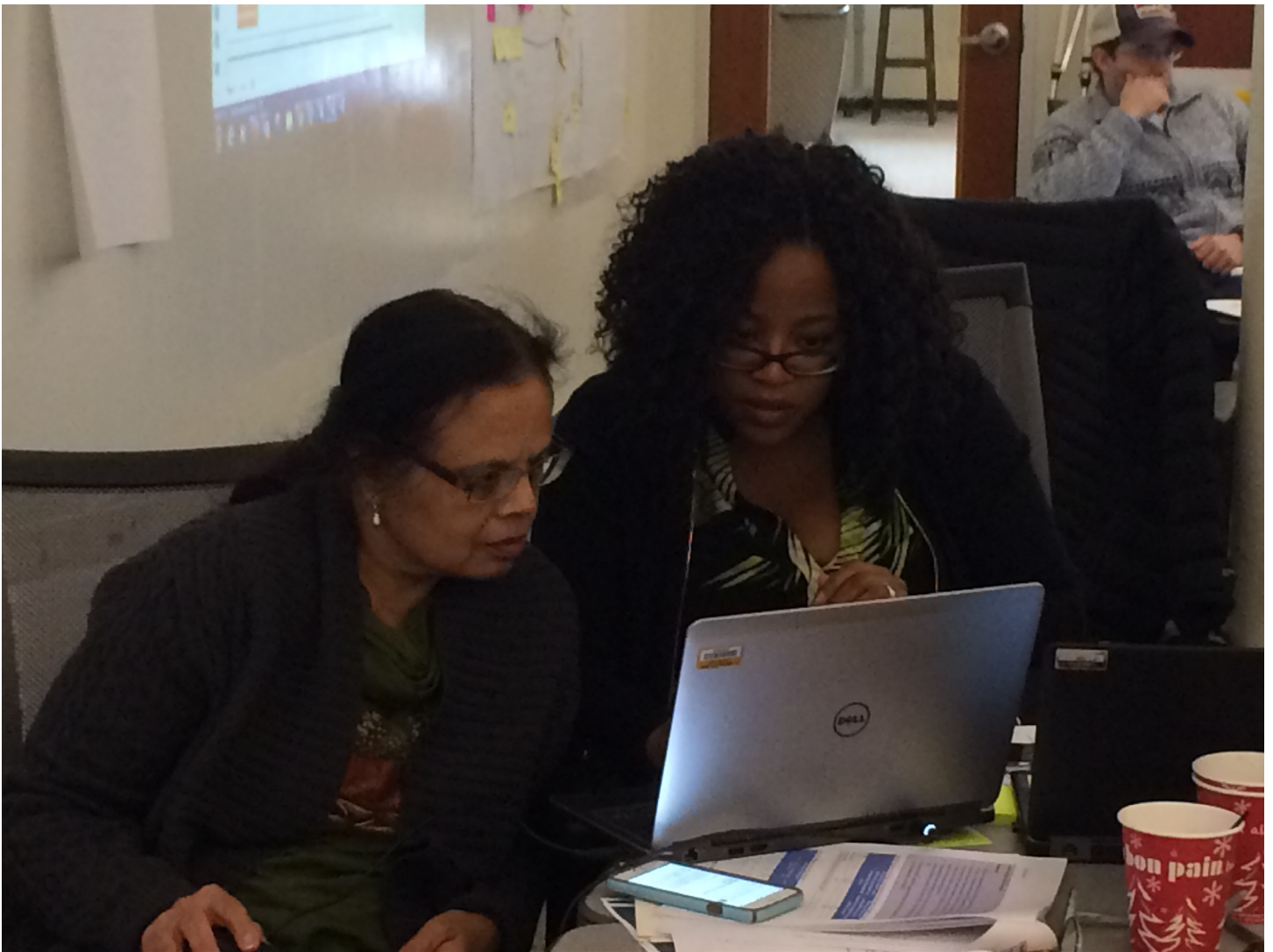
Questions for Discussion:

How many questions are appropriate for your program? What is your program able to realistically take on?

How will you ensure that you're developing new questions and not questions that have already been answered?

How will you align with the external landscape to help develop questions with relevance beyond your own program?

V. Prioritizing Learning Questions

A long list of learning questions can be paralyzing. The content team needs to put in place a good and transparent process to filter through the list and identify the top questions for your program to address within a specific time frame.

