USAID Education Learning Approach Brief

USAID's Office of Education uses a strategic approach to learning in order to focus our research, fill gaps in the evidence base, and improve outcomes to achieve our 2018 USAID Education Policy vision. To achieve these objectives, we worked with key stakeholders to develop learning priorities that span the spectrum of USAID's education programming. They include:

Foundational Skills
Education in Crisis and Conflict
Youth Workforce Development
Higher Education*

*As many sectors are engaged in higher education across the Agency, the Higher Education Learning Agenda will represent Agency-wide learning interests.

Each learning agenda was produced in consultation with regional bureau education teams, mission staff, implementing partners, other donors, and education researchers.

APPROACH
The guiding principle for the Office's approach to implementing the learning agendas is **utilization**. To increase the likelihood that the knowledge generated will be used, it is important to consider the user in the full lifecycle of evidence building -- from the design of the questions and approach through dissemination and engagement. Therefore, just as development of the learning agendas was a collaborative effort, the knowledge generated and disseminated will continue to be a collaborative effort across experts in Washington, field staff, and external partners, including donors, foundations and networks, USAID colleagues in missions or in other sectors, implementing partners, researchers, higher education institutions, civil society organizations and partner governments. The Office will involve key stakeholders early and often who have an interest in using the knowledge.

USAID anticipates that learning agenda questions will be explored using a **variety of methods** - such as systematic reviews, literature reviews, rigorous monitoring, cost analysis, performance and impact evaluations, implementation research, and other forms of knowledge capture. Methods should be "fit-for-purpose" and focus on generating the knowledge needed to support decision-making given the resources available.

USAID works in a **variety of contexts**; partner countries may be experiencing growth or fragility, conflict, and crisis. The research and learning portfolio should reflect all the types of places where USAID works.

In the end, if we are able to generate knowledge in different ways and in different contexts, then we will have a richer knowledge base that can inform our programming.

These products will be posted to EducationLinks, USAID's public-facing knowledge management website for education. Beyond simple dissemination of learning, USAID is committed to helping missions and partners figure out how to use findings to program differently.

As part of sharing research and learning, we will create different knowledge products that synthesize key findings and support use. In addition to more detailed reports, USAID will produce creative content to extend learning, such as:
- Blogs
- Short video interviews
- Podcasts
- Briefs
- Infographics

PARTNERS IN LEARNING

USAID aims to learn from research and learning that the Agency commissions directly, as well as work commissioned by others. We want to make space for partners to influence us in refining and adapting our learning priorities and approaches. Our partners in learning include: other donors, foundations and networks, USAID colleagues in missions or in other sectors, implementing partners, researchers, higher education institutions, civil society organizations and partner governments.

KEY PRINCIPLES

To create a research and learning portfolio that has a utilization focus, we offer the following considerations for USAID colleagues and partners.

When generating research and learning:
1. **Understand how context influences results:** To support evidence-based program recommendations, research and learning should identify ways in which contextual factors influenced results. When USAID aggregates results from a variety of contexts, the extent to which project-specific findings are likely to translate to other settings should be clear.
2. **Explain how and why programs work, or don't:** It is imperative that research and learning collect information on program ingredients, how they were rolled out, the cost, and feedback from communities or stakeholders. Capturing the technical and operational pathways to change can support uptake and further innovation. Just as important as

understanding what did work, USAID is committed to understanding what didn't work so we can avoid the same challenges or find new solutions to barriers to success.

3. **Understand system uptake over time:** To support the road to self-reliance, USAID should look for ongoing and/or retrospective research opportunities to understand the extent to which planned system uptake is occurring and continuing over time.

4. **Document results for different populations:** USAID's education programs work with people with various intersectional identities, those who are in urban and rural settings, displaced people and host communities, young women and men, children, their parents and guardians with and without disabilities, and other marginalized identities ranging from pre-primary to higher education. Documenting and understanding how results differ across populations is critical for quality, equitable and inclusive development and scale.

5. **Ensure specific, sustainable, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound recommendations:** Recommendations from research and learning might be applied to multiple levels of the education system. Recommendations should be socialized with key stakeholders before they are finalized to ensure they are feasible.

In order to increase use, such as making decisions, changing practice, or guiding investments (including when evidence-based learning already exists):

6. **Develop and monitor action plans to implement recommendations:** To increase the likelihood that learning helps improve the way USAID works, any analysis should include an action plan that describes how recommendations will be used, roles and responsibilities of various actors, and a timeline for implementation.

7. **Track cost to inform design, efficiency, cost effectiveness, and sustainability:** Understanding how much education interventions cost is critical to ensuring country self-reliance. As such, all studies should include cost analysis to determine not only the effectiveness of interventions but the relative cost effectiveness to help governments determine where best to focus their limited resources.

8. **Focus on sustainability:** To achieve measurable, sustained gains in learning outcomes and support countries on their journey to self-reliance, consider the resources, capacity, and commitment of partner governments. The most effective policies or programs may need adaptation to fit the local context for the long-term.

9. **Ensure local ownership:** The USG Basic Education Strategy and the USAID Education Policy prioritize country focus and ownership across all USAID education activities, including research and learning. To ensure the feasibility of proposed solutions to the challenges posed by the learning agenda questions and to gain country buy-in and ownership, including local participants throughout the process is ideal, from planning to data collection to dissemination and action planning.

HOW TO ENGAGE

We encourage you to share your learning priorities and present ideas for how to partner in jointly generating knowledge.

Visit EducationLinks at https://www.edu-links.org/learning-agendas to learn more.