KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT and ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING (KMOL) POLICY

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Photo by Luciano González, FECOPROD

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ACRONYMS

ADS	Automated Directives System
AI	Artificial intelligence
BIOM	Bureau, Independent Office, and Mission
CLA	Collaborating, learning, and adapting
DEIA	Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility
Evidence Act	Foundations for Evidence-Based Policy Making Act
IT	Information technology
KM	Knowledge management
KMOL	Knowledge management and organizational learning
LER	Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research
OL	Organizational learning
OU	Operating Unit
PLR	Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management
PMP	Performance Management Plan
SOP	Standard operating procedure
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Everything the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) does involves people applying what they know to what they do. Staff and partners ground their work in extensive professional knowledge, knowledge derived from the Agency's cumulative history and resources, and outside knowledge and expertise. Through implementation of this policy, processes to generate, retain, transfer, and use knowledge to achieve Agency priorities will be strengthened and embedded systematically throughout USAID's structure and functions.

The vision of this Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning (KMOL) Policy is to *improve USAID's ability to harness its cumulative knowledge, learn from it, and apply those lessons to its work to achieve more impactful results*. To achieve this vision—which will reduce burdens associated with accessing and transferring knowledge—the Agency will strengthen KMOL efforts, infrastructure, and norms to leverage its knowledge fully and systematically. The policy's core aims lie in improved humanitarian and development outcomes, with a holistic approach that spans both **programs (USAID efforts to achieve outcomes) and operations (USAID's internal processes and systems that support programs)**. This policy has three primary goals: 1) steward knowledge as a shared Agency asset, 2) leverage knowledge and learning to enhance program impact, and 3) invest in local knowledge systems to support locally led development.

Six key principles will guide policy implementation. The Agency's KMOL efforts will be **human-centered, integrated, accessible, focused, local, and dynamic**.

The policy focuses on exerting **leverage points for action** (people, practices, systems, governance, culture, and resources) on **three core business processes covering a large portion of USAID's work:**
1. **Programming:** Activity design, acquisition and assistance, and implementation.
2. **Workforce:** Hiring, training, retaining, and transitioning staff.
3. **Budgeting and Reporting:** Budget formulation and execution and results reporting.

To advance the vision and goals, the policy includes two requirements: The Agency will establish a governing body to address Agency-level KMOL issues, and Operating Units (OUs) will establish KMOL plans.

KMOL
@USAID

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT
+
ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Generating, curating, organizing, sharing, and using knowledge to create value or support decision making in context.

The process by which an organization improves itself over time by gaining experience and using it to create knowledge that can be transferred within the organization, applied again, and improved.
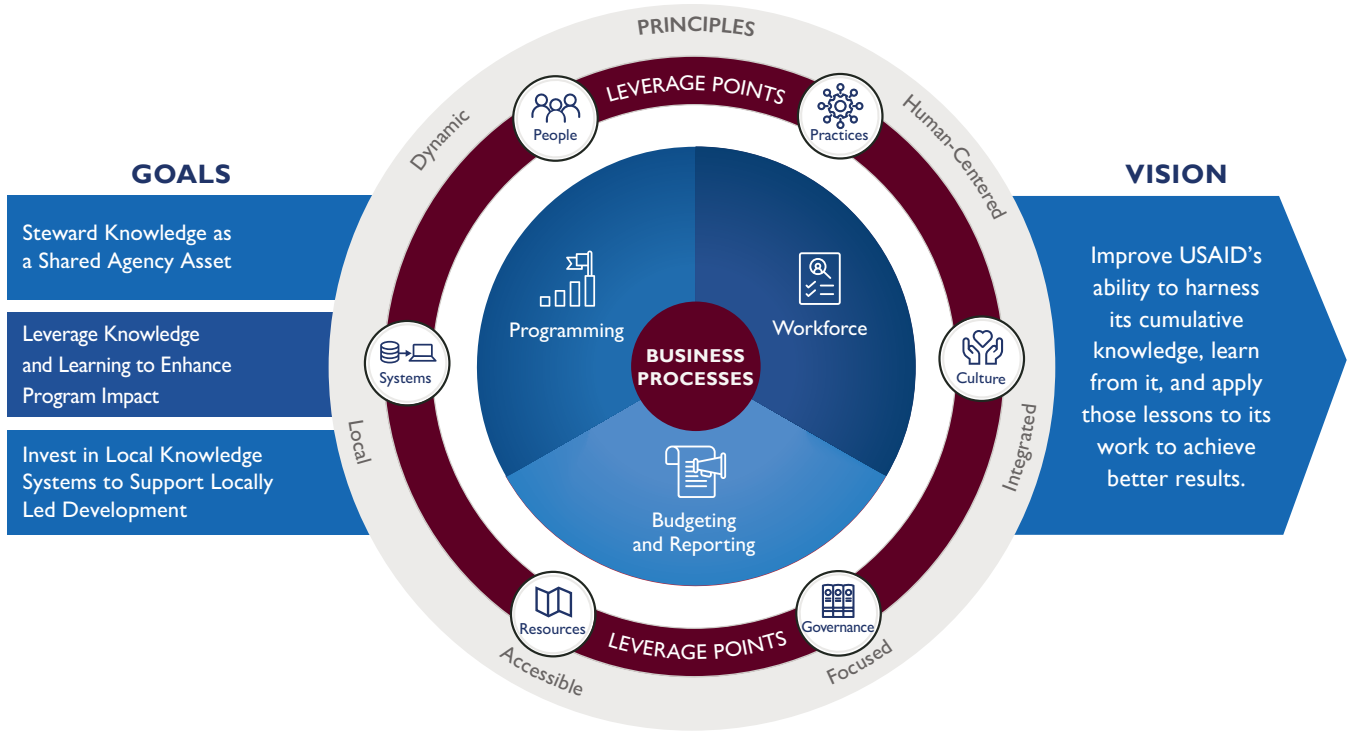
GOALS

Steward Knowledge as a Shared Agency Asset

Leverage Knowledge and Learning to Enhance Program Impact

Invest in Local Knowledge Systems to Support Locally Led Development

VISION

Improve USAID's ability to harness its cumulative knowledge, learn from it, and apply those lessons to its work to achieve better results.