While there are many potential processes that can be used, an essential first step is developing clarity on the criteria for prioritization. Examples include:
- Importance, from own perspective
- Importance, from program perspective
- Feasibility
- Urgency

As an example, CRS/Ethiopia (Annex 5) identified the following criteria for prioritizing learning topics and their associated learning questions:
- Relevance to CRS projects
- Availability of internal resources
- Availability of external resources
- Existing M&E data
- Strategic donor importance

Once you know your criteria, you need to determine the best process for your context.

The case studies provide several different examples. DRG used an online survey tool, asking stakeholders in DC and Missions to put each question into one of three buckets (low, medium, and high) based on several different criteria.

In the PSNP Plus workshop, participants worked through several levels of prioritization. They individually ranked the degree to which they thought assumptions were valid and evidence-based. The whole group then voted with sticky dots for those they felt were most important to focus on for the success of the project. Small groups developed learning questions based on the prioritized assumptions and engaged in a progressive voting exercise to identify the most important learning questions. Small groups wrote their potential questions on index cards, organized them, and then selected their top five. They then traded cards with another group and each group picked their top three questions. The top three cards from each group were collected, posted on the wall, and sorted.

> **Practitioner Tip:** *Document the reasons why questions or themes were chosen for the learning agenda. This information will be useful when reviewing and updating the learning agenda.*

In some cases, the process may include a step of reviewing the literature base around a number of questions in order to identify what is already known and where additional information may be useful.

For your program, what are the most important criteria against which to judge potential questions?

What process(es) will your content team use to ensure an effective and efficient selection of final questions?

VI. Planning for Action

Once the learning questions have been selected, there needs to be a concrete plan of action to implement the learning agenda. The planning team is responsible for developing an action plan template that will guide the process of implementation. A good template walks users through a series of questions to guide their thinking, planning, and documentation.

A good template will include:

- An action plan for each learning question
- Decision making around the right amount of time and effort to dedicate to various questions.
- How lessons would be shared (internally, externally, with stakeholders, etc.)
- How lessons would be utilized
- Responsible parties and timelines
- Budget with explicit costs

Annex 6 provides the template used by PSNP Plus for their learning agenda implementation.

In the box below, or in an electronic document, design an action plan template for your project.

One tool to support your action planning is Stakeholder Mapping. The following worksheet can help your group think through the various stakeholders and how their needs should be factored into the action plan.

Stakeholder Mapping Worksheet

Stakeholder group	What do they want to know?	What do we want them to know?	How will they use the information?

VII. Tips for Implementing a Learning Agenda Across a Program

There are a wide variety of potential techniques for implementing a learning agenda. The techniques used will emerge from a discussion of the learning questions, however, a few ideas are included here to help you think about the wide variety of potential techniques that could be used. It is important to keep the learning agenda manageable and focus on the application of the learning.

Literature review – Conducting a literature review of what is already known about a question is often an excellent first step to better focus the program's questions, build from the established evidence base, and provide information to share with stakeholders. The act of conducting the literature review, when done as an internal exercise, can serve as an important learning tool.

Incorporating learning into routine monitoring and evaluation – In the case of PSNP Plus, a significant amount of time after the workshop was spent with the monitoring team to ensure that the program's existing M&E system was designed to contribute to answering the learning questions.

Creating space for reflection – Program learning involves making the initial space for reflective conversation and prioritization of questions, and then making existing coordination forums work better and improving the quality of existing conversations. Consider using existing program meetings to report out on results for specific learning questions. After Action Reviews[5] provide a structured opportunity to reflect on an event or task and identify the lessons learned and implications for the future.

Seeking out expertise from others – Conduct key informant interviews or peer consultations with other organizations to collect information and expertise that often doesn't exist in written form. Conduct focus groups or other formative research to better understand a situation. Embedding someone who can learn about an approach and document it may be a good way to capture descriptive information that is hard for the people conducting the programs to articulate.

Creating groups to take on specific questions – Task forces can be formed to take on specific learning questions. Communities of practice[6] can be formed where there is interest in jointly exploring an issue over time.

Host events – Meetings and workshops provide a structured venue for learning and information exchange. Meetings range from technical workshops designed to explore specific issues to larger venues for knowledge sharing, "failure fairs", or "significant change" workshops.

Conduct research – There are a variety of research tools that may be appropriate to answer a specific learning question. Resources and partnerships may be a huge driver indicating the level of research that can be conducted.

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5. For information on how to conduct an After Action Review, see "Activities for Stimulating Knowledge Sharing and Learning: A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners," https://www.fsnnetwork.org/activities-stimulating-knowledge-sharing-and-learning-tops-quick-guide-linking-development
6. For more information on convening communities of practice see "Supporting Communities of Practice: A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners," https://www.fsnnetwork.org/supporting-communities-practice-tops-quick-guide-linking-development-practitioners

Questions for Discussion:

It is important to go beyond simply sharing information – how would you ensure actionable change?

In some cases, you may have research questions that need the involvement of academics. How will you engage academics where needed (and without getting overwhelmed)?

VIII. Techniques for Sharing/Using Knowledge Gained or Already Available

In many cases, some of the learning questions posed by a program have already been answered and the challenge is to ensure that the existing answers are shared widely. Additionally, as answers are found to unique learning questions, sharing out that knowledge gained will be essential for impacting change.

A brainstorming of techniques used by organizations to share information include:

- Developing clear infographics that communicate the information visually
- Writing 'one-pagers,' short documents that distill the key points
- Writing a newsletter for the project where regular updates and knowledge gained can be shared
- Developing short video clips
- Hosting webinars to share findings or discuss implications
- Conducting a five-minute distillation of salient points from an evaluation as a regular feature in a staff meeting

IX. Ensuring Budget and Time Allocation

A learning agenda needs to be developed within practical constraints of budgets and staff time. These constraints will be a key factor in determining the shape and focus of any learning agenda.

In the PSNP Plus example, program learning was not initially planned for the project. While it ended up being cited as a key success in the final evaluation, staff met with a lot of initial resistance to budgeting time and money for this effort. Learning agendas have a greater profile now and are being actively supported by various donors, however, resource allocation will always be an important constraint.

> **Practitioner Tip:** *"A guiding thought based on my experience is that it probably makes sense to abide by the notion of 'less is more', so that we don't over-extend ourselves as we start to design and implement our learning agendas. Organizing and managing a learning agenda process, a literature review, aligning methods to ensure that the learning questions will be properly addressed, and so on, will all take a lot of time and effort. It is vital that the early experience of work relating to learning agendas should be positive; so let's tread carefully as we proceed!"*
> *- Guy Sharrock, CRS*

How would you argue for the importance of committing staff time and funds to develop a program learning agenda?

What are ways to maximize program learning without over committing time and budget?

X. Creating an Enabling Environment

Any discussion of a learning agenda needs to acknowledge the important contribution of an enabling environment in a program that encourages people to practice critical and analytical thinking, supports learning, tolerates errors, and the important learning that can come out of failure.

Addressing the environmental issues is beyond the scope of this workbook, but several links are included in the references section for those interested in exploring this area in more depth.

Some steps that can help create a culture of learning include:

- Creating space and time for sharing and reflection
- Building knowledge management into roles, job descriptions, and annual reviews
- Asking questions in hiring interviews to find people who can share and work effectively in a learning organization (ex. When was the last time you worked on a team and collaborated on a project?)
- Understanding and modeling how to share information effectively
- Recognizing staff to encourage future contributions (ex. "I got these great ideas from x and we can use them for y.")

Questions for Discussion:

What are the current incentives (and disincentives) to learn and share in your program?

How could you create an environment in your program that would encourage learning? What are some of your initial thoughts?

References

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Annex 1: Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) Plus Project - Learning Agenda and Plan

Funded by USAID and led by CARE, PSNP Plus was carried out in Ethiopia by a consortium composed of CRS, Relief Society of Tigray (REST), Save the Children - UK, Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), and Tufts University.

1. Learning Agenda and Plan - Impact

Learning Question #1	Learning Question Story/Paragraph #1
What combination and sequencing of interventions will significantly contribute to graduation? • What is the combination of interventions that would lead to graduation (Value Chain, Village Saving and Lending Associations, Microfinance, etc.)? Is there any difference for women and men? Which combination is more appropriate for women or female-headed households? • Is every Implementing Partner (IP) on the same page as far as combination and sequencing are concerned? Do the Implementing Partners have different approach for women and men? • Is the already started combination working for both women and men? If not, what can we do?	***Action:*** The PSNP Plus program aims to assist PSNP households to move towards graduation through market driven approaches. The program framework designed to empower the poor households to make informed decisions about scarce resources, while facilitating access to informal and formal financial products and services and their entry into markets. The project facilitates delivery of combination of interventions and services following a stepped approach through enhancing use of a range of contextually relevant microfinance services (Village Saving and Lending Associations, Linkage with Microfinance Institutions) coupled by business skills, financial literacy and various technical trainings; and by strengthening linkages between poor households and commodity markets through value chain approach and asset transfer leading to asset accumulation at household level with associated steps towards PSNP graduation and more resilient households.
Planning Questions	***Our Plan***
What evidence already exists about this topic?	The Longitudinal Impact Study report showed that participating in one Value Chain only will not have significant impact on the households.