PRINCIPLES

LEVERAGE POINTS

People · Practices · Culture · Governance · Resources · Systems

Dynamic · Human-Centered · Integrated · Focused · Accessible · Local

Programming · Workforce · Budgeting and Reporting

BUSINESS PROCESSES

Figure 1: KMOL at USAID

I. INTRODUCTION

Everything the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) does entails people applying what they know to what they do, whether it is designing programs, responding to crises, procuring services, managing awards, hiring staff, crafting budget requests, analyzing evaluation results, training its workforce, or managing the logistics that connect staff to work in some 100 countries. To do this work well, relevant knowledge must reach people as they are making decisions, in quantities and forms they can absorb, through processes that help them make sense of and apply this knowledge. To continuously improve these processes, the Agency must intentionally build knowledge management and learning into organizational infrastructure, processes, and skill sets. Though USAID invests in knowledge management and organizational learning (KMOL), too often these efforts have been shallow, siloed, or ephemeral. To support the Agency's transformation into an effective learning organization and advance USAID's mission, this policy establishes the foundation for strengthening KMOL efforts, investments, infrastructure, and norms. This policy's core aims lie in improving humanitarian and development outcomes, with a holistic approach that spans both programs and operations.[1]

There is firm acceptance in business, academia, and government—and among leading international development donors[2]—that strong KMOL facilitates better results. The evidence reviewed to inform this policy supports this conclusion (see Annex 1). Data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey; evidence from collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) efforts; and research from the business management and behavioral sciences fields indicate KMOL advancements will also contribute to greater engagement and job satisfaction among USAID staff.[3] Staff demand a workplace where they can easily obtain the right information at the right time to inform decision making.[4]

This policy builds on USAID's existing efforts in knowledge and learning—such as CLA and Program Cycle evidence processes; the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policy Making Act (Evidence Act) efforts; sectoral learning agendas and KM efforts, such as the LINKS sites[5] and related knowledge-sharing processes; IT systems that support data and knowledge organization, access, and use; and capacity strengthening around evidence use. The policy also builds on a host of operational examples, including Business Process and Organizational Effectiveness Reviews. Each of these efforts remains useful and valuable to USAID. Strengthening Agency-wide KMOL, as the most recent line of effort, builds on this foundation, and seeks to fill gaps left by other efforts.

> While USAID's CLA Framework includes KM among its subcomponents, and though the principles and practices of KMOL align closely with CLA, this policy fills additional gaps identified during the past decade of operationalizing CLA across the Agency. In some cases, KMOL provides more detailed and comprehensive tools and approaches in areas that CLA touches on—for example, knowledge retention and transfer. In other cases, KMOL provides guidance on areas CLA does not address, in which the Agency has a core need, such as the leverage points related to Agency operations (see more on these below). In this way, KMOL and CLA are complementary and mutually reinforcing, rather than firmly distinct. Together, they aim to strengthen continuous learning within USAID and its partners to strengthen development results.
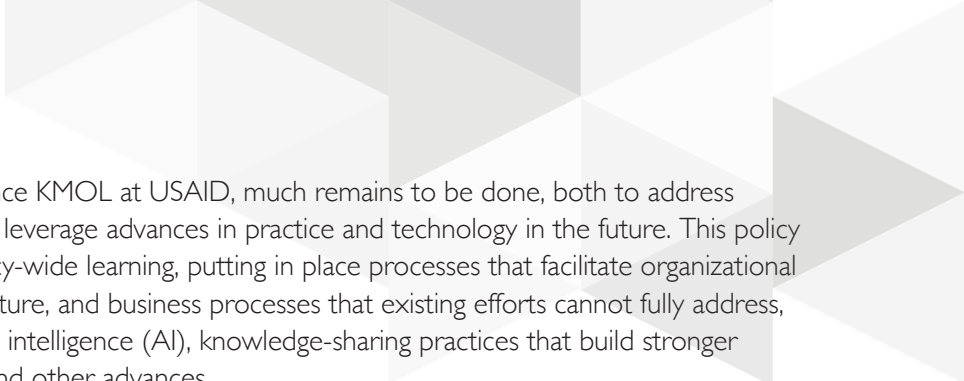
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1 The term "development" is used broadly in this policy and meant to encompass USAID's efforts in long-term development, disaster assistance, and humanitarian response.
2 See Piers Bocock and Chris Collison, *Return on Knowledge: How International Development Agencies are Collaborating to Deliver Impact through Knowledge, Learning, Research and Evidence*, Florence, Italy: Multi-Donor Learning Partnership (MDLP), UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2022. See especially the theory of change, depicted graphically on pp. 21-23, which nine leading donors in development, including USAID, articulated.
3 See the "CLA Evidence Collection" on USAID Learning Lab.
4 See Annex 1, "Condensed Evidence Synthesis for KMOL Policy," which includes evidence from consultations with USAID staff.
5 The LINKS websites at USAID comprise a collection of learning sites modeled after the original microLINKS (now MarketLinks), and share similar functionalities and link to each other. Other sites in the LINKS family include AgriLinks, BiodiversityLinks, ClimateLinks, EducationLinks, GlobalWaters, LandLinks, Learning Lab, ResilienceLinks, and UrbanLinks.

While these efforts have done much to advance KMOL at USAID, much remains to be done, both to address remaining gaps and to position the Agency to leverage advances in practice and technology in the future. This policy is the next intentional step in catalyzing Agency-wide learning, putting in place processes that facilitate organizational change, addressing gaps in guidance, infrastructure, and business processes that existing efforts cannot fully address, and preparing the Agency to leverage artificial intelligence (AI), knowledge-sharing practices that build stronger partnerships with a wider range of partners, and other advances.

A practical implication is that different Operating Units (OUs) will emphasize different aspects of KMOL, based on their existing efforts in evidence, knowledge management, and learning; and all of these efforts will evolve over time. Consequently, this policy allows OUs to customize their KMOL efforts, while also establishing, for the first time, standards for two essential functions required to reduce burdens and increase effectiveness: 1) knowledge retention and transfer as staff move in and out of positions, and 2) norms and standard naming conventions for folders and work products.

2. KEY CONCEPTS

Knowledge—Knowledge is the combination of factors that informs decisions, including awareness, data, information, evidence, experience, "know-how," understanding, and so on. There is no universal knowledge definition or framework; rather, as a social construct, knowledge is fluid, contested, and infused with power. Navigating this fluidity and continuously adjudicating among these elements is an essential aspect of decision making. This policy provides principles and considerations to help USAID staff navigate using knowledge in decision making.

Knowledge Cycle—Knowledge is effectively managed via a cycle[6] that includes generating, synthesizing, curating, capturing, storing, sharing, and applying it to inform decisions, strengthen organizations, and improve outcomes.

Knowledge Management (KM)—For the purposes of this policy, knowledge management is defined as generating, curating, organizing, sharing, and using knowledge to create value or support decision making in context.

Organizational Learning (OL)—Organizational learning is the process by which an organization improves itself over time by gaining experience and using it to create knowledge that can be transferred within the organization, applied again, and improved over time.

KM and OL are mutually reinforcing and often consolidated as KMOL, as in this policy. Both are critical programmatic and operational Agency capacities essential to effective strategy, resource allocation, program design and implementation, staff onboarding and transfer, crisis response, innovation, and adaptation.

TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

KMOL at USAID must effectively manage **explicit knowledge** while surfacing, synthesizing, and sharing the **tacit knowledge**[7] of Agency personnel. As shown in Figure 2, explicit knowledge is more visible, like the top of a tree. It is knowledge that can be documented, curated, and stored via standardized systems and repositories, such as databases, documents, videos, or other media. It is relatively easy to share explicit knowledge with others. Tacit knowledge, meanwhile, is like the invisible and large root system below the ground. It refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities staff acquire through experience, which are sometimes undervalued and often difficult to document. Rather than trying to make it explicit, tacit knowledge can be more meaningful when shared in context, via peer-to-peer discussion or through observation. Approaches that surface and facilitate the circulation of tacit knowledge are critical to effective KM.
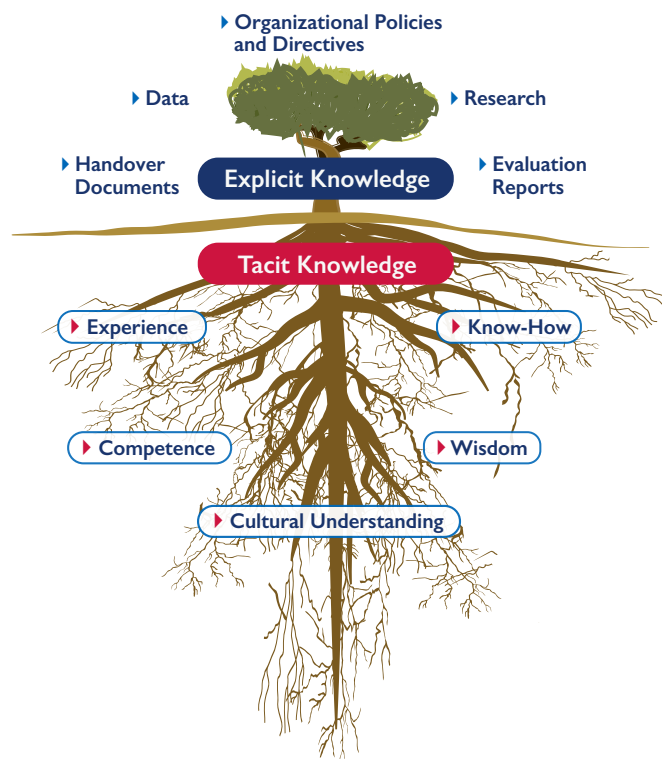

Figure 2: Explicit Knowledge and Tacit Knowledge

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6 In contrast, information management addresses only one or two components of the knowledge cycle.
7 For more on this concept, see Tacit Knowledge: Knowledge Management Briefs.

The many types of knowledge include, but are not limited to, general knowledge, global knowledge, rigorous scientific evidence, and local and Indigenous knowledge and evidence. Local and Indigenous knowledge can be explicit or tacit, scientifically or empirically derived, grounded in other knowledge systems, or context specific. USAID is still learning how to understand, facilitate, and equitably integrate local and Indigenous knowledge into its work.[8] Gaps or inconsistencies between local or Indigenous knowledge and empirical knowledge should be treated as heuristic opportunities for USAID to explore the contributions and limitations of each type of evidence and to seek their integration where possible. USAID is also learning to ethically incorporate many new forms of data—from remotely sensed geospatial data to AI-generated data to human-generated data from cell phones or social media use, etc. For all of these types of knowledge and information, USAID commits to applying a Do No Harm approach in weighing the ethics and applicability of their use.

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8 The Agency will implement relevant guidance issued under the Presidential Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships, and further elaborated in USAID guidance on Indigenous knowledge, and will continue to expand its understanding and use of good practices surrounding local and Indigenous knowledge in international development. "Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships," 86 Fed. Reg. 7,491, January 26, 2021; "Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government," Exec. Order No. 13,985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7,009, January 20, 2021; "Advancing Equity, Justice, and Opportunity for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders," Exec. Order No. 14,031, 86 Fed. Reg. 29,675, May 28, 2021. In this guidance, Indigenous knowledge is defined thus: "Indigenous Knowledge can be developed over millennia, continues to develop, and includes understanding based on evidence acquired through direct contact with the environment and long-term experiences, as well as extensive observations, lessons, and skills passed from generation to generation."

3. VISION AND GOALS

The overarching vision of this policy is to improve USAID's ability to harness its cumulative knowledge (and other extant knowledge), learn from it, and apply those lessons to its work to achieve better results. Three interrelated goals will help the Agency achieve that vision.

Goal 1: Steward Knowledge as a Shared Agency Asset

The collective knowledge of USAID staff and the broader development community is a critical asset. This knowledge must be effectively generated, stored, organized, and shared to be accessible for use in USAID programs and operations. These processes should not be left to individual initiative, created without regard to established good practice, or applied differentially across Bureaus, Independent Offices, and Missions (BIOMs). The Agency will therefore establish an infrastructure that ensures USAID and its partners effectively manage and use collective knowledge. USAID will strengthen existing or create new resources, systems, processes, and incentives in addition to fostering a culture of learning to take full advantage of the development community's collective knowledge.

These efforts will include taking a systematic approach to knowledge transfer so the Agency does not lose valuable information and experience when staff rotate, as well as supporting knowledge flow across Missions and throughout the implementing partner community. Treating knowledge as an Agency asset enables the retention of Agency knowledge over time—through crises, staff transitions, and leadership shifts—so lessons learned are not lost. KM helps to increase the likelihood that effective practices are shared internally and externally, improving efficiency by ensuring that effective programs and practices are used more often, in more places. In short, the Agency will steward knowledge as an essential Agency asset in the same way it responsibly stewards financial resources.

Goal 2: Leverage Knowledge and Learning to Enhance Program Impact

Knowledge and learning are program resources that should be used strategically alongside funding and personnel to inform USAID's programs and influence development efforts beyond those that USAID funds. Knowledge should also be viewed as a development outcome where USAID investments in learning—its own and others'—can advance shared development goals. As USAID strengthens its own KMOL capabilities, it will be better positioned to leverage its extensive knowledge and experience to influence the development landscape. The Agency can also help mobilize a diverse array of knowledge and knowledge holders, including local communities, the private sector, academia, research organizations, and host governments, to learn together, inform and align programming, and strengthen local knowledge and learning ecosystems. Mobilizing knowledge can catalyze positive change, ensure that lessons are consistently used and built upon, and reduce duplication of efforts across development organizations, thus enabling USAID and the development sector writ large to gain efficiencies and achieve greater impact. This cannot be achieved or sustained through funding alone—rather, it requires planning for leveraging emergent technologies, incorporating local knowledge system strengthening into program design, and systematically deploying the Agency's collective knowledge to influence thought and action in partner countries and in the broader development sector.

Further, the Agency has a substantial role to play in modeling inclusive development through engagement of local stakeholders and their customary practices, understanding, and knowledge. This local knowledge will increasingly drive USAID's policies and programs, as part of the Agency's broader localization agenda.[9]

Agency knowledge is a public good. USAID will treat it as such and transparently deploy it to catalyze learning across the countries in which the Agency works and throughout the development sector. In this way, USAID extends its impact by influencing other development efforts beyond its own programming.