How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	• Development of gender sensitive check list
	• Identify 5 households: 3 households who have shown some positive changes and 2 not doing well, and;
	• Track changes in their lives
	  • Collect case stories quarterly
	  • Document the sequence and combination of interventions

How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	• Implementing Partners report quarterly on the Technical Working Group meetings • Share with Project Planning Committee and Steering Committee • Facilitate for the Households to share their stories in different events for other community members, stakeholders, government, NGOs, donors • Compile the stories and lessons to present them on the Technical Working Group meetings
How will we keep track of and store our information?	• Case stories • Regular follow up and documentation • Finally, develop complete story and publish in the PSNP plus newsletter, videos and other medias (print and electronic medias)
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	• Organize learning events for both internal and external stakeholders • Use newsletters
Learning Question #2	**Learning Question Story/Paragraph #2**
What are the most reliable indictors to track changes in the short-term?	The impact indicators of PSNP Plus project are explained in terms of short term asset-based indicators. From the project implementation experience to date, from the drought faced during the year 2009, from Tufts impact assessment results, and from the study of Village Saving and Lending Associations economic impact assessment studies, it was observed that building assets at household level, with in the short run having these seasonal interventions of the project will be challenging. Therefore as impact is broad and not only be measured in terms of assets, it will be good to assess other reliable short term impact indicators.
Planning Questions	*Our Plan*
What evidence already exists about this topic?	There are study documents such as the Doba Longitudinal Impact Study result; Village Saving and Lending Associations impact assessment study showing impact and the Intermediate Results assessment reports.
How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	• Intermediate Results, objectives and impact indicators should be critically assessed • Assess the midterm and Intermediate Results assessment reports • Include outcome related questions in the Intermediate Results assessment questionnaire to capture related changes such as Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs)

How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	• Present the report to the Knowledge Management and Learning Task Force and the Technical Working Group meetings • Share with Project Planning Committee and Steering Committee • Responsibility: • Time: Interim reports are expected by the end of the next quarter
How will we keep track of and store our information?	Adjust the log frame and incorporate it in the Monitoring and Evaluation plan.
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	Prepare a consolidated report that shows the indicators we should use and share it with the donor.

2. Learning Agenda and Plan - Microfinance

Learning Question #1	Learning Question Story/Paragraph #1
How can a sustainable Village Saving and Lending Associations (VSLA) - Microfinance Institutions (MFI) linkage be established?	In the absence of access to alternative financial services, Village Saving and Lending Associations play the role of financial intermediation and act to bridge the gap between financial service providers and community residents while offering a gradual and stepped approach to linking with formal financial services. The issue of VSLA-MFI linkage needs to be broadened to include cooperatives and commercial banks. Clarification is also sought in terms of sustainability of 1) linkage with VSLA/group but not individuals vs. with individuals and groups, 2) VSLA-MFI linkage with respect to microfinance business i.e. wholesale vs. retailing, 3) VSLA-Cooperatives linkage, 4) group vs. networks and or federations. What sustainable arrangement should PSNP Plus Project recommend?
Planning Questions	*Our Plan*
What evidence already exists about this topic?	• The Village Saving and Lending Association members are linked to Microfinance Institutions individually; and; • Microfinance Institutions have strong interest to work with Village Saving and Lending Associations
How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	• Design a pilot linkage mechanism in CARE operation areas and develop to test, demonstrate, document and evaluate it to scale it up in to a viable linkage modality (this is an action research-based mechanism which is open to change and revision by the end of which we expect a document that shows what has been done) • Incorporate learning from other countries in the development of the mechanism

Question	Content
How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	• The two persons' team will first present to the Knowledge Management Task Force then if agreed up on by the Task Force it would be presented to Technical Working Group, Project Planning Committee and Steering Committee • Establishing a Multi-Stakeholder Platform that discusses Microfinance Institution issues • Responsibility: • Time: Up to September 30 finalizing the design of the modality and start implementation then after the lessons will be documented and shared every quarter
How will we keep track of and store our information?	• Developing a case story to be shared with the different stakeholders • Can be part of the quarterly report
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	Develop a consolidated report of the progress and result of the pilot and can be shared through the newsletter as well as different forums
Learning Question #2	**Learning Question Story/Paragraph #2**
How can Village Saving and Lending Associations link with Value Chain activities?	While promotion of linkages to formal Microfinance Institutions enhances the take up of food security packages and other credit and saving services, PSNP Plus primarily works on the selected four value chains which is expected to improve production, enhance productivity, diversify income sources and increase productive assets for food insecure households. Village Saving and Lending Associations members are currently taking advantage of the Value Chain related interventions such as livelihood skills training, other technical assistance and the artificial marketing arrangements of shoats. In facilitating access to rural financial services, especially credit, what linkage approach best suits the PSNP Plus Project i.e. linking Village Saving and Lending Associations with Value Chain activities or Value Chain activities with Village Saving and Lending Associations? How should the assessment focus to propose the best practice linkage modality?
Planning Questions	*Our Plan*
What evidence already exists about this topic?	• In Save the Children-UK areas there are problems of group cohesion that has resulted in difficulty in using the financial services provided/available • The keen interest of Village Saving and Lending Associations members to participate in Value Chain activities

Learning Question	Response
How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	• Identifying Village Saving and Lending Associations and Production and Marketing Groups in all woredas • Try to identify Village Saving and Lending Associations and try to link them to Value Chain • Identify Production and Marketing Groups and support them to establish Village Saving and Lending Associations • Document the process and changes to identify which process is beneficial to participants • This is an activity every implementing partner should do • We can develop the tool that will assist us to gather the evidence • Responsibility: • Time: Activities can be started immediately
How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	Technical Working Group Meetings
How will we keep track of and store our information?	• Develop case stories • Incorporate stories in quarterly reports • The task team will review the stories and identify changes and lessons from the stories and members of the team will go to the field to validate evidence, giving recommendation and coaching • A Terms of Reference to be developed outlining these and other activities to be undertaken by the task team
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	• Newsletter • Presenting on conferences even out of PSNP Plus

3. Learning Agenda and Plan - Value Chain

Learning Question #1	Learning Question Story/Paragraph #1
Are the value chain interventions in place supporting PSNP Plus participants to benefit from functional markets?	The PSNP Plus project works to link poor rural households to functioning market. To this it is working on four value chains: honey, livestock, cereals and white pea beans. In doing so, assets are being transferred to participants to help them engage in these markets. Some of the markets for the selected value chains are characterized by seasonality and price fluctuation. However, drought and the prevailing loan term, group lending approach and amount of loan have discouraged participants engaging in selected Value Chains.

Planning Questions	Our Plan
What evidence already exists about this topic?	• Participants have the assets at hand and have actually started engaging in marketing activities • The private sector has shown interest in working with participants • Trainings have been provided and farmers are producing quality products such as shoats, transitional beehives, and are engaged in colony multiplication
How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	• Develop a gender sensitive data collection checklist (include a question on 1) Which activity is beneficial and which one is not and the adjustments to be made, and 2)Oon what they are learning from Multi-Stakeholder Platforms) • Identify 8-10 households (2 households per value chain) and/or individuals, groups per value chain who produced surplus and managed to sell to the market • Identify two private sector institutions that are working with PSNP Plus participants to check their views on the value added as a result of their engagement, and; • Document the changes quarterly • Responsibility: Lead advisors from SNV should work with the project managers or value chain focal persons to support the documentation process
How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	• Reports and presentations on the Technical Working Groups • Share with Project Planning Committee and Steering Committee • Newsletter
How will we keep track of and store our information?	• Develop case stories • Incorporate stories in quarterly reports
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	• Newsletter • Multi-Stakeholder Platforms
Learning Question #2	**Learning Question Story/Paragraph #2**
How do we create win-win relationships between the private sector and participants based on mutual understanding?	In creating market linkages, efforts have been underway to bring the private sector on board. However, experience shows that beneficiaries are not producing based on the expectations of the private sector in terms of quality, quantity and time of delivery. On the other hand, the beneficiaries also indicated that the private sector is not offering prices that rewards quality and embedded services and support that would encourage them to be engaged with the private sector. There is also some indication of lack of trust from both producers' and private sectors' side, making it necessary to create mutual understanding between these key stakeholders.