Goal 3: Invest in Local Knowledge Systems to Support Locally Led Development

Knowledge and effective KM are essential not only for USAID to achieve its mission, but also for country governments, local and regional organizations, and other development actors whose contributions advance locally led development. USAID will complement efforts to strengthen its own KMOL with programmatic investments that strengthen the knowledge and learning ecosystems in the countries and communities where it works. This can be accomplished as a program goal or as part of a broader program (e.g., investing in local health data systems and learning networks as part of a health systems strengthening program). This will include supporting the transmission and use of various kinds of local knowledge, and seeking to counter harmful legacies that diminish development impact by devaluing local knowledge and unique Indigenous knowledge systems. It will also include focusing USAID's investments in AI strategically on operational efficiencies that can be shared with and cultivated in local development organizations and program advances that innovate solutions to development challenges. Local development entities will see greater gains when they are better equipped to use local and global knowledge to inform their efforts. As part of a broader approach to localization and local ownership of development agendas and outcomes, USAID will include this third KMOL goal among the results it seeks to achieve through its programmatic investments and its thought leadership and convening authority.[10]

9 For implications, see Integrating Local Knowledge in Development Practice.
10 Knowledge for Development Partnership, *Agenda Knowledge for Development: Strengthening Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals*, Vienna, Austria: International Fund of Agricultural Development, 3rd edition, October 2018.

4. KMOL IN THREE USAID CORE BUSINESS PROCESSES

This policy focuses on three targeted processes central to the Agency's mission: Programming, Workforce, and Budgeting and Reporting. These business processes cover a large portion of USAID's work and represent opportunities for the Agency to realize operational efficiencies and burden reductions, as well as gains in programmatic effectiveness. A key finding of the evidence review conducted for this policy is that building KM or OL into existing processes, systems, or documents is an important way to enhance the work rather than add undue burden.

Business Process 1—Programming: Design, Acquisition and Assistance, and Implementation

Programming includes upstream analytics to prioritize development challenges and opportunities, set country or regional strategic plans, and identify interventions to advance development goals. Getting the most credible and reliable information into the hands of USAID staff making those decisions at all levels is a critical application of this policy. Strong KM practices ensure that the Agency's workforce has the information it needs to inform design processes, acquisition and assistance actions, and the implementation that results through activities under USAID's Program Cycle.[11] This core business process represents essential USAID functions, as demonstrated by the increasing demands of programming, which have grown from under $10 billion annually in the early 2000s to more than $40 billion in 2023.[12]

This business process involves staff in Missions and Washington and requires coordination and collaboration across OUs, functions, roles, and external actors, which is why improving KMOL practices around it is critical. Access to evidence, data, and other information to support decision making and a culture of learning and adapting are imperative to effective design, award, and program implementation. USAID invests a great deal in generating evidence to inform programs through assessments, monitoring, evaluations, sector learning agendas, the Agency Learning Agenda, and other analytic processes. Implementing this policy will ensure that the Agency capitalizes on those investments. Leverage points for KMOL in this business process include **people, practices, systems, culture, and resources**.

System owners will enhance data resources and technical repositories for greater interoperability, while Agency programs will focus on strengthening local knowledge systems to support local actors and reinforce evidence ecosystems in the countries where USAID works. Strategic planning and program design teams will intentionally leverage both Agency and external knowledge to inform USAID programs and the work of other development actors, and to achieve development goals faster, emphasizing evidence ecosystems for more sustainable locally led decision making. The Agency will enhance staff skills to use diverse sources of knowledge and evidence, including academic and scientific research, local and Indigenous knowledge, various forms of data, and practitioner experience. The Agency will dedicate human and financial resources to bring these knowledge and evidence sources to program design, implementation, and adaptation of and testing theories of change. The Agency will foster a culture that values reflective practices for continuous learning, adaptation, and collaborative decision making with implementing partners.

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11 "The USAID Program Cycle," *USAID Learning Lab.*
12 "USAID's Foreign Assistance Spending by Year (20 Year Horizon)," *ForeignAssistance.gov.*

KMOL Can Harness Advances in AI to Advance Agency Priorities

In a global organization such as USAID, where managing knowledge efficiently and effectively is crucial for success, AI is a critical and rapidly evolving enabler for the KMOL Policy to make knowledge more accessible, relevant, and actionable. The Agency KMOL function has an essential role in supporting the Chief AI Officer and the Office of the Chief Information Officer in exploring the responsible application of AI to Agency systems and processes in accordance with relevant legislation, Executive Orders, and other U.S. government frameworks for safe AI.

The adoption of Agency-approved AI holds promise for enhancing a number of KMOL practices:

- Automated Data Organization and Retrieval: AI can automatically categorize, tag, and index vast amounts of data, making it easier for staff to find relevant information.

- Accelerated Synthesis of Explicit Knowledge: AI can reduce burdens and create significant efficiencies in enabling staff to synthesize evidence far more rapidly.

- Predictive Analytics for Decision Making: By analyzing historical data, approved AI can help identify trends and patterns that human analysts might miss to inform strategic decision making.

- Enhanced Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing: AI-powered tools can facilitate smoother communication and collaboration across different time zones and language barriers.

- Continuous Improvement Through Feedback Loops: Approved AI systems can continuously learn or optimize outputs and results from user interactions and feedback, refining the KM process over time.

- Innovation for Development Breakthroughs: While AI currently holds promise for gaining efficiencies in informing decision making, the Agency should also seek future opportunities to influence investments in developing AI solutions to longstanding development challenges while also mitigating biases in AI priorities and application.

Business Process 2—Workforce: Hiring, Developing, Retaining, and Transitioning Staff

USAID's global workforce possesses the knowledge essential to everything the Agency does; however, staff working across 100 countries can struggle to find the specific knowledge they need. A key element of strengthening USAID as a learning organization involves approaching workforce functions as a critical opportunity to build, retain, and use the Agency's knowledge. The leverage points in this business process are **people, practices, governance, and culture**.

USAID is prioritizing strengthening KMOL capacity across several key areas. The KMOL governance body will review current and establish future target resource levels for KMOL, with a phased approach to achieve those levels. It will develop an Agency-wide KMOL staffing plan and define KMOL competencies and workforce coverage. The Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management (PLR) will develop tools to support resourcing KMOL across the Agency's programs and operations. Workforce planning emphasizes hiring individuals with KMOL skills, systematically staffing the Agency with KMOL positions, and adding KMOL responsibilities into key technical and management position descriptions to support KMOL staff and promote accountability for KMOL functions. Senior leadership development is a priority to foster knowledge-friendly behaviors, inspire curiosity, celebrate learning from failure, and create an environment conducive to OL at USAID and in USAID programs. Practices include implementing adult learning methodologies, offering diverse continuous learning opportunities, and establishing standard processes for effective knowledge access and use.[13] To reinforce a culture of knowledge and continuous learning,[14] knowledge-

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13 Training and other staff development processes should reflect the highest standards for collaboration with local and Indigenous communities as well as respect for the retention of widely varying knowledge systems when integrated into USAID resources, including avoiding appropriation or presumptuous translations.

14 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data indicate that effective KM is an essential component to staff engagement.

retention strategies will be employed, reducing barriers to knowledge access and rewarding staff for managing the Agency's expanding evidence base. The [Knowledge Retention and Transfer process and toolkit](#)[15] supports maintaining programmatic momentum amid staff changes, reducing burdens associated with turnover.