Planning Questions	Our Plan
What evidence already exists about this topic?	• Though the private sector is interested in working with PSNP Plus participants, they couldn't get products at the required quality and quantity • The participants also feel that the prices offered by the private sector are not adequate • Trust issues raised from the producers' side at Multi-Stakeholder Platforms as a factor prohibiting the establishment of functional relationships between the two parties
How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	• Identify strong producer groups • Facilitate the production process in a way that meets market requirement (to be discussed at the Technical Working Group meetings) • Try to link them with identified private sector, and; • Document the process • SNV will take the lead on this whole activity (with each lead advisor)
How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	• Reports and presentations on the Technical Working Groups • Share with Project Planning Committee and Steering Committee • Newsletter
How will we keep track of and store our information?	• Develop case stories • Incorporate stories in quarterly reports
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	• Newsletter • Multi-Stakeholder Platforms
Learning Question #3	**Learning Question Story/Paragraph #3**
What would be the effective institutional linkage or system that would enable participants to access inputs and services sustainably? • How can we access inputs at the required quality and quantity? • What is the most effective and sustainable asset transfer modality?	The issue of accessing inputs for asset transfer especially improved seeds has been a challenge in most PSNP Plus operational woredas. On the other hand, there are institutions such as research centers, universities, microfinance institutions etc. that can potentially support the project through the supply of inputs in the project implementation areas with whom PSNP can work together to have easier access to productive inputs such as beehives and accessories and improved seeds etc. In addition to that, different project areas and IPs have adopted different asset transfer modalities resulting in differences in progress in the stage of project implementation. Thus, this has made developing a common and workable system of asses transfer has been that can be shared among the IPs.

Planning Questions	Our Plan
What evidence already exists about this topic?	• Community-based colony and seed multiplication • Cooperatives working on colony and seed multiplication • Production of transitional beehives • Willingness of research institutes to provide improved seeds if assisted in certain respects
How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	• Through reviewing secondary information such as project reports, activity reports, training reports • Collecting primary data through discussing with the input providers on how the input provision system can be improved • Assessing other possible sources of input • Assess the existing asset transfer modalities to check their effectiveness • Responsibility: • Start time: IMMEDIATELY
How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	• Reports and presentations on the Technical Working Groups • Share with Project Planning Committee and Steering Committee • Newsletter
How will we keep track of and store our information?	• Develop case stories • Incorporate stories in quarterly reports
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	• Newsletter • Multi-Stakeholder Platforms

Annex 2: Case Study - Developing a Learning Agenda

The Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) Plus Project was a three-year pilot project in Ethiopia. Funded by USAID and led by CARE, PSNP Plus was carried out by a consortium composed of CRS, Relief Society of Tigray (REST), Save the Children - UK, Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), and Tufts University.

The aim of the project was to support chronically food insecure households to 'graduate' off of the government-sponsored safety net and into positions of food security, through facilitative and market-oriented approaches[1]. Intended to directly benefit 47,414 households in 12 woredas, PSNP Plus sought to combine targeted capacity building, increased access to financial services, and transfer of productive assets as part of an overall value chain approach to improved food and livelihood security. By demonstrating the potential impact of value chain approaches among chronically vulnerable populations, the PSNP Plus project also sought to inform government and private-sector strategies for strengthening markets in support of greater household livelihood security[2].

At the outset of program activities, little budget had been set aside for learning given the imperative that as many households as possible be reached through direct implementation. As the program progressed, however, project leadership determined that it was important to assess the validity of the project's causal model and that this time and budget investment could have a positive impact on future programming efforts.

The final evaluation specifically cited the program-wide learning agenda as a cornerstone of the project's ability to execute and adapt to achieve results. The results of this learning effort brought about changes in how PSNP Plus was implemented, from making activities more 'drought-resistant,' to calling for the mainstreaming of gender into livelihood activities, and linking of farmers with the private sector. The results of the learning activities directly influenced the shape of the follow-on USAID Feed the Future-funded project, Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development (GRAD) as well, while informing the thinking around countless other programs hoping to graduate the most vulnerable out of conditions of severe food insecurity and extreme poverty[3].

Developing the Learning Agenda

The Final Evaluation states that much of the learning generated by the project was the result of the Learning and Knowledge Management strategy development workshop held in Addis Ababa from April 14-17, 2010.

The workshop was highly participatory including field staff of the implementing partners and project managers and project focal persons at the national level. The main intent of the workshop was to bring the issues of learning and knowledge management to the attention of the implementing partners, improve communication within the consortium and help in capturing and dissemination of lessons learned across project implementers and other key stakeholders.

The workshop included:

1. **Envisioning change:** The workshop started with a visioning exercise to explore the project's target beneficiary and what her life would look like when the project was completed. Small groups diagrammed their understanding of what the beneficiary has, what she does, with whom she interacts, how her environment affects her, and how all of these areas change if the project is successful.

2. **Revealing assumptions:** PSNP Plus is based on a model through which a combination of access to financial services, market linkages and clean water improves livelihoods and helps people graduate to a position of food security. Within this model, partners have different unspoken assumptions regarding how they think the model will really work. In this exercise, participants explored the project logframe and explicitly mapped out their assumptions. Assumptions included both:

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1. GROOVE Network, Tacit Knowledge in Value Chain Monitoring, 2011
2. PSNP Plus Project Final Evaluation, 2011
3. USAID, A Collaborating Learning and Adapting Report: Missions and Partners Share Experiences and Best Practices in Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting, 2013

a. Operational assumptions having to do with the PSNP Plus causal model – e.g. if we create the VSLA groups then women will be better able to withstand shocks because they have savings; and

b. Logical assumptions having to do with the processes used and the project's structure – e.g. if we establish technical working groups we will be able to coordinate effectively across the consortium on key issues

3. **Assessing assumptions:** For each assumption, participants rated the degree to which they think the assumption is valid and the evidence they have to support it. They voted for those they thought were most important to focus on for the success of the project using both their PSNP Plus project 'hat' and their own organizational 'hat.'

4. **Identifying learning themes:** The next step was to draft learning questions based on the most important and urgent assumptions. Individuals generated questions based on what they want to know or learn about the issues in order to improve their work. Small groups organized the individual questions and identified the ones they felt were most important for the project as a whole. The group engaged in a progressive voting exercise to identify the most important learning questions.

5. **Stakeholder mapping and planning for action:** Participants identified the various stakeholders and looked at what they want to know and how they will use the information. They then filled out a table for each draft learning question identifying: what evidence already exists; how evidence would be gathered; what processes, formats, and tools would be used to share lessons internally; how information could be tracked and stored; and how lessons would be shared with stakeholders.

Learning Agenda and Plan

The primary learning interest was to validate the PSNP Plus causal model and test the hypothesis that if one provides basic food support, and links the Chronically Food Insecure households with functioning markets and microfinance, these families can graduate out of food aid.

The final learning questions were:

- What combination and sequencing of interventions will significantly contribute to graduation?
- What are the most reliable indicators to track changes in the short-term?
- How can a sustainable Village Saving and Lending Associations – Microfinance Institution linkage be established?
- How can Village Saving and Lending Associations link with value chain activities?
- Are the value chain interventions in place supporting PSNP Plus participants to benefit from functional markets?
- How do we create win-win relationships between the private sector and participants based on mutual understanding?
- What would be the effective institutional linkage or system that would enable participants to access inputs and services sustainably?

PSNP Plus designed a Longitudinal Impact Assessment to test their causal model. They used Intermediate Results assessment to check whether the inputs/activities were resulting to outputs and outcomes and put a quarterly performance monitoring system in place to ensure efficiency of operations. The performance monitoring system was particularly important because they wanted to ensure that their project was operating as designed in order to correctly interpret the research results.

The Final Evaluation states:

> *In retrospect, the PSNP Plus Learning Agenda appears to have played a vital role in generating and disseminating action research that has piqued the interest of government staff, donor representatives, NGO partners, and research institutions.*

The documentation of pilot project processes, outputs and outcomes has been particularly effective in highlighting the potential of value chain approaches for attainment of sustainable food and livelihood security. In this sense, the Knowledge Management and Learning (KML) strategy implemented by PSNP Plus has had a direct influence on Objective 4[4] by informing decisions made by private interests, micro-finance institutions, and government offices participating in the Household Asset Building Program (HABP).

In addition to numerous case studies and regular reports shared with the Project Planning Committee and Steering Committee, the KML strategy resulted in Experiential Tours for government and private officials involved in PSNP Plus implementation. The tours were aimed at informing policy (Objective 4) by exposing partners to the opportunities and constraints encountered in various PSNP Plus target areas. Knowledge Management advisors for CARE and SNV also took the lead in developing and disseminating "The Plus", a periodic publication aimed at achieving wider dissemination of information related to PSNP Plus activities, partners, promising practices, and progress toward project objectives.