Business Process 3—Budgeting and Reporting: Budget Formulation and Execution and Results Reporting

One of USAID's core functions is to strategically program congressionally appropriated resources to achieve its objectives and regularly report on results. The underlying processes are multifaceted, toggling between budget planning and execution, as well as reporting on multiple fiscal years of funding, often at the same time. These tasks demand cooperation, collaboration, and strong information sharing among multiple agencies, Bureaus, and offices.

The leverage points in this business process include **people, practices, systems, governance, and resources**. To enhance the budget formulation and results reporting processes, it is essential to clarify roles and responsibilities through guidance or standard operating procedures (SOPs), establish standardized timelines, and centralize these documents to increase accessibility and staff awareness. Staff will share knowledge across BIOMs engaged in these processes to strengthen the codification of standard processes and leverage tacit knowledge effectively. Strengthened feedback loops between Washington and Missions could increase Missions' awareness of how their reporting feeds into Washington-level decision making, thereby incentivizing commitment and enhancing the overall quality of information provided. Documenting OU processes through SOPs, clearance roadmaps, or other tools will also help.

The Agency has employed increasingly sophisticated systems to ensure transparency of funding and results. Enhancing the functionality of existing enterprise information technology (IT) systems along with improved interoperability and integration of various products (e.g., templates, Development Information Solution, Foreign Assistance Coordination and Tracking System Next Generation project,[16] etc.) could improve how BIOMs complete different phases of the budget or annual reporting process and could help increase productivity and decrease the burden during the high-pressure annual reporting process. In addition, these systems need to be strengthened to better handle emergency supplemental appropriations and off-cycle requests for information. Complementing these enhancements with advancements in KMOL practices will enable staff to consistently search for and find reliable data about funding levels or results in enterprise systems, will strengthen knowledge handover, and will provide the kind of business intelligence Washington-based decision making requires.

On the governance and resources fronts, structures and processes should support cohesion in management decisions about these Agency budget and reporting systems and should elicit and respond to stakeholder needs around the nature and functioning of the systems and their uses to support multiple purposes. Missions spend significant time reporting on the annual Performance Plan and Report process; however, stakeholders feel they would benefit from additional data to inform their decisions. To bridge this gap, the Agency will devote more resources toward analyzing the existing data in a way that serves a diverse array of needs, enhancing data analysis capabilities and exploring how existing systems can make these analyses more efficient and customer-focused.

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15 "[Toolkit and Implementation Checklist for Knowledge Retention and Transfer (KRT)](#)," *USAID ProgramNet.*
16 "[U.S. Department of State's FACTS Info System Evaluation](#)," Integra LLC, January 2016.

5. LEVERAGE POINTS FOR ACTION

There are six key "leverage points" that can be used to support KMOL in any organization. They were articulated above in terms of their role in achieving this policy's vision via USAID core business processes and are spelled out more fully here. They include people, practices, systems, governance, culture, and resources.

People—All staff create and use knowledge, and all staff have a role in maintaining and using OL processes. Therefore, helping staff understand their respective KMOL responsibilities while also building their capacities, and clarifying KMOL roles and expectations for people and BIOMs, is essential. The success of this policy will depend on the ability of all staff to integrate KM and OL into their day-to-day work in carrying out the Agency's business. It is critical for OUs to assess their needs for specialized KMOL staff to ensure effective KM and OL across all OU functions. (Likewise, the KMOL governance body will assess KMOL staffing patterns Agency-wide.)

USAID's Foreign Service National staff have particularly important KMOL roles and responsibilities: as the longest serving members of Mission staff, they hold important institutional memory and knowledge that is essential to maintaining momentum and continuity in Mission programs; as experts in local contexts with unique access to local stakeholders and local and Indigenous knowledge, they bring unique capabilities to the Agency's commitment to locally led development; and as members of local communities themselves, they are a key part of the Agency's commitment to elevating diversity in viewpoints and advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in its workforce and programs. Other key KMOL roles include Agency technical staff, the Management Bureau's Office of Acquisition and Assistance Director and Contracting Officer's Representatives/Agreement Officer's Representatives, Human Capital and Talent Management staff, the Performance Improvement Officer, Mission Executive Officers and Program Officers, and staff involved in management operations.

Agency leaders are also critical in advancing the KMOL Policy. Particularly important roles include the **Chief Knowledge Officer,**[17] **Chief Information Officer, Agency Evaluation Officer, Chief DEIA Officer, Agency Chief Economist, Chief Data Officer, Chief Scientist, Scientific Integrity Official, Chief Human Capital Officer, PLR Assistant to the Administrator, Management Bureau Assistant Administrator,** and **Agency senior leaders.**

Practices—A wide array of practices support KMOL, and many focus on engaging staff with evidence for sensemaking and use. USAID will ensure KM practices and processes are tailored to the knowledge and interactions required to share and use that knowledge. Where possible, the Agency will standardize practices to reduce burdens and gain efficiencies while leaving room for customization of KMOL. It is expected that OUs will go beyond the standard requirements and customize additional KMOL efforts for their own needs.

USAID has many strong KM practices in use, including program planning, management, assessment, and pause and reflect processes, communities of practice and sector councils, topical repositories, the CLA Case Competition, the Agency Learning Agenda and other learning agendas, etc. Additionally, implementing partners play important roles in documenting and sharing Agency knowledge and identifying learning opportunities. Knowledge retention and transfer is a KMOL practice that supports effective knowledge handover and continuity as staff transition in and out of positions, addressing a longstanding Agency deficit. Processes that make data accessible for decision making

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17 Formerly the Agency KMOL Officer.

are key to activity design, implementation, and learning. Using Mission Performance Management Plans (PMPs) to capture lessons from the past can create KM and learning opportunities for adaptive management. These are just a few of many examples.

Systems—For the purposes of this policy, a system is a collection of IT tools linked with associated processes that support Agency KMOL. USAID has scores of these systems, which are indispensable to carrying out many core business functions. The Agency will fill gaps in its systems, work toward greater access and interoperability, increase the coherence between technology and business processes, and position itself to leverage evolving technologies into the future. USAID will better harness its systems to support KMOL efforts through enhanced functionality for staff and implementing partners to upload information and knowledge products so that critical data are not lost; strengthening taxonomies and methods to categorize content to enhance the organization of information in these systems; and improving data repositories (through the use of dashboards and by other means) so they support user needs and maximize use of USAID's knowledge and evidence by staff, partners, and members of the public, consistent with relevant laws and regulations. USAID will improve navigability of the Agency's internal and externally facing databases and knowledge platforms[18] by prioritizing and strengthening organizational processes for curating KM platforms and database content and for finding information. As the Agency migrates fully to Google Drive (or a future equivalent), improved practices around file naming and management protocols will better enable staff to find the information they need for their day-to-day work.