Annex 3: DRG Learning Agenda 2016

See next page, page 37.

Annex 4: How to Create a Learning Agenda...the DRG Way

See page 38.

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4. Government and private sector strategies show greater support for engaging PSNP participants in market-based activities

![USAID - FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE]

DRG LEARNING AGENDA 2016

USAID Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance

NEXT STEPS

DRG's Learning Division will target the top question under each theme for initial action planning, which will involve the following steps:

STEP 1

Question workshopping. Each of the top learning agenda questions will be work-shopped in order to sharpen the focus and relational logic of each question.

STEP 2

Evidence reviews. Academics assess the need for an evidence review and evaluate the quality of extant reviews. Where necessary, new evidence reviews will be commissioned.

STEP 3

Learning products. Depending on the subject matter and target audience, carefully planned and accessibly written learning projects may include infographics, two-pagers, short video posts, and webinars.

STEP 4

Dissemination plan. Dissemination is an essential element of the Learning Agenda and will involve distilling findings in order to enhance utilization by the DRG Cadre and partner community. Events and products may include evidence summits, publications, academic panels, and online activities.

We welcome feedback, inquiries, and engagement on these questions, so please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any thoughts or questions. Visit **www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/organization/bureaus/bureau-democracy-conflict-and-humanitarian-assistance/center** or write to **outreachdrg@usaid.gov** for additional information on USAID DRG.

DRG Learning Agenda 2016

The USAID DRG Learning Agenda is a set of twelve research questions in priority development areas for which the DRG Center intends to organize and disseminate existing data, generate new evidence, and produce conclusions and recommendations through academic research, program evaluations, and multi-method tests of the assumptions and theories of change that guide DRG programming.

The Learning Agenda is intended to organize and generate evidence to inform USAID DRG strategic planning, project design, and in-service training efforts.

Learning Agenda Formulation

The Learning Agenda questions were informed by existing DRG research and evaluation efforts, and were developed through a participatory process that involved five DRG Center Theme Teams, as well as consultations with DRG field staff, Sector Council colleagues, and USAID Monitoring & Evaluation Specialists.

Focus on Civic Participation

Based on survey feedback , questions about the role of civic participation in catalyzing democratic change emerged as a top priority. DRG will highlight research and analysis related to civic mobilization during Learning Agenda implementation.

HOW TO CREATE A LEARNING AGENDA

...the DRG Center way

write concept note
aligning Learning Agenda with DRG Center's strategy

convene **Theme Teams** with membership from across the DRG Center

start with **Theories of Change** and convert to **mid-level research questions**

create and implement **action plan** for each question to generate academic & practitioner research

construct brochure and **user-friendly website** to publicize Learning Agenda questions
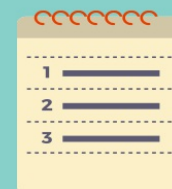
survey stakeholders in DC and Missions to **prioritize questions**

share findings with Theme Teams, field Missions, and other stakeholders

strategize about utilization of findings, track dissemination, and integrate with knowledge management strategy

convene **Learning Agenda Advisory Group** annually to retire some questions and formulate new ones

Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance

Annex 5: Learning Agenda Template (Adapted from CRS/Ethiopia)

Learning Topic	Research Question	Relevant Organization Projects	Availability of Internal Resources	Availability of External Resources	Existing M&E Data	Donor Importance
	Which of our interventions do we think are particularly good or compelling? How can we examine and ultimately demonstrate their value/impact/scalability?	*Does this topic pertain to several of our projects? Which ones?*	*What financial and human resources can be used to conduct this learning activity?*	*Universities, TOPS-FSN Small Grant Program Improvement Awards, etc.*	*What project Indicators or data are we already using to inform the research questions?*	*Is the learning topic a funding priority? Will we be able to demonstrate impact and scalability?*

Annex 6: PSNP Plus Action Plan Template

Learning Question #1	Learning Question Story/Paragraph #1
	Action:
Planning Questions	*Our Plan*
What evidence already exists about this topic?	
How will we gather this evidence to fill our knowledge gaps in the coming quarter?	
How will we share our lessons internally to improve our performance (what processes, formats and tools will we use)?	
How will we keep track of and store our information?	
How will we share our lessons with our stakeholders?	

Immediate Next Steps	Responsible Person(s)	Time for Completion