Given the exponential increase in information, evidence, and knowledge Agency staff and partners engage with, other technologies and techniques not currently in wide use at the Agency will need to complement improvements to existing systems. To continue to build into the future, USAID's Chief Knowledge Officer will partner with the Chief Information Officer, the Chief Data Officer, the Agency Statistical Official, the Performance Improvement Officer, the Chief Scientist, the Office of the Chief Economist, and others to advance the Agency's engagement with AI and machine learning. Together, they will explore how these tools can support knowledge synthesis and streamline knowledge seeking to better inform Agency programs and operations. As relevant, the ability of local organizations to invest in and maintain KM systems sustainably after a program's end should be considered when designing programs. Staff responsible for systems should consider simplicity and replication as they implement programs, to ensure that requirements for data collection, analysis, and storage facilitate use by smaller organizations (and therefore enhance sustainability after USAID programs conclude).

Governance—This KMOL leverage point includes the authorities, means, and structures for overseeing implementation of the KMOL policy and aligning it with related efforts at USAID. Given USAID's global work across sectors, the Agency will employ cross-functional, cross-sectoral championing BIOMs to guide, coordinate, and support KMOL practices.

This policy aligns with several existing policy and guidance sources, including aspects of document and data warehousing (Development Experience Clearinghouse and the Development Data Library through Automated Directives System [ADS] Chapters 540 and 579), records management (ADS Chapter 502), using data in programming in the Program Management Improvement Accountability Act, the Evidence Act that addresses evidence-based programming, and ADS Chapter 201 on the Program Cycle, including the Evaluation Policy. Finally, at the BIOM levels, SOPs, Mission Orders, etc., touch on KMOL practices and systems. In spite of these many sources of policy and guidance on evidence generation and management, USAID recognizes some gaps in policy and guidance regarding KMOL. USAID does not have central guidance and tools for managing the range of knowledge and evidence sources (in particular local knowledge), or for knowledge capture and sharing (in particular how to capture experiential and tacit knowledge). Moreover, the Agency has lacked a central governance body with the authority to address KMOL issues that rise above the level of individual OUs, and therefore will establish such a

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18 A notable example is aidscape.usaid.gov.

body to oversee and facilitate implementation of this policy, and ensure that its implementation continuously evolves as AI and other technologies advance.

Culture—This includes common behaviors, values, norms, and customs across the Agency that support KMOL directly or indirectly. Culture is a critical leverage point or inhibitor for KMOL efforts. The CLA Framework includes specific aspects of culture that are mutually reinforcing for KMOL, such as fostering a climate of openness, encouraging the use of relationships and networks to broaden situational awareness and update individual and collective knowledge, and fostering continuous learning. An enhanced emphasis on knowledge generation and use is an ongoing cultural shift the Agency will continue to scale in order to reach development goals efficiently and cost-effectively.

Leaders who promote transparency, openness, and learning contribute to a positive organizational culture where KMOL can flourish and contribute to better results. Thus, USAID's leaders need to champion KMOL, resource it, and help move Agency staff toward implementation by creating clear expectations and incentives and removing obstacles. USAID will promote a culture of collaboration, communication, and willingness to share knowledge, learn, and change behavior. KMOL practices can foster this culture by creating or supporting venues to acknowledge, share, and learn from mistakes and failures.

Resources—Recognizing knowledge as a critical and valuable asset, the Agency must intentionally invest funds and human resources within USAID and through its implementing mechanisms to ensure Agency staff, programs, and functions can build on existing knowledge, steward that knowledge, and continuously learn and improve. This leverage point includes guidance for how BIOMs resource KMOL, KM staff, or KM or OL capacity strengthening, practices, systems, or support. Successful KM initiatives require adequate financial resources to support staff time devoted to KM and learning, purchase Agency-approved hardware and software, facilitate knowledge-sharing events and training, print or post publications or products, and facilitate engagement. The Agency will consider how to dedicate resources to support KMOL within and across implementing mechanisms and Agency functions. Agency leaders and KMOL experts alike play key roles in clarifying for Agency staff and partners the resources robust and effective KMOL requires and advocating for those resources to advance Agency goals.

6. REQUIREMENTS AND CONCLUSION

By way of this policy, the Agency is developing a deliberative and focused approach to strengthening the foundation for KMOL. The key to realizing the vision articulated here will be investing the leadership, resources, and time to allow for the policy's implementation to pay dividends in the form of more efficient systems, reduced frustration, and better development outcomes. Implementation of the vision described in this policy will be supported via a combination of required actions and more robust KMOL that BIOMs will tailor to their contexts and opt into. The requirements are:
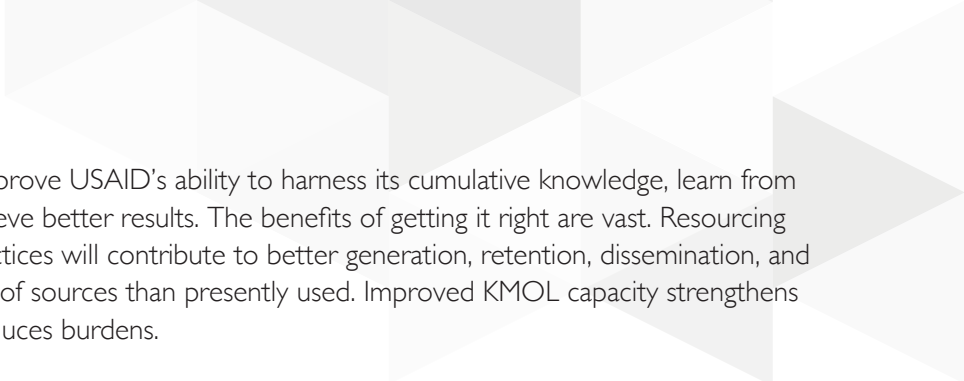
1. **A KMOL governance body** will be established to maintain a high-level commitment to Agency KMOL and develop a plan to address resources, workforce, and accountability considerations. This body will include principals from across Agency functions and leaders from key Bureaus and Independent Offices and serve as a subcommittee of the Management Operations Council. It will be sponsored by the Chief Knowledge Officer (so designated by this Policy, formerly designated as the Agency Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning Officer[19]). It will be chaired by PLR's Deputy Assistant to the Administrator or their designee.

2. **BIOMs at the relevant levels will establish KMOL plans**[20] so the practice is institutionalized in USAID business processes and adheres to the principles and leverage points described in this policy. Within one year of publication of the ADS Chapter on KMOL, each BIOM must establish KMOL plans at the appropriate level(s). These will be grounded in an assessment at the relevant levels to identify gaps and opportunities, and adapted and customized to their priorities, operating contexts, and organizational structure. They will be implemented continuously and updated as needed. BIOMs may exercise discretion to determine the appropriate level of detail and specificity needed in the KMOL plan to carry out activities effectively and efficiently and achieve KMOL objectives. KMOL plans may be integrated with PMPs at the discretion of the BIOM. **The KMOL plan must include a structured process for knowledge retention and handover (building on or aligning with the Knowledge Retention and Transfer toolkit[21]) and Google Workspace (or equivalent) norms and standard naming conventions for folders and work products (per example included in the KMOL Resources on the Agency intranet). These two measures will reduce systemic burdens at USAID that currently create significant inefficiencies across the Agency.** BIOMs are encouraged to include in their plans additional KMOL processes as relevant, with an emphasis on reducing burdens. These plans will be supported by a new chapter on KMOL in the 200 series of the ADS, which will provide actionable guidance on these processes and other optional KMOL processes.

While these requirements are essential to reducing burdens and achieving efficiencies that will improve Agency effectiveness, by themselves they will not achieve the vision laid out in this policy. Nor do they come close to capturing the high-quality KM and OL work that already exists at USAID, despite its gaps and lack of cohesion. Effective implementation of this vision will require an evolution, across the Agency and over time, of KM and OL that is grounded in the work of the Agency and informed by the vision and goals, principles, and leverage points described herein.

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19 Per Agency Notice #12147 on December 22, 2020.
20 BIOMs will adapt and customize their KMOL Plans to their priorities, operating contexts, and organizational structure. BIOMs may exercise discretion to determine the appropriate level of detail and specificity needed in the KMOL plan to carry out activities effectively and efficiently and achieve KMOL objectives.
21 "Knowledge Retention and Transfer (KRT) Model," *USAID Learning Lab.*

Effective implementation of this policy will improve USAID's ability to harness its cumulative knowledge, learn from it, and apply those lessons to its work to achieve better results. The benefits of getting it right are vast. Resourcing and systematically applying strong KMOL practices will contribute to better generation, retention, dissemination, and application of knowledge from a wider range of sources than presently used. Improved KMOL capacity strengthens the Agency's core business processes and reduces burdens.

Better KMOL contributes to more effective stewardship of public resources. It is incumbent on USAID and its personnel to ensure the most efficient use of its resources as a taxpayer-funded agency. This responsibility extends to every Agency employee, and USAID needs to pay close attention to change management and create an enabling infrastructure and environment to best fulfill it.

To that end, PLR's Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research (LER) is developing a change-management plan for this policy. PLR/LER will also provide guidance and additional support materials, including core resources on knowledge retention and transfer, standard file structure, additional KMOL resources, and peer learning opportunities. Other knowledge and learning efforts and staff across the Agency will be required by BIOMs throughout the Agency. Some of these are in place, and others will need to be established. Cultivating Agency knowledge and making it easily available to staff will strengthen organizational learning, improve decision making, and lead to better returns on USAID development investments.

ANNEX 1: EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS FOR KMOL POLICY (condensed)

1. Overview

This document summarizes background research done to develop the Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning (KMOL) Policy at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). An Agency Policy Working Group led by staff from the former Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning[22] conducted evidence-gathering efforts in three parts: a document review, focus group sessions with USAID staff, and key informant interviews with other development partners and nongovernmental organizations. More details on the methodology used as well as a full version of the evidence synthesis can be found here.

2. Effective Evidence-Based Practices

Several best practices were so commonly held in the KM and OL fields and among peer organizations that they rose to the level of principles that underpin USAID's KMOL Policy. One such principle is to place people at the center of any organization-wide KMOL effort. All staff create and use knowledge, so finding ways to help them understand their respective KMOL responsibilities is important. While all staff have basic KM and OL responsibilities, having dedicated, resourced KM or OL staff is critical for data management, records management, learning facilitation, staff transitions, etc. Designating a top-level leader to oversee the KM or OL function is a clear best practice.[23]

Another finding highlights that roles and expectations for people and units must be clear. This can be accomplished by adding KM or OL functions to job descriptions, core competencies, work objectives, and performance evaluations. A related finding pertains to skills and capacities. It is important to recognize that time and support are needed to build staff skills to support KM and OL. Finally, soft skills including facilitation, listening, and self-examination are critical, especially when engaging tacit, experiential, and local knowledge.

The evidence base on information technology (IT) systems and KM recognizes that, while technology can enable KM, it must be integrated with how people work, address their needs, and be appropriate to the setting. Technology should be built around staff needs and behaviors and be easy and intuitive to use. Other important insights the Agency should consider regarding IT systems and KM include: reducing cognitive effort to find and share information; using existing platforms, consolidating information, and using social networks to promote sharing; designing search functions to raise the most relevant information first; elevating norms to signal information sharing as an appropriate behavior; developing digestible and navigable formats and using interactive elements; and creating feedback loops around user needs, motivation, and experience. In addition, strengthening taxonomies and using standard file structures and naming protocols would improve efficiency and overall file management.[24]

The review also found KMOL efforts should leverage, align with, and support an organization's core business processes to ensure easy uptake and organizational buy-in. Making data accessible for decision making is key to activity design, implementation, and learning, especially for adaptive management. Further, simplified knowledge products and tools for evidence tracking are often more user-friendly and preferred to those that may be more sophisticated or complex yet challenging to use.

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22 Now the Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management.
23 "USAID Knowledge Management Recommendations: Deliverable for Knowledge Management (KM) Project under Outcome 4 (Empower People to Lead) of USAID's Transformation Task Team (T3)," *USAID (unpublished)*, December 2018, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1RPmrmyTfYY5Q1xqpgdtdP2DAY8XR0nt3.
24 "USAID Knowledge Management Recommendations."

A clear best practice from peer organizations is having cross-functional, cross-sectoral championing units to guide, coordinate, enforce, and support KMOL practices. Under this approach, a broadly composed advisory group meets regularly, led by a particular person or unit with KM expertise to tackle organization-wide impediments while a network of KM focal points lead implementation. These networks are responsible for sharing information, tracking implementation, and testing innovative approaches to KM. Such bodies consider what incentives can be provided at appropriate levels for positive behavior, legal compliance, and the balance between knowledge sharing and knowledge protection. Governance bodies periodically assess compliance with KM or learning strategies or oversee certain aspects of implementation.

The importance of culture for any organizational change effort is broadly documented and universally noted as a critical enabler for KMOL efforts. Specifically, leaders who promote transparency, openness, and learning support a positive culture. A clear finding around culture that emerged is that transparency and openness are key to the flow of knowledge and learning. Collaboration and communication are positive cultural enablers, as are valuing humility and willingness to share and learn from mistakes.

The document review and consultations identified many good KM practices across USAID, including approaches to support peer-to-peer learning, including communities of practice, pause-and-reflect exercises, newsletters tailored to specific knowledge needs, and unique dissemination approaches such as podcasts. A particularly notable practice is the use of learning circles, which are highly interactive, small group supportive discussions about what works and what does not in program implementation.[25]

3. Needs within USAID, Trends, and Opportunities

The research identified several key KMOL needs within USAID, elevating their importance for consideration in a policy.

Governance/Guidance Gaps: USAID does not have central guidance or tools for managing the range of sources of knowledge and evidence or for knowledge capture and sharing, particularly how to capture experiential and tacit knowledge. Additionally, many good practices are developed repeatedly within individual Operating Units. Elevating some of those practices to the Agency level could produce time savings. Focus group participants stressed the need for standardization and dissemination of standardized tools, templates, and standard operating procedures to accomplish repeatable tasks.

Resourcing KMOL: The research also highlighted the importance of the intentionality and resourcing of KMOL. This resourcing issue applies within Operating Units, with several examples of Bureaus or Missions hiring KM or OL experts to support the critical work of managing knowledge and supporting learning across mechanisms, portfolios, or sectors. It applies equally to USAID activities, with strong calls to require implementing partners to include funding for KM and to provide sample language about KMOL for Contracting and Agreement Officers to insert into solicitations and final agreement language.

Trends: One leading trend, particularly among development banks, is viewing KM and dissemination as a core business practice. Consequently, they integrate multiyear knowledge agendas into their work and have strict quality standards and accountability around knowledge gap assessments, knowledge generation, and knowledge dissemination. Some of these partners have corporate-level KM strategies with explicit theories of change around KM and metrics for implementation. Several organizations cited the importance of collaborating with local organizations and governments to share knowledge or solve problems. Examples of this approach include:

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25 Sarah Hopwood and Hauwa Okorie, Hauwa, *What Can Behavioral Economics Tell Us About Knowledge Management? A Desk Review for the Knowledge SUCCESS Project*, Nairobi, Kenya and Baltimore, MD: Busara Center for Behavioral Economics and Johns Hopkins Center for Communications Programs, November 19, 2019, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X1K6.pdf.

supporting grantees on results frameworks, project management, data collection, and monitoring and evaluation; encouraging grantees to use their generated knowledge to raise more resources for their projects; and co-creating knowledge products with local organizations.

Opportunities: KMOL Policy implementation will enable USAID to make a substantive contribution to the broader development and humanitarian field. The policy elevates the role of local knowledge in contributing to USAID's localization vision. By situating local and Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate source of knowledge and placing it alongside empirical and other western forms of knowledge, the policy can spotlight these often untapped sources of knowledge.[26] USAID also has a wealth of local and contextual knowledge within its Foreign Service National staff.[27] Secondly, the KMOL Policy can reinforce other USAID policy priorities, such as the Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, Evaluation Policy, and Digital Strategy, among others, emphasizing catalyzing learning and knowledge ecosystems. Research in the development sector emphasizes the need for approaches embedded in a local context and negotiated and delivered by local stakeholders. This type of development emphasizes learning partnerships between donors and local actors based on trust and transparency and where actors' power differences are acknowledged and addressed.[28]

Finally, implementation of the KMOL Policy will enable USAID to project its thought leadership by elevating knowledge as a resource. Framed this way, KMOL efforts can accelerate development processes. Promising USAID practices include: funding research to generate evidence to influence local actors' behaviors, engaging local knowledge to identify information needs of local actors, and promoting USAID-managed knowledge platforms as public goods.

26 Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Knowledge Management for Development: Towards a Practical Approach for the Caribbean*, United Nations, March 11, 2010, https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/38264/1/LCCARL234Rev1_en.pdf.

27 Gretchen King, Larry Garber, and Karen Hirschfeld, *The Four Approaches Final Report*, Washington, D.C.: The Mitchell Group, Inc., January 28, 2022, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z8KS.pdf.

28 Dexis Consulting Group, *Evidence Base for Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Summary of the Literature Review*, Washington, DC: USAID, March 20, 2020, https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/cla_literature_review_update_march_2020_final.pdf.

ANNEX 2. PRINCIPLES

Six principles emerged as essential for KMOL at USAID based on an evidence review conducted for this policy (see Annex 1). These principles are: **1) human-centered, 2) integrated, 3) accessible, 4) focused, 5) local,** and **6) dynamic**.

PRINCIPLE 1
Human-centered: Enable and incentivize people to share and use their individual and collective knowledge.

What this means: The human-centered nature of knowledge must provide the basis for KM processes, tools, and systems, so diverse individuals can contribute to, understand, and use the knowledge base to achieve USAID's objectives—or those of their communities or countries.

PRINCIPLE 2
Integrated: Integrate KMOL practices into existing business practices.

What this means: KMOL cannot be siloed; it must be integrated into the Agency's core business processes, including 1) designing and awarding grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements and managing their implementation; 2) hiring, training, retaining, and transitioning staff; and 3) formulating and executing budgets and reporting results. (See Section 4 for more on what this looks like in three core USAID business processes.)

PRINCIPLE 3
Accessible: Strive to make knowledge transparent and accessible to everyone.

What this means: All users, including staff, partners, and local counterparts, must be able to access and digest knowledge easily. Grounding the Agency's KMOL approaches in human-centered design and resourcing them appropriately will support the development of processes and systems that make knowledge accessible. Accessibility increases equity, reduces power imbalances, and enhances transparency and knowledge sharing.

Knowledge accessibility and transparency is managed ethically,[29] in ways that ensure safety in sensitive contexts that may pose hazards to women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ communities, and others. Other sensitivities and security considerations inform knowledge accessibility and transparency, including protocols for what can/cannot be shared and approval processes for knowledge sharing as relevant.

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29 As defined in this policy, knowledge encompasses more than just data and knowledge from scientific research. USAID's existing policies and guidance on the ethical and responsible use of data apply broadly to the many types of knowledge the Agency uses. A foundation in the Federal Government's ethical treatment of humans and their knowledge is the Common Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects included in USAID's Scientific Research Policy. The Federal Government further expanded upon the Common Rule in the Federal Data Ethics Strategy, which is recognized in USAID's Considerations for Using Data Responsibly. Additionally, USAID should harmonize guidance on knowledge where available, including Guidance for Federal Departments and Agencies on Indigenous Knowledge.

PRINCIPLE 4
Focused: Tailor KMOL to fit purpose and circumstances.

What this means: To inform USAID programs and operations, people need curated, synthesized, and packaged knowledge that is actionable and tailored to their context and the functions they are performing. Curation requires streamlining data collection and archiving data and knowledge products that are no longer useful to make space for current learning. KMOL is not always about building databases and websites to store and disseminate knowledge. It also involves supporting knowledge use with a range of activities that fit the types of knowledge available and purposes and circumstances for which the knowledge can be useful, including creating space dedicated for dialogue and learning.

PRINCIPLE 5
Local: Value and equitably engage local and Indigenous knowledge.

What this means: To ensure greater sustainability of USAID efforts, USAID will value and equitably engage local and Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. This may include mindsets, worldviews, experiences, evidence, and know-how that enable locally led and sustainable development that revolves around local ownership, priorities, and perceptions of progress.[30]

PRINCIPLE 6
Dynamic: Update knowledge and KMOL practices through continuous learning.

What this means: For knowledge to remain a key asset driving development impact, the Agency cannot treat it as static. In line with the focus on continuous learning in the CLA Framework, organizational leadership and infrastructure must support staff's ability to engage in learning and use iterative approaches that enable building on and updating individual and collective knowledge.

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30 In line with treating knowledge ethically (see footnote 29), USAID will work to understand the contributions and the limitations of all of the forms of knowledge it engages. This includes, for example, exploring the ways that empirically derived knowledge both illuminates and sometimes obfuscates the dynamics at the heart of the development challenges the Agency's programs address. Likewise, it includes exploring both the potential for and the prejudices inherent in local knowledge and the need to understand the power structures at play both when local knowledge impedes equity and when it facilitates equity